

### Children and Families

#### Children and Young people – Impacts of the pandemic

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There has been on going assessment of how the pandemic has affected children and young people from the perspectives of CYP themselves and the organisations and workforce supporting them and their families.

What follows now is a summary of the issues and impacts felt specifically across both Education and Children and Families Services, as well as the wider system, and includes an overview of the position in respect of children and young people's emotional wellbeing and mental health including suicide and domestic abuse.

- **Children and families - Commissioned services and Social Care**

The number of requests for support coming to the Children and Families Hub did not increase in volume in the initial stages of the pandemic, nor did referrals to Family Solutions. The increases in requests, not surprisingly, coincided with the country coming out of national lockdowns and children and young people returning to school. There was however a marked increase in volume in calls to the Hub Family Consultation line which created tremendous pressure of the staff for a period of time but for now has returned to pre-pandemic levels.

The pandemic has increased complexity in casework. Unaddressed parental and child mental health and wellbeing issues, and hidden domestic abuse, took longer to come to light and problems have been more entrenched. So, the number of children subject of a child protection plan has increased significantly, and it is taking social workers longer to affect positive change. The economic impact of the pandemic and EU withdrawal means we expect to see more children living in poverty, and given the strong association between poverty and entry into care, we expect the number of children in care to increase, placing a significant financial pressure on the service.

We have an excellent edge of care offer, and the specialist, D-Bit service prevents over 70% of the children it works with entering care. Furthermore, for cases in the pre-proceedings process 40% have a positive outcome, and our approach to this work is regarded as best practice, nationally.

The pandemic has created a backlog in the Court process. Cases in care proceedings are expected to be concluded within 26 weeks but have taken 52 weeks or longer. This has created additional work pressure in the system, with more visits to the family, updated or repeated assessments. While the number of delayed cases is reducing this will be an issue for some months to come.

We have 1,091 children in care at present. At 34 per 10,000, this is one of the lowest rates for children in care in England and reflects the outstanding work of social workers and partner agencies. However, the pre-pandemic average for the preceding two years was around 1060, and this number is currently increasing. As Corporate Parents, we are expected to make sure that the care those children

receive, would be of a standard we would expect for our own children. We need the right children to be in care.

Of the children in care, around 100 are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC). Given the traumatic experiences prior to leaving their country of origin, care is taken to support their mental wellbeing and connect them to their community and culture. For those from Afghanistan, this is a particularly traumatic period.

Across the country there is an over-representation of some children of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds in children's social care systems, and Essex is no different. We are working to understand these differences, and make sure that our service offer meets the needs of all Essex children.

- **Working together across the children and Families and Education**

At the start of the pandemic our objective was to ensure that those most vulnerable were supported from both a practical and welfare perspective. CYP with SEND and their families were identified as some of the most vulnerable families particularly those classified as Clinical Extremely Vulnerable.

Safeguarding, Communications, supporting those with specific health needs, personal welfare, educational provision, and practical help were key considerations for those working together across Education, Social Care, Essex Child and Family Wellbeing Service, Commissioners and other partners. The development of a robust Children and Young People's Response Plan set out expectations around safeguarding for all settings, with advice on how to escalate any concerns and also set a framework for working with other partners. Weekly meetings ensured that these families were receiving the support they needed.

Whilst the pandemic has undoubtedly had social, emotional and physical impacts on these children and people and has resulted in increased pressure on their families, the plans were effective in mitigating the impacts that might come about by loss of communication with schools, health and social care; lack of access to school and education; preventing safeguarding issues.

- **Emotional wellbeing and mental health**

Whilst our Essex insight tells us the vast majority of children and young people have coped extraordinarily well throughout the pandemic, for some this has not been the case, and not surprisingly the biggest impact has been on those already experiencing emotional wellbeing and mental health challenges.

The pandemic has put a huge strain on many young people who were already struggling with their mental health, because of traumatic experiences, social isolation, a loss of routine and a breakdown in formal and informal support.

Low mood and anxiety caused by issues such as social isolation, lack of physical activity, disruption to routines, exams, and family life has manifest in several ways including for example risky behaviour or self-harm. There are some young people

who have had to deal with multiple pressures, especially those who have been bereaved or experienced other trauma during this time.

The second lockdown has proven to be more problematic for some who in a national survey identified that the rapid return to academic pressure, after six months away, was having a negative impact and at a local level we are preparing for that.

Where young people have significant mental health issues requiring hospital admission a national shortage of Tier 4 beds is resulting in young people being supported in the community and as a result timely and specialist treatment is significantly delayed. Children's social care are struggling to manage these high-risk young people whilst beds become available.

Support has been given to schools since children and young people returned to full education in September 2020. This support included guidance documents for all Essex schools/settings supporting staff, children and young people and families. This was called 'Recovery and Return' which was aligned to the DfE Wellbeing for Education Return agenda.

The Recovery and Return and Trauma Perceptive Practice have been the core approaches to supporting emotional wellbeing and mental health. The values and mindset; compassion and kindness, hope, connection and belonging, help adults to understand the impact of isolation and how the intent to support connection and engagement are vital as society continues to come out of the restrictions put in place.

