

COVID-19: Review of emerging evidence of needs and impacts on Children and Young People in Cambridgeshire & Peterborough

Pack 2, July 2022 – Executive Summary

Overview and issues of inequalities

During 2021, Business Intelligence and partners produced the first update to the Covid Impacts and Needs Assessment produced in Autumn 2020. It is based on the emerging evidence that is available to the system from late 2021 to early 2022 that focuses on children and young people. It is a collaborative piece with Public Health Intelligence, Business Intelligence (Cambridgeshire County Council and Peterborough City Council) and the Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) Business Intelligence team are working together.

This briefing and accompanying evidence pack focuses on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people. There have been a broad range of impacts and the evidence pack groups the information by theme. Some aspects such as 'long COVID' and children with disabilities and special educational needs will be released separately to provide the right level of insight in those areas.

Covid-19 and the associated socio-economic restrictions have impacted everyone; however, it has impacted some groups of people more than others. Although children see less direct health impact from Covid-19 than adults, there has been considerable disruption to families, educational settings and other services that support children.

Inequalities

Pre-pandemic, children already experienced inequalities in outcomes especially children living in more deprived areas. This may well have been exacerbated further by the pandemic. Nationally, levels of obesity in children increased considerably during the pandemic, but even more so in children at schools in deprived areas. There is national concern about reductions in activity level in children although local information is not sufficient to assess the inequalities currently. We know obesity in childhood is an indicator of ill-health later in life and therefore unless addressed this is likely to increase future health inequalities.

National analysis of pupils learning loss using pupils eligible for free school meals as a crude measure for disadvantage shows that disadvantaged pupils lost 0.5-1 month more than their peers.

The most vulnerable children in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough also potentially face worsening impacts with increases since the pandemic lockdown in social care assessments identifying factors of mental health, domestic violence and drug misuse, along with an increase in indicators for potential sexual and criminal exploitation.

Demographic changes in CYP (Children and Young People)

After a long period of gradual decline, we have reason to think that the number of women giving birth went up slightly in 2021/22. This could indicate more children conceived in the lockdown periods. This data has not yet fed into our population forecasts, which are currently suggesting that we will see increases in the number of teenagers.

After a spell where the numbers of young children in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough was falling gradually, Early Years services will need to be aware of the recent increases when planning future capacity.

Direct health impacts

Covid-19 rates amongst all children were very low until July 2021 when they started to climb. In the 2021/22 Autumn term we saw particularly high case rates in secondary schools; in the early part of the 2021/22 Spring term in Peterborough the high case rates in secondary schools returned but across all the patch we saw much higher rates in primary schools.

The direct health impact of Covid-19 in children has been milder than in adults, as children are much less likely to develop severe disease. All-cause child mortality declined in the first year of the pandemic, predominantly as a result of reduction in other infectious diseases due to the measures in place to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

Educational and Early Years service disruption

There were several periods over the pandemic period when schools were required to close by the Government and remote learning alternatives were provided by schools. School closures (excluding children of key workers and vulnerable pupils) took place between 23rd March 2021-1st June 2021 and 5th January 2021-8th March 2021. Phased further opening up of schools was as follows; Year 1 and 6 took place from 2nd June 2021 and then to year 10 and 12 from 15th June 2021. Alternative home-schooling arrangements varied by school with some providing material and resources to be completed as and when through to live online classes delivered by teaching staff.

Once schools were allowed to re-open fully, they were still affected by Covid-19. Some schools had to close classes, year groups or fully close due to Covid-19 disruption [such as outbreaks or staff absences due to infection].

Even if a school did not have to close, nearly all had to manage outbreaks which caused disruption.

Isolation rules for much of the pandemic have meant that whole class groups, or 'bubbles', have needed to isolate at home for 14, and later 10 days in line with government guidance when identified as a close contact of a positive case. This has caused further disruption.

Therefore, in addition to the school disruption caused by enforced national closures, there has been disruption whilst schools have been open, which means that all children will have experienced some level of disruption to their learning.

We saw particularly high absences of pupils and staff in January 2022 due to Covid-19 which further impacted learning.

Attendance at Special Schools in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough generally trended above the regional and national attendance for Autumn term 2021. Attendance of pupils considered vulnerable (i.e. those with an Education, Health and Care Plan – EHCP) has followed the regional and national trend.

Learning loss

National evidence shows us that children were affected by learning loss despite remote learning. In the first half of the autumn term 2021, primary school children lost 1.8 months in reading and 3.5 months in mathematics on average. Results show that in the second half of the autumn term 2021, children recovered some of the months lost. Reading loss reduced to 1.2 months and mathematics loss reduced to 2.5 months on average. We do not have data on recovery after this first term, but the rapid gains made in a short time do suggest that further recovery can probably be expected and may already have occurred.

Learning loss was not evenly distributed across all children. Those eligible for free school meals (FSM) fell 0.5-1 more months behind in comparison to other pupils especially in relation to mathematics. Children with English as additional language were most disadvantaged in reading (DfE 2021 and RL 2021). Younger year groups presented the largest drops in achievement (RS Assessment and School Dash 2021).

There is a programme of analysis work to support Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) currently. There is an opportunity to include impacts of COVID alongside that.

