

Impact of Covid on the Education System:

1. Introduction.

The impact of Covid on the education system has been immense, not just the impact on children and young people with regards to levels of lost learning and impact on emotional wellbeing and mental health, but on the entire workforce and system as a whole. In Essex, we are incredibly proud of the response from the whole education system 0-25 to Covid and the prioritisation of children and young people's education, safety and wellbeing.

Appendix 1 provides a timeline of the key milestones over the past 18 months as they affected every early years' setting, school and college across Essex.

2. National Research into the impact of the lockdowns on lost learning.

The Education Policy Institute have published some high-level research into the impact of the lockdowns on lost learning during the first lockdown. Their research compared the outcomes of pupils in autumn 2020 to those of earlier cohorts and found:

- All year groups experienced lost learning in Reading. In primary schools this was typically between 1.7 and 2.0 months, in secondary (years eight and nine) 1.6 and 2.0 months respectively.
- Learning losses in mathematics were greater, on average 3.0 months
- Disadvantaged pupils experienced higher levels of learning losses compared to their non-disadvantaged peers.

3. The impact on education services in Essex and our response – key areas:

3.1 The Children and Young People's Response Plan and Multi Agency working.

There are circa 217,000 pupils attending school aged between 5 and 16, circa 33,000 3- and 4-year-olds attending early years settings and circa 32,000 16–18-year-olds in school, college or apprenticeship providers.

During the first week of the national lockdown in March 2020, 2000 children attended schools. These were children of critical workers and vulnerable children (those with a social worker or EHCP). A much smaller number attended early years settings. This meant over 222,000 children and young people were at home, which posed a potential significant safeguarding risk.

Working with social care colleagues, we very quickly developed and put in place the Children and Young People's Response Plan. The Plan can be found here: -

[Education Settings, Covid Response Plan](#)

This 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. The plan included a system of welfare checks where every setting was expected to contact every child at least weekly and more frequently if they were deemed to be vulnerable. Advice and support was given to schools about any concerns they may have had following the conversations with children and families and how they could escalate those concerns. This process was key to the education system's ability to have oversight of the safety, welfare and wellbeing of all children and young people.

During the second national lockdown, as the DfE set clear expectations about the quantity and quality of remote education, this became easier for schools, but did not replace the need for having a discussion with pupils and their families.

Multi Agency working strengthened significantly during the pandemic and is a strength that we will retain as we move into the renewal phase.

3.2 Engagement with schools.

The majority of the Education Directorate's work during the pandemic was supporting settings, schools and colleges. This was done through a number of mechanisms including:

- Daily (or more often if needed) emails with full guidance and information to schools, settings and colleges.
- Digesting and summarising the plethora of DfE guidance, which often was released during the night or at weekends. During the COVID19 outbreak, the School Communications Team has produced **300+** pieces of guidance to support schools, settings and colleges and interpreted the **600+ different** instances of guidance issued by the DfE. Frequent FAQ documents have also been produced.
- Meeting three times a week with the professional associations and the teaching unions to discuss concerns, challenges and to problem solve.
- Holding webinars with Dr Mike Gogarty to discuss public health concerns and the epidemiology data and to support schools to manage their protective measures, outbreaks and wider concerns they had.
- Working with all schools, settings and colleges to manage outbreaks.
- Phone calls to leaders offering support and guidance in and outside of working hours
- Writing numerous letters to parents outlining periods of closure and then wider and full opening.

This is just a snapshot of the engagement and full details can be found in the supporting document - Education Covid19 Programme.

3.3 Engagement with district and boroughs.

The Director of Education attended the Covid Outbreak Management Board, chaired by the Leader, Cllr Finch. Updates included levels of attendance, details on outbreaks, details on changes to protective measures and preparing for the wider and full opening of educational establishments and discussing any local issues. Children travelling to and from school was a key local issue in September 2020, when schools fully opened. The Director of Education and Assistant Director for NE Essex are members of the Essex Health Protection Board.

