

NORTHERN AREA OUTCOMES GROUP

SCHOOL DISRUPTION

**Understanding the Impact on
Children and Young People's
Wellbeing caused by Disruption to
Education during the Covid-19
Pandemic**

July 2022



Produced by Una Casey and Kori McLaughlin for
Northern Area Outcomes Group

Background

The Covid-19 pandemic created worldwide disruption to education, leading to prolonged school closures and rapid implementation of remote learning for children and young people of all ages. There was an expectation that learning and teaching would continue with parents supervising, and guidance provided by schools via online platforms such as See-Saw, or via home-learning packs. Education management and policy is devolved to the NI Assembly, the Department of Education has lead responsibility. Across Northern Ireland approximately 19% of children have one or more Special Educational Need and around 29% are entitled to Free School Meals in Primary Schools. During the first wave of the pandemic when school closures were announced the First Minister stated; “ the societal and economic impact of this measure will be enormous as parents have to adjust their routine to deal with this unplanned long-term closure...education cannot cease” (Arlene Foster, (then First Minister for NI), 2020).

Purpose of Report

In 2021 the Northern Area Outcomes formed a Task and Finish Group to understand the effects of School Disruption the children’s wellbeing and education. This will help inform an action plan to reduce the negative impact of Covid-19 on the many children and young people (CYP) who have faced isolation, educational disadvantage and periods of stress as a result of this pandemic.

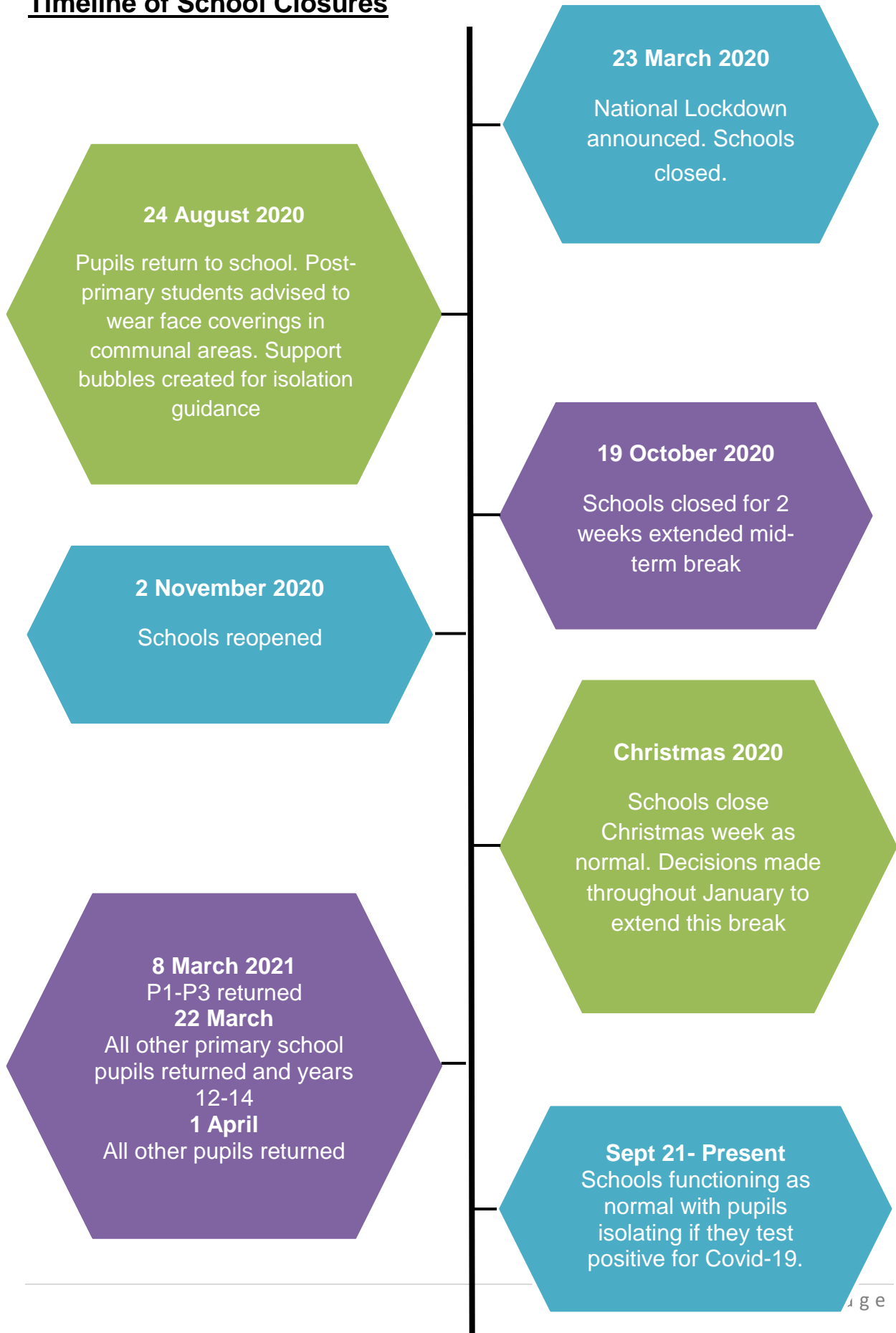
Due to the unprecedented nature of the school closures due to covid-19 vast amounts of research has been carried out on the impact on different elements of children, young people, parents and family life. This report will review and consolidate some of these into one overarching report, to help us understand the multifaceted effects of disruption to education on CYP’s wellbeing and inform local action planning. It is important to note that while this report is divided into a number of different issues, many of these are interlinked.