The programme included:

### **Recovery and Returning to Educational Settings Part 1:**

Training Webinars focusing on:

- staff wellbeing: now viewed 2268 times
- children and young people wellbeing: now viewed 1546 times
- Further useful supporting documents were also published

### **Recovery and Returning to Educational Settings Part 2:**

6 webinars related to the following mental health and wellbeing themes

Theme	No. of Views
Bereavement & other loss	685
Anxiety & low mood	581
Neuroscience of the stress response	361
Psychologically informed first aid	488
5 Rs & One Planning	299
Long term whole school approach	216

## Recovery and Returning to Educational Settings Part 3:

2 webinars for families recorded. Looking after yourself and Looking after your family: in total 800 views since March 2021. Information posters for specific areas of need presenting through lockdown have been prepared on the themes of disorderly eating, self-injury, and loneliness and isolation (examples of the posters are below)

### Let's Talk: Loneliness & Isolation

Covid-19 has had an impact on the lives of children, young people and families in Essex. Loneliness and isolation have been identified as an increasing concern for all ages.

If you are worried about a child or young person feeling lonely or isolated, there are things you can do to help.

If you are noticing any changes from a child/young person's presentation, **be curious with the family** to find out more. Remember to discuss confidentiality agreement and boundaries with the pupil before having conversations with them.

**Look**

- Are they spending increasing time on their own?
- Are there changes in their engagement in social situations?
- Are there changes in their relationships with friends and family?

**Listen**

- Others saying that they are not engaging as before (clubs etc)
- Crying, sadness, low mood, anger, expressing their loneliness
- Changes in connection-seeking behaviours

**Say**

- "I've noticed...and I'm wondering what's happening?"
- "Let's think about this together."
- "Help is available for you."

**Do**

- Offer emotional support, let them know you care with regular check-ins
- Involve them and their peers in acts of kindness and belonging
- Think with the child/young person about distraction and coping techniques e.g. music, breathing exercises, writing their thoughts down
- Gentle encouragement and scaffolding where needed

**Signpost**

- Essex Youth Service <https://youth.essex.gov.uk/>
- Kooth.com <https://www.kooth.com/> & Togetherall <https://togetherall.com/en-gb/>
- Essex Wellbeing Service 0303 9988 (for education staff and families)
- EWMS EP helpline: <https://bit.ly/3bvdn2e>
- Shout text service: 85258

Essex promotes the values of Trauma Perceptive Practice (TPP) in all that we do:

Compassion & Kindness Hope Connection & Belonging

Other topics available in this series of posters:  
**Disordered Eating, Self-Injury and Social, Emotional and Mental Health Pillars.**

If you found this poster useful and would like to propose more themes to add to the range, please get in touch: [semstrategy@essex.gov.uk](mailto:semstrategy@essex.gov.uk)

Essex County Council

### Let's Talk: Social, Emotional & Mental Health Pillars

All children, young people and families will need a holistic period after this latest lockdown. This should be a whole school/setting approach.

Some may need a focused recovery intervention programme, personalised to their needs. This needs to be viewed in terms of short, medium and long term.

**Pillars of Recovery**

Creating a resilient and well-being focused educational setting

Relationships providing...

Openness and understanding providing...

Time and space to be flexible and to provide...

**Pillar 1: Relationships** providing the compassion and kindness

We cannot underestimate the impact of the loss of that social interaction. It is key to their holistic development. For most children and young people, their daily goal in going to school is not just to learn, but to see their friends. This provides them with a sense of self-worth and belonging that only a peer group can offer.

**Pillar 2: Openness** and understanding providing the hope

Hope enables individuals to look forward in life instead of being stuck in the past. Opportunities for growth is the hope. It enables people to bounce back from stressful life experiences with increased resilience.

**Pillar 3: Time** and space to be, freedom and fun providing the connection and belonging

Connecting with others makes us feel safe and provides a sense of belonging that we all need. Improving someone's relationships within their positive social network increases their resilience. Being kind and connected is the best thing we can do for each other. Everyone must have quality relationships with at least one adult and one friend.

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If you found this poster useful and would like to propose more themes to add to the range, please get in touch: [semstrategy@essex.gov.uk](mailto:semstrategy@essex.gov.uk)

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The Essex Youth Service have been targeting vulnerable young people in the year groups 9- 12 to support resilience and emotional wellbeing.

The council's commissioned services have and continue to play a significant role in mitigating the negative impacts on children and young people the pandemic is having on them. All organisations, without exception, were willing to redeploy capacity around the system to ensure children and young people were able to access support early if needed. From the Essex children and Family Wellbeing Service redeploying staff to the Essex Welfare Service, to providers of SEND Short breaks clubs providers making welfare calls and providing practical and emotional wellbeing support for families, the pandemic has demonstrated how agile and flexible local organisations and their workforce is. The speed with which the Voluntary and Community Sector responded to calls to provide additional emotional wellbeing and welfare support for children and families was remarkable and they continue to provide a firm foundation for those families need some extra help.

The anticipated increase in rates of suicide and domestic abuse have not materialised in Essex but the increasing complexity of those cases coming through for support from services has and should be a cautionary indication that the current synopsis of the mental health and emotional health wellbeing of children and young people is not a one-off position and we should be mindful that some of the worst emotional wellbeing and mental health impacts are more likely to be felt in the months and years to come.