3.4 Supporting children and young people with SEND during the pandemic.

The local area supported children and young people with SEND and their families in five key areas during the pandemic:

Safeguarding

Safeguarding all children and young people but particularly those who are vulnerable (including those with SEND) was the local area's main priority:

- Implementation of the Children and Young People's Response Plan (see section 3.1).
- Weekly meetings were held with Education, Social Care, the Essex Child and Family Wellbeing Service and other partners to joint plan and discuss challenges and barriers.
- Regular briefings and updates were sent to all settings and partners.
- New resources and materials to support safeguarding were made available.
- All efforts were made to enable settings to accommodate vulnerable children and young people on site rather than via remote education.

Communications

- Weekly meetings across health (five CCGs), Education, Social Care and parents (the Essex Family Forum) to share key message and discuss challenges and barriers.
- Regular meetings with Essex special schools with multi-agency input to find solutions and provide support.
- Weekly drop-ins from Feb '21, open to representatives from any support group for parents of children or young people with SEND to respond to the increase in the number of contacts being made by parents to their group/service, as families worked through the complications of remote learning, changes in routines and less opportunities for breaks outside the home.

Supporting specific health needs

- Multi-agency approach to providing advice and guidance for schools and settings where children and young people require Aerosol Generating Procedures (AGP).
- Specific and targeted as well as general support for schools and settings on the mental health needs of staff as well as children and young people.
- Provision and delivery of PPE to keep schools and settings open.

- Support for those who were shielding.

Welfare

- Support for schools to facilitate home learning.
- Delivery of regular welfare calls to the families of vulnerable children and young people.
- Additional support during school holidays.
- Development of materials and resources to support well-being.

Provision

- Supporting transport operators to continue to get children to school despite challenges of social distancing.
- Multi-agency approach to individual children and young people.
- Developing school and setting based training to ensure that 'reasonable endeavours' were made to continue to make provision beyond education for children and young people with SEND.
- Development of multi-agency risk assessments to inform decision making and engagement with families.
- Additional resources to support delivery of education either on-site or virtually.

3.5 Early Years Sector

The early years and childcare sector started to re-open from June 2020. The majority of the providers have been open since the start of the Autumn 2020 term and remained open since and throughout the last lockdown period. Overall, the attendance levels of pre-school aged children remained relatively low during the Autumn term, with a cautious increase of numbers since the beginning of 2021 returning to more expected levels by the end of the Summer 2021 term.

To date, very few early years and childcare providers have closed as a result of the pandemic, but the early years sector is reporting significantly increased financial pressures. These pressures have been further heightened where providers have needed to close or partially close due to positive Covid cases within the staff or children and their families

The early years sector are also reporting an impact on some of the children returning to their childcare setting, with speech and language delays and social skills being mostly affected

3.6 Levels of attendance from March 2021

Average attendance levels across primary, secondary and special schools stood between 92% and 94% since full opening in March 2021, which is a strong level of attendance. It did dip towards the end of term due to year 11 and year 13 pupils no longer in attendance and the number of pupils required to self-isolate as case rates significantly increased during June and July.

3.7 Elective Home Education

During September 2020, we saw a significant increase in parents seeking to electively home educate their children.

We made contact with all families who elected to home educate during the last academic year, to ensure that parents were fully aware of the financial and school place implications that their decision would bring; and it was clear from these discussions (particularly during the Autumn Term 2020) that such decisions were, in the main, made due to anxieties linked to Covid or their desire to maintain a small bubble. This was mainly in relation to any health concerns within the household and shielding requirements for those deemed clinically extremely vulnerable.

The table below shows the comparative figures by quadrant.