This report focusses on of data and research carried out between March 2020 and Autumn 2021. A further report will be produced when up to date data and research becomes available.

Table of Contents

Key Area	Page No.
Timeline of School Closures	4
Timeline of political decisions made by the NI Executive	5
Impact Home Schooling on CYP Wellbeing	7
Impact of School Closures on Family Life	9
Impact of lockdown on Early Years	10
Impact of exam disruption on CYP Wellbeing	12
School Disruption and Economic Impact of Covid-19	14
Impact of Digital Poverty and risk of increased online activity during lockdown	17
Impact of lockdown on Physical and Emotional Wellbeing	20
Impact of lockdown on vulnerable children, <i>including children with SEN, physical disabilities, Newcomer families and Young Carers</i>	22
Impact of school closure on Safeguarding CYP	25
Impact of Returning to school for CYP, teachers and schools	27
Service Delivery	28
Next Steps	29
Appendix	30

Timeline of School Closures



Timeline of Political Decisions made by NI Executive

Dates	Decisions/Policies
18 March 2020	All schools are closed to all children except those whose parents are front line/ key workers.
19 March 2020	Minster of Education announced that the summer 2020 examinations series would be cancelled and that grades would be based on a range of evidence and data, including prior attainment and centre estimated grades.
26 March 2020	Announcement made by NI Executive that families entitled to Free School Meals will receive £2.70 per child per day for each day of term the schools are closed. This will be paid on a fortnightly basis via direct payment
2 September 2020	Education Minister delays all examinations due to take place in November 2020 to January 2021.
9 September 2020	Cases of Covid-19 confirmed in 64 schools.
19 October 2020	1500 confirmed cases of Covid-19 in schools between August and October.
22 October 2020	Executive announces free school meals to be provided during 2 week extended mid-term closure.
9 December 2020	Education Minister announces that GCSE, AS and A level examinations would definitely take place in 2021 after previous implications that they may be cancelled.
1 January 2021	Announcement that scheduled Transfer Test will go ahead on 9 January.
6 January 2021	GCSE, AS level and A level exams scheduled for summer 2021 are cancelled.
8 January 2021	Transfer tests postponed until 27 February.
8 January 2021	EA indicate that there are no school meals for vulnerable or key worker children in the majority of schools until mid-February and no transport unless requested.
13 January 2021	Transfer tests cancelled.
25 January 2021	SBNI reports a sustained noticeable drop in the number of Child Protection referrals since schools closed in October 2021.
28 January 2021	After discussions at the beginning of January that schools would return through phased approach, it is announced schools will not return.
2 February 2021	GCSE, AS level and A level results calculated by schools for 2021.