Early years (EY) health and development service disruption

During the first lockdown, attendance at EY settings was very low, almost zero. This was because they were closed and only children of essential key workers and vulnerable children could attend. Since then, attendance has increased. But for many EY children they missed out on time at the settings. The longer-term impact of this is unknown currently. Some data for this period is unknown particularly the detail about what proportion of time was missed by children.

The key metric for assessing the outcome of early years services is 'good level of development at 2-2.5 years' (assessed as part of the health visitor check at this time). In 2019/20 children's development at this age would have been affected by children not attending EY settings and disruption to services in the early part of the pandemic (from March 2020), and there were fewer assessments at this time. In the second and third lockdown periods attendance was higher at EY settings, but fewer assessments were done again, with a particularly large drop in Peterborough.

Physical health impacts

We don't have a lot of data for physical health impacts but there are two particular issues of concern.

Firstly, vaccinations became harder to do due to the disruption, though in the main levels in 2020/2021 remained similar to 2019/20. There were some drops in Peterborough for vaccination uptake at 12 months. However, many childhood pre-school immunisations remain below the national 95% target, particularly in Peterborough with implications for future immunity.

Secondly, national evidence shows there has been an impact on children's weight. The proportion of Reception children who are obese has increased from a 10-year flat trend at 23% to 27.7%, and by 5 percentage points in Year 6 children. Local survey data follows the same trend, but we are concerned that the sample was potentially too small to be robust. However, we have no reason to expect that Cambridgeshire and Peterborough are different from the national picture.

The national evidence suggests that this trend has exacerbated existing inequalities in obesity; the largest increases in prevalence of obesity has occurred in the most deprived areas of England. Disparities in obesity prevalence between ethnic groups has increased and boys, particularly in Year 6, have experienced the largest increases in weight.

Other national evidence suggests that there was a reduction in physical activity during the pandemic amongst children, particularly team sports, swimming, active play and athletics, with an increase in going for a walk, cycling or gym / fitness. This suggests a shift from guided and organised activity in groups to solo or family

activity. The proportion of children who were active for an hour or more each day fell slightly. What is unclear currently is how this may have impacted longer-term habit-forming behaviours.

We know obesity in childhood is an indicator of ill-health later in life. This is an area that needs to be urgently addressed. This should be considered alongside efforts to recapture lost learning for long term health and wellbeing for children as they grow up.

Wellbeing and Mental Health impacts

A national survey from early in the pandemic (April – June 2020) shows us that approximately a third of children and young people were reporting that they were finding it difficult to cope without seeing family and friends. When we look at locally collected data in Cambridgeshire in 2021, the Health Related Behaviours Survey showed that compared to 2018, a smaller proportion of young people felt resilient. Issues affect boys and girls differently.

Approximately 3500 families across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough are receiving Early Help support from Children's Services. Mental health issues and behavioural problems at school are very common factors in families needing help. It seems likely that these issues have been exacerbated by pandemic and lockdown disruption.

Safeguarding children and young people

Referrals to children's social care during the most intense phase of the pandemic period (the year 2020/21) fell nationally. This trend was also seen locally. This has mainly been driven by a decrease in the number of referrals from schools.

During the 2020-21 year when most of the lockdowns occurred, slightly fewer children went missing from home in both Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. However, in Cambridgeshire up to Dec 2021 the number of children and episodes of going missing has already exceeded the total for the previous year despite only having $\frac{3}{4}$ of the year passed; and in Peterborough the number is nearly as high. So it seems that we are returning to pre-pandemic or slightly higher levels of children going missing from home, which is a key indicator of the potential for exploitation. Indicators of sexual and criminal exploitation have risen since the pandemic lockdowns.

Referrals to the Independent Domestic Violence Advocacy service, who support adults experiencing domestic violence (but whom often have children) showed a slight increase after the third national lockdown in Q1 2021-22 but were relatively stable through the earlier phases of the pandemic and have dropped again since (as at Q3 2021-22).

Employment and NEET impacts

There are few clear and unambiguous signals from the data about the employment and training of young people aged 16-24.

There appears to be little change in the proportions aged 16 and 17 in education, employment or training at the time of writing; further data available in March 2022 may help.

In Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, about 91,600 people fall within the 16 – 24 working age bracket – known as ‘young people’. There were national employment impacts on this group during the pandemic. Furlough was particularly common amongst young people (1 in 4 young people were on furlough in July 2020).

Economic inactivity in young people increased during 2020 by 12 percentage points (ppts) in Cambridgeshire and 3ppts in Peterborough. Benefit claimant numbers in the 16 – 24 age bracket increased by 134% between March 2020 and June 2020 and counts remain high, with rates for September 2021 being 95% higher than in September 2019.

Employment rates in Cambridgeshire decreased in 2020 by 11ppts to 45% but surprisingly, employment increased in Peterborough by five ppts to 56%, the highest since 2008.

In 2020, young people (16-24 year olds) in full-time education increased by 11% in Cambridgeshire but decreased by 9% in Peterborough.

The proportion of 16 and 17 year olds who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) or whose activities were unknown increased from 3.0% to 3.2% in Cambridgeshire and by 6.4% to 7.0% in Peterborough from 2019 to 2020 (national average 2020: 5.5%).

There was a 5% decrease in apprenticeship starts between Q3 of 2020/21 and 2019/20. However, uptake varies by age and apprenticeship type, with Intermediate Apprenticeships and Under 19s seeing the largest declines in starts.