All Pupils	Primary		Secondary		Total	
	2020/21	2019/20	2020/21	2019/20	2020/21	2019/20
Mid	222	158	227	124	449	282
North	239	148	209	153	448	301
South	253	159	258	193	511	352
West	184	96	201	141	385	237

3.8 Supporting children eligible for free school meals

School meals have been provided to all pupils eligible for free school meals throughout the pandemic. Schools have provided this during the lockdowns through either the national portal or by providing food parcels. Since September 2020, the funding has been passed to local authorities. We have procured a system from a provider called Wonde who schools use to issue free school meal vouchers directly to parents.

4. The Essex Education Taskforce

During February 2021, following discussions with the Executive Director of Children, Families and Education and the Lead Member for Education regarding concerns about the impact on children's learning of a second national lockdown, a proposal was put together to form a strategic group that would work on behalf of the education system in Essex to oversee the education recovery of children and young people. This proposal was supported politically and announced in the Leader's budget speech at the full council meeting in February 2021. A commitment of £1.5m was allocated from council reserves with an additional £0.5m to support the extension of the holiday activity fund. Of the £1.5m, £0.5m is earmarked to support children's mental health

The Taskforce was formed in May 2021 and is chaired by Roy Blatchford CBE, founder of the National Education Trust, former Ofsted Inspector and Chair of the Association of Secondary School and College Leaders review into the Forgotten Third. There have been two meetings to date and the current priorities of the Taskforce are:

- Investment in Pre-school language professional development.
- Investment in supporting vulnerable students at 16+, moving into FE Colleges.
- Investment in the voluntary sector to provide summer and future holiday outdoor learning/residential for most vulnerable students and those with SEND.
- Investment in creating transition coaches for vulnerable children and those with SEND in Year 6, moving from primary to secondary school.
- Investment in leaders and their coaching and wellbeing.
- Investment in teenage wellbeing.
- Investment in reading, with a focus on the primary /secondary transition years: Years 5-8.

It is proposed that the calendar year 2022 will be the 'Essex Year of Reading'.

Further details can be found in the Press Release issued in June 21 at Appendix 2. Both Roy Blatchford and Robert Halfon MP featured in a BBC Essex Interview in June.

5. Other areas of innovation / collaboration

Schools within School Partnerships have supported the response to the COVID-19 crisis in the way in which they have liaised with each other; so many school partnerships have become stronger as a result. The partnerships have used a variety of ways of keeping in touch and facilitated collaboration throughout the crisis. They have used Zoom, WhatsApp groups, partnership meetings and e-mail contact to work together on a variety of common issues such as:

- Re-opening and re-integration arrangements
- Transition
- Staffing issues
- Advice on DfE guidance
- Sharing policies and examples of practice e.g., sharing 'return to school action plans'
- Provision for key worker children

Other areas School partnerships have collaborated on are:

- Virtual training opportunities
- Bereavement counselling
- Sharing premises
- Organising shared cover arrangements over holiday periods when schools had to remain open

As a Local Authority we have met with School Partnership Leads to support them in working with their groups of schools throughout this time and provided advice and guidance as to the types of work on which they may wish to collaborate for their mutual benefit.

We have also supported the wellbeing of school leaders throughout the pandemic, through the development of the School Leader Wellbeing programme and worked with governors to ensure that they are prioritising the wellbeing of their leaders.

6. Conclusion

The pandemic has been challenging for everyone and education is no exception in that regards, however it has been a vital part of this country's response to Covid19 which has not been as widely understood as the health and social care response.

Even during the lockdowns, schools, settings and colleges have remained open and operated a remote education offer, something new for everyone. Education leaders have spent more time on implementing infection control measures than overseeing the quality of teaching and learning. Risk Assessments have become part of everyday life, as has dealing with children, young people and staff who have tested positive and undertaking contact tracing and bubble management. The pandemic has tested the resilience of every education leader including the education directorate workforce but as a result of that, the relationship and level of trust between the local authority and education leaders is stronger than ever.

The priority now is to ensure that no child or young person's education is adversely affected by the pandemic in the long term and to support the significant increase in emotional wellbeing and mental health issues that are starting to present. The challenges will continue to be immense.