September 2021	Schools opened as normal for first term.
8 September 2021	PHA takes over contact tracing for schools.
30 November 2021	NASUWT urges for early closure of schools for Christmas holidays as a circuit breaker. Also reports some classes have switched to remote learning because there are not enough teachers to cover classes due to sickness/self-isolation.
6 December 2021	No plans from Department of Education to close schools early or switch to remote learning.
3 January 2022	NASUWT urges NI Executive to take action to prevent further disruption in schools due to Covid-19.
4 January 2022	Schools reopen with Covid measures implemented before Christmas. Education Minister saying that getting schools open again amid high Covid infections remains a priority. From 6 -13 January 2022, 18,231 children aged 5-19 tested positive for Covid-19.
17 January 2022	Figures show that half of schools in NI had staff absences in the first week of new term.
20 January 2022	The Department of Education is to get an extra £40m, the majority of it for Covid-19 related expenses such as the hiring of supply teachers to cover absences.
1 February 2022	Education figures show that 20% of pupils were absent from school due to Covid-19 in the week beginning 24 January, the highest number of the 2021–22 academic year.
15 February 2022	Most Covid-19 Regulations are lifted in NI

Impact of Home Schooling on CYP

The sudden and unprecedented closure of schools and movement to remote learning created disruption to CYP's daily routines and also to the routine of family life

“The impact of the lockdown on the children's mental and emotional health hasn't been fully taken into account and I worry what this means for their development.” (Ulster University Experiences of Supporting Children's Home Learning during Covid-19)

- Some children are really struggling to adjust to home schooling and the major changes in their routine that this creates. At times, children are arguing for hours with their parents, only to complete 10-20 minutes of schoolwork (Family Support Practitioner).
- Young people reported subsequent anxiety experienced as they felt they were falling behind in their studies or being at a disadvantage to peers and that this would have a long-term impact on their education achievement. Some reflected significant stress and anxiety about returning to school due to fears they had fallen behind (Children and Young People).
- One Family Survey found that the biggest challenges reported were **keeping children on track with school work** (79% said this was an issue). Similarly findings in the Stranmillis Survey, highlighting that 3 in 5 claim that their child/ren's level of motivation to learn has become worse since home-schooling began (Family Survey, 2020).

“I felt like I had learned virtually nothing over the lockdown period. It was also stressful as someone with depression and anxiety... I think also having to do assessments and the uncertainty of what was happening with my GCSEs was very stressful, I felt like I had already failed them before they started.”

(Direct quote from young person,
2021).

Word cloud showing the main words parents used to describe their overall experience of home schooling (from Bates,J., Finlay, J. and O'Connor Bones, U., 2021)



Impact of School Closures on Family Life

- QUB research evidenced that the pandemic impacted on family and home life generally in a variety of ways, including a **strain on parent-child relations** as a result of lockdown and the closure of children's services; parental concerns for children/ young **people's mental well-being** and sometimes their **behaviour**; and expectations regarding the **home schooling** and **education of children**. (QUB, 2021)

"This lockdown has been more about trying to keep going as much a normal as possible unlike the last [lockdown] when a lot of time was spent outside."

(Direct quote from parent participating in the CREU, Stranmillis University, 2021 survey).
- One of the most problematic aspects has been the **balancing of work** and wider family caring commitments with **childcare** and **supporting home learning**. In particular, parents and carers in NI argued that the scope of the Key Worker scheme was restrictive and in early June 2020, the definition of key workers was extended to afford supervised learning/childcare.
- Although levels of contact between schools and families were reported to be high, the period of home-schooling in the first lockdown was marked by **burnout among many parents**, especially parents of children with Special Educational Needs (QUB, 2021).

Impact of lockdown on Early Years

The Pandemic has had a significant impact on NI's youngest children. Pre-school education provision only remained open for vulnerable children and those of key workers, while the remaining majority of pre-school children had to access pre-school education via remote learning, including Sure Starts. This remained the case until pre-school settings re-opened on 8 March 2021.

- “One could argue that the more concerning impact will be on 3-4 year olds who have **lost nearly 5 months of play based** curricula during a crucial developmental period... and we probably need to think about how the needs of those children continue to be met, and treated as likely to be additional well into the their primary school years. The danger is that the health and social gradient that existed pre-Covid and was amplified very publicly over the last 5 months, will be wider and **sharper in 5 and 10 years’ time for today’s 3 year olds.**”
(Practitioner)
- A study carried out to examine the impact of Covid-19 on play in early years classrooms, with a particular focus on nursery and foundation stage, found that **59% of respondents** felt that restrictions impacted **negatively on children in terms of their social skills, their levels of independence**, their ability to stay on task and overall enhanced anxiety ([Playboard NI and Stranmillis University, 2021](#)).
- However, **41% of respondents** to the same survey indicated **children were more independent in terms of self-care routines**, more settled in class, happier and more relaxed, and displayed increased levels of resilience and coping skills. The survey also highlighted the high level of creativity, improvisation and dedication invested on the part of early years teachers to ensure that young children have, in the main, continued to enjoy a stimulating, playful and nurturing learning experience, despite the many challenges ([Playboard NI and Stranmillis University, 2021](#)).

- We have the children whose parents were trying to juggle working from home, looking after the children and home-school older siblings. Those are the children that tend to be having problems now. We are seeing children **who cannot talk at all**, they grunt or they point at things they want. They **don't know how to speak to the other children** and if they want a toy they will push the other child out of the way or snatch a toy from them. There are also children who become **distressed because they can't communicate**, either because they **cannot understand what is being said to them** or because they **can't express themselves** (Pre-school Group provider, 2022) [Lockdown led to major decline in NI children's language skills - BelfastTelegraph.co.uk](https://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk/news/education/lockdown-led-to-major-decline-in-ni-childrens-language-skills-1.2222222)

55.3% of teachers responding said they would be prioritising mental health and wellbeing when schools returned, while **23.5%** anticipated a greater demand for support services, **including counselling and Early Years intervention** (Barnardo's NI, 2020)

- While losing access to face to face early education is likely to have affected all young children, its impact on those from more disadvantaged backgrounds may be even more significant, widening existing learning gaps. **Disadvantage at an early age can negatively**

impact social mobility. Evidence shows a strong association between child poverty and poorer cognitive and language outcomes on entry to primary school, and this disadvantage gap persists throughout school ([Social Mobility Commission, 2021](https://www.socialmobilitycommission.com/our-research/2021-research)).

- Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) in Northern Ireland, said members have reported **an increase in the number of referrals to speech and language services** and that young children, who have **communication problems can fail to reach their educational potential as they grow older**, therefore it is vital services are provided now to address any issues (Ruth Sedgewick, head of the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists in NI, 2022).

Impact of Exam Disruption on CYP

For older children and young people one impact on their wellbeing was the unpredictability and disruption to exams, including the transfer test, GSCEs, AS and A levels.

Transfer Tests and Transition to Post-Primary School

- Pre-pandemic the transfer test has often been a contentious issue. During the pandemic this increased, due to last minute postponements, cancellations and general issues for school entrance in September 2021. The uncertainty led parents to worry about the negative impacts on children's health and wellbeing which added weight to the calls for the cancellation of the tests, as at pupils had missed out on months of in-school learning or in the case of the school year beginning in Sept 2021, children and teachers missing periods of school due to isolating because of individual, family or class bubble Covid-19 cases.
- In a 2021 survey carried out by the [Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement at Stranmillis University](#), when asked if the transfer test should have been cancelled, **258 parents out of 390** agreed that it 'should have been cancelled at the start of the school year [September 2020] with alternative contingency plans put in place' ([CREU, Stranmillis University, 2021](#)).
- Some parents of year 8 students felt that their children had **missed out on the normal preparation for transition to post-primary schools** and that some were not adjusting as well as might have been expected as a result ([CREU, Stranmillis University, 2021](#)).

"My son is in P6 and his academic ability, confidence and wellbeing has suffered so much due to missed face to face schooling that it is beyond reason to expect him to prepare for and sit the transfer test in November"

(Direct quote from parent participating in the [CREU, Stranmillis University, 2021](#) survey).

GCSEs/AS/A Levels

- In the Summer of 2020 calculated grades for those completing their GCSEs, A/S Levels and A-Levels were calculated on based on a combination of information provided by schools, colleges and statistical information. A/S-Levels were counted as stand-alone qualifications and did not contribute to final A-Levels in 2021.

There were different approaches taken on how to award grades in different jurisdictions of the UK. This created a lot of stress for young people who were registered with different exam boards other than CCEA.

“One of the situations that affected me is when [the Education Minister] said we are definitely doing exams and then changed his mind less than a week before my English and Math GCSEs. I have now had to sit over 4 exams for each subject. This has added so much stress to my life. This has been the worst year of my life. I also struggled greatly with my mental health, as did my peers.”

- The uncertainty about whether summer 2021 exams would go ahead meant that, from the first period of term, **young people were faced with repeated assessment** as schools prepared for the eventuality that exams would be cancelled and grades would again be based on centre assessment. This caused an

increased level of pressure, stress and anxiety for CYP during an already difficult school year ([NICCY, 2021](#)).