7. Testimonials:

We have received so many testimonials over the last 18months, which have continued to shape the work of the programme. Three recent examples are below:

Primary School Headteacher July 21

I hope you don't mind this direct email but I just wanted to say a huge thank you for the incredible way you have helped manage and guide us all through these past eighteen months.

Your reassuringly strong leadership has gone an immeasurable way in helping me feel able to meet some of the challenges and difficulties - and often has just helped in the keeping on keeping on of the relentlessness of it all. It really has felt like you have had our backs which has made the job feel so much more 'do-able'.

I have appreciated your very regular updates, the webinars, the meetings - and the encouraging words that have sat alongside all of them.

It has often felt overwhelming but you have conveyed a sense of purposeful calm which has felt steady and enabling.

So thank you, very genuinely, thank you.

Special School Headteacher, August 21:

Having had a good period of reflection on these troubled times we have all lived through with COVID I wish to go on record as saying that I cannot speak highly enough of the unerring support offered by the LA in general and you and Ralph Holloway in particular. There were many occasions when schools were feeling lost, isolated and vulnerable. You found us, shared with us and comforted us.

The LA under your leadership showed real empathy, kindness and understanding.

I have been privileged to experience this.

Secondary School Headteacher, Christmas 2020:

Just a quick message from me, thank you so much for what you are doing and how you are supporting us. Being a head is hard enough, I can't imagine the challenges you are facing each day.

Everyone is always willing to moan but it is more important to say thank you. Keep going, i hope you get some quality time with your family over Christmas.

You and your team have been excellent, it is much appreciated.

Appendix 1 – Timeline of events.

February – March 2020	Schools and Early Years settings struggled to stay open due to staff and pupils requiring to self-isolate.
Friday 18 th March 2020	Announcement by Gavin Williams that schools and settings would close for the majority of pupils.
Monday 23 rd March 2020	Schools and settings closed to all but children of critical workers and vulnerable pupils.
Tuesday 24 th March 2020	England goes into a national lockdown.
Tuesday 24 th March 2020	2000 children are attending Essex schools. 215,000 children are at home.
March 2020	Announcement that KS2 SAT's / GCSE's and A-Level examinations would be cancelled - no indication given of the process to replace them
March 2020 – May 2020	Schools operate a remote education offer to all pupils not on site Schools remain open during school holidays for critical worker children
June - September 2020	Early Years settings welcome back pupils. Primary Schools welcome back pupils in years R, 1 and 6. Secondary Schools welcomed back students in Yr. 11 and 13
August 2020	A-Level results published following a process of Centre Assessed Grade and a national algorithm. National outcry that the algorithm disadvantaged many pupils – algorithm scrapped for GCSE results the following week. Students were awarded the higher of their teacher assessed grade or grade produced by the algorithm.
September 2020	Full return to schools for all pupils. Protective measures in place including: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Staggered start and finish times• Pupils put together in bubbles• Extra cleaning and hygiene measures• Ventilation

	<p>If a pupil tests positive after showing symptoms, the whole bubble is required to self-isolate and move to remote education</p>
December 2020	<p>Essex placed into Tier 4. Infections rates in secondary schools increase significantly.</p> <p>Greenwich LA advise their schools to switch to a full remote education offer to try to control the spread of the infection. The DfE force Greenwich to overturn this decision</p>
30 th December 2020	<p>Gavin Williamson announces that the DfE Contingency Framework will apply to some parts of the country and that secondary schools start in January will be delayed by 2 weeks.</p>
31 st December 2020	<p>Details of the contingency plan are published. All schools in Essex to remain closed expect primary schools in Colchester, Tendring and Uttlesford.</p>
1 st January– 3 rd January 2021	<p>Discussions take place to keep all Essex Schools closed</p>
3 rd January 2021	<p>Cllr Finch requests that the Secretary of State enacts the contingency framework in Colchester, Tendring and Uttlesford to keep all schools closed</p>
4 th January 2021	<p>Second National Lockdown is announced, all schools to remain closed expect for children of critical workers and vulnerable children. The list of eligible critical workers is significantly expanded.</p> <p>Early Years Settings and Special Schools are required to stay open for all pupils.</p> <p>A directive is published by the DfE setting out the minimum expectations on the remote education offer.</p> <p>Examinations are cancelled for the summer 2021</p>
8 th March 2021	<p>Schools fully open again for all pupils</p> <p>All secondary students encouraged to test twice weekly. They are tested on the school's site 3 times before full attendance begins.</p> <p>Face coverings are required to be worn on home to school transport and when moving around the school for those eligible.</p>