“I’m glad to be back in a routine but having to treat every assessment as my GCSEs due to the chance of returning to lockdown is very stressful.” (Young Person, Young Minds Report, 2020)

- NI Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) stated that “...immediate action was needed to alleviate the stress experienced by young people” ([NICCY, 2021](#)).

- In January 2021 the Education Minister confirmed the summer 2021 exams series would not proceed. Instead, the approach to awarding grades was to be

based on teacher professional judgements, with moderation.

- In March 2021 CCEA released its guidance to schools/exam centres on the alternative awarding arrangements. This set out that centres should use a range of evidence to base judgement on pupils' grades; the type, range and number of pieces of evidence was at the discretion of schools (CCEA, 2021)
- There was a **perception by young people** that, rather than reducing the level of assessment, the decision to **cancel the summer 2021** exam series had generated **the same, if not more, work** than would have been the case had they sat several formal examinations (Children and Young People's direct quote).

School Disruption and Economic Impact of Covid-19

In all research relating to the impact of Covid-19 on CYP, it is emphasised that those most negatively impacted are those who were already in existing disadvantaged groups. Those in poverty before the lockdowns are more likely to have been pushed further into poverty.

- The latest data which covers 2017-20 shows that 330,000 people in Northern Ireland live in poverty; this is 18% of the total population of 1,860,000. Poverty in Northern Ireland is highest among children with approximately **one in every 4 children** (110,000 of population) living in poverty (Poverty in Northern Ireland, 2022). Families living in poverty are less likely to have some of the resources required for home schooling such as laptops, tablets or printers. This could have potentially had an impact on the children's ability to learn at home.
- School closures resulted in parents balancing caring for their children, working from home and being a teacher.
25% are juggling working from home with childcare duties.
17% have reduced their working hours to take care of their children.
A further **12%** of parents have been **forced to take unpaid leave** to look after their children.

10% had to **leave their jobs** completely. (Save the Children, 2021)

- When the Young Life and Times Survey (YLTS) asked the following statement: *“My family is financially worse off because of Coronavirus,”* **22%** respondents agreed while **31%** disagreed (Young Life and Times Survey, 2021).

“An uneven distribution of the negative consequences of the pandemic carry a risk of existing special inequalities and gaps in the standard of living becoming further entrenched, or widening.”

(Magill and McPeake, 2021)

- Similarly, **around one in five children in P7** responding to the same question that in the Kids Life and Times Survey (KLTS) **agreed that their family was financially worse off because of Covid-19**. Children from ‘low affluence’ families were more likely to agree (**27%**) than those from ‘medium affluence’ (**20%**) or ‘high affluence’ families (**14%**) ([Kids Life and Times Survey, 2021](#)).
- “Many Families have struggled in terms of **deciding to heat or eat**; as well as electricity meters screaming. This has a huge impact on children as well as parents. Many young people of spoken to our mentors of the sound of the electricity meter haunting them in their sleep as it makes them feel “poor”. The stigma of this has caused an **increase in school refusals** and an increase to the Family Support Hub for support” (Family Practitioner).
- While it is not yet fully known how lockdowns and other Covid-19 related factors will affect the labour market in NI, it is clear that the impact has been and will continue to be to be **most keenly felt among young people** and those with the **lowest qualifications and earnings** ([Social Mobility Commission, 2021](#)).

- The analysis also highlights that the wider impacts of Covid-19 are

“The data suggests that young people have been significantly impacted by Covid-19 from a homelessness perspective. Young people have different experiences of and ways into homelessness than adults. They are frequently ‘hidden’ homeless situations- staying with family, friends or other shared living arrangements- and lockdown measures alongside loss of income, have seen many of these arrangements breakdown...”
[\(NIHE, 2021\)](#)

likely to increase health inequalities, with those who live in the **most deprived communities** most at risk (Department of Health, 2020).

- Between July and December 2020, 4,849 households **presented as homeless**, one third of which were families containing a **total of 3,136 children**. On 4 January 2021, a total of **3,315** children were living in

temporary accommodation, an **increase of 11%** from the previous year. This added another layer of stress into children’s lives when they were already facing uncertainty regards school. Evidence shows homelessness and **unstable living arrangements impacts on children’s ability to learn**, for example, arriving to school tired, wearing dirty clothes, or not wearing weather appropriate clothes or without homework completed ([Shelter](#), 2018).

- The number of **16-25 year olds** presenting as **homeless increased** in from **1,419 in 2019 to 1,544 in 2020**. The increase in the number of young people requiring temporary accommodation placements **increased by 91%** for 16 and 17 years-olds ([NICCY, 2021](#)). This has further compounded the issues arising from school disruption for this cohort of young people as it could impact their wellbeing from trauma associated with losing their family homes, being unable to attend school or their inability to do homework.

Impact of Digital Poverty and risk from increased online activity during lockdown

Digital Poverty

There is a strong evidence base that highlights digital poverty as a barrier to enabling remote learning in areas where there are high levels of social deprivation and connectivity issues in rural areas.

- Non-school factors are a primary source of inequalities in education.

They believe that **focusing on digital education**, due to school closures will definitely **widen the learning gap** between children from **low and high socioeconomic backgrounds**. In fact, they have described the combination of school closures and child poverty as a social crisis in the making ([Gupta and Jawanda, 2020](#)).

“The most difficult things faced by young people and children during the pandemic, I feel, are the stress of school and expectations to get good grades and complete school work, when at home where some people do not have access or time to teach themselves... I feel the government need to address the issue of children not being able to access resources they would in school, like computers, textbooks, etc. so that all children have an equal chance to get a good education. This needs to be a permanent change made by the government so all children own a computer have their own resources to do homework, not just a short time fix or borrow from school.”

(Direct quote from young person, 2021)

- In order to mitigate the risk of digital exclusion, the Education Minister acknowledged that not all pupils had sufficient access to

technology required for their learning while at home. This was rolled out in three stages to provide 24,000 devices. Priority was initially given to Year 11 and 13 pupils in post-primary and primary 3 and 6 in primary schools. This has taken longer than initially planned, which may have further impacted on children’s learning.

- Ulster University research highlighted different levels of **digital literacy among parents**, resulting in them struggling to navigate the large

number of online resources in order to support their children's learning. NIA Research Matters, 2020).

Increased Online Activity and Risk

School closures and restrictions have resulted in CYP relying more on technology and digital solutions for learning and socialisation. Spending more time on virtual platforms can leave children vulnerable to online sexual exploitation and grooming as predators exploit the pandemic (Unicef, 2020).

- PSNI highlighted concerns about increase in risk of online sexual abuse during the pandemic due to a number of coinciding factors, including **CYP were spending more time online**, many **parents had limited time to supervise** their children's online lives and may not understand the possible dangers. And **people who pose a danger** to children are also likely to be **spending more time online**, viewing and sharing or engaging children in sexual conversations and behaviours (PSNI, 2020).
- **50% of parents**, the most prevalent concern, was the pressure on their child to make **in-game purchases**. **45% of parents** of children who played games, said they were concerned about the possibility of their **child being bullied** by other players. For some parents this concern was valid. Among the **children aged 8-15** who agreed to answer questions about problems that can be encountered on mobiles and online, **three in ten said they had been bullied**, 38% said it was through online games.
- Over half of 5-15s said they posted or shared content on Video Sharing Platforms during 2020, ranging from 39% of 5-7s to 75% of 12-15s. ([OFCOM, 2021](#)).
- Overall, just over half of 5-15s used social media sites or apps in 2020 (55%), with incidence increasing with age to 87% of 12-15s. For most social media platforms, the minimum age requirement is 13; however, our research showed that **42% of children under the minimum age**

requirement (that is, aged between 5 and 12 years old) used social media ([OFCOM, 2021](#)).

- 12-15 year olds who opted to answer these questions, **55% said they had experienced some form of negative online experience**, from a list they were prompted with. Among these negative experiences, the most likely to be cited was “**being contacted by a stranger online who wanted to be their friend**” (30%) ([OFCOM, 2021](#)).
- **20% of 12-15s said they had accidentally spent money online** that they didn’t mean to, **or seen or received something scary/ troubling, or seen something of a sexual nature that made them feel uncomfortable** ([OFCOM, 2021](#)).

“...I was on social media for a larger percentage of the day. This meant I was exposed to influencers perfect images, bodies and life. This made me feel like I was abnormal by feeling down and not being able to cope with lockdown. I compared my life, my body to these people. This resulted in me going long periods without eating which made me lose 2 ½ stone. As I was so tired and feeling utterly disgusted with how I looked, I stopped all contact with my friends, isolated myself... I don’t know how I am going to recover from this.”