	Bubbles are required to self-isolate
July 2021	Infection rates soar in schools. During the week of the 19 th July 2021 over 750 positive cases are reported into the School Communications Team.
August 2021	<p>A-Level and GCSE results are announced, based purely on Teacher Assessed Grades</p> <p>All Covid restrictions are lifted including the need to self isolate if identified as a contact.</p>
September 2021	<p>Preparing for the new academic year, this includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On site testing for all secondary pupils - 2 tests prior to attending • The removal of the need for bubbles to self-isolate • Removal of all social distancing requirements • Schools to update their risk assessment and produce an outbreak management plan.

Appendix 2 – Essex Education Task Force Press Release

Essex Education Task Force unveils plan for education renewal

The task force will invest £1million to ensure that every child in Essex leaves school able to read at their age level or better.

The newly formed Essex Education Task Force has announced it will invest £1million in reading over the next 18 months, to support children and young people affected by the loss of learning and missed opportunities during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Marked by the launch of a new campaign, *Essex Year of Reading 2022*, the group's aim is to ensure that every Essex child leaves school able to read at their age level or better.

The investment is part of ambitious plans to address the short- and long-term impact of Covid-19 on children and young people's education.

In addition, the task force plans to invest £500,000 into mental health and emotional wellbeing support. This includes pledging commitments and resources in the following areas:

- Providing transition coaches for vulnerable children moving from primary to secondary school
- Helping vulnerable students over 16 years of age move into further education
- Providing £100,000 of funding to the voluntary sector for the provision of summer and half-term holiday outdoor learning for vulnerable students and those with Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities
- Investment in the wellbeing of leaders
- Investment in early years' language development.

Roy Blatchford CBE, Independent Chair of the Essex Education Task Force, said: "We know that being able to read confidently is the key to being a successful learner in all other areas of life. We strongly believe this investment will help those who have fallen behind with their reading over the past year and help them to thrive in other aspects of their education. Together, with the additional commitments we have outlined, we will help children and young people prosper after a very disruptive time.

"During the roll out of the Year of Reading, we will be working with many local partners across Essex such as libraries, Adult Community Learning, and local businesses, in addition to schools and colleges. We also recognise the enormous impact that Covid-19 has had on education colleagues. Our plans include additional support and resources to help both their pupils and their own wellbeing."

Cllr Tony Ball, Essex County Council's (ECC) Cabinet Member for Education Excellence, Skills and Training, said: "Investing £1million to improve and promote reading from early years through to schools and into further education, demonstrates the level of our commitment to children and young people across Essex. It has been an incredibly difficult year for them and this additional support will help them to thrive and support education colleagues to enable them to do so.

“We want the county to be at the forefront of shaping education policy and achieving bright futures for all pupils, and are confident that our plans will help to make this a reality.”

The investment plan for the Education Task Force mirrors the three guiding principles of Renewal, Equality and Ambition set out by ECC’s Leader, Cllr Kevin Bentley, in May.

ECC is committed to championing equity, inclusion and excellence for all to ensure that no child in Essex is left behind or disadvantaged from the pandemic.

Following the launch of the Essex Education Task Force, a new website has been created to keep interested parties informed on the Task Force’s priorities and activities, and will be updated in due course.

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