(Direct quote from young person, 2021).

- **70% of children aged 12-15 with an impacting/limiting condition claimed to have experienced at least one of the negative experiences** listed in a survey, compared to **50%**

of those without a condition. In particular, they were more **likely to have been contacted online by someone they didn’t know who wanted to be their friend (45% vs. 27%)**, and to feel **under pressure to send photos** or other information about themselves to someone (14% vs. 4%). Children aged 8-15 with an impacting/limiting condition were more likely to say that they had **experienced some form of bullying (46% vs. 26% without)** ([OFCOM, 2021](#)).

Impact of Lockdown on Physical and Emotional Wellbeing

Mental health has been one of the most discussed impacts of the pandemic and particularly so in relation to CYP. While some children may have maintained good emotional mental health and wellbeing, or even seen improvements, research carried out through the YLTS and KLTS reported that **41% of Primary 7 respondents** and **52% of 16 year-olds** felt their mental and emotional health had **worsened** during the pandemic.

“This has been the worst year of my life. I also struggled greatly with my mental health, as did my peers. Being kept in the house for such long periods of time made me feel alienated from my community. This eventually resulted in me having social anxiety when we were allowed to go out which has put a gigantic strain on my relationships. By sitting inside all day by myself as my parents work for the NHS bar my one walk a day allowed me to have a lot of time to think... This allowed these feelings to fester in my mind and grow.. I don’t know how I am going to recover from this” (Direct quote from young person)

- Common mood disorders such as anxiety and depression affect **12.6%** of CYP in NI - around **25% higher** than in other UK nations. Emotional problems are particularly common among boys aged 5-10, especially in the most deprived quintile ([Social Mobility Commission, 2021](#)).

- There have also been changes emerging in terms of health related behaviours, such as **smoking, alcohol**

consumption, physical activity and road safety. The biggest negative impacts on disease outcomes are likely to be in respect of **mental wellbeing** and the development and management of long-term mental health conditions (Department of Health, 2020).

- The closure of schools has had a wide-ranging impact on CYP that extends far beyond educational attainment. **Schools are often the place in which early signs of health or developmental problems** are identified and **are a main referral route** to many health services. Schools were restricted in their ability to carry out this important role whilst they were closed.

- In addition to being a referral route through to the health system, **schools are also a hub** for the delivery of health-related services such as, **educational psychology, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy** and engagement with **CAMHS**. When schools closed the main channel families and children had with allied health professionals also closed. **Health check-ups** and **vaccination programmes** that would normally take place in schools did not take place during their closure.
- There was a reduction of access to outdoor play for early years and school age children due to school closures with the loss of break time playground access, PE classes, after school recreational activities, etc. This can be hugely detrimental to a child's healthy development. During lockdown, school-aged children **active in play** dropped from **53.2% to 31.4%** and participation in social play decreased dramatically from **58.9% to 5%**, while technology-based play increased from **33.9% to 55.7%**. The lack of physical activity and socialisation raises significant health and wellbeing concerns, and the need for playful experiences and interactions may be more important than ever after lockdown ([NICCY, 2021](#)).
- **Lack of outdoor play** could also increase **weight problems and the disorders** that are associated with them. Studies have stressed the need to maintain regular physical activity and stated that it is important to avoid behaviours that lead to inactivity and a sedentary lifestyle. They state that maintaining regular physical activity and routinely exercising in a safe, home environment is an important strategy for healthy living during the Covid-19 pandemic ([Gupta and Jawanda, 2020](#)). Schools often provide time for regular outdoor play and physical education that children missed out on due to school closures.
- Schools often play a significant part in **children's nutrition through school meals**; therefore the closure of schools may have led to children not benefitting from these. Good nutrition plays a critical role in children's cognitive development and academic performance, and this was a concern during the pandemic. The impact of **nutritional deficiency is mostly seen in poor socioeconomic groups** and

school closures. This includes a lack of Vitamin D, which is essential for bones and teeth. ([Gupta and Jawanda, 2020](#)).

Impact of lockdown on vulnerable children

CYP with Special Educational Needs (SEN) including children with Physical Disability

Many parents of children with disabilities are finding the lockdown has been especially difficult for them and their children. The loss of routine, short breaks and school have had a negative impact on home life.

- A study by the University of Ulster in 2020 found that parents of children with SEN were likely to experience a range of challenges when home schooling their children.

"I have discussed with the teacher how some days she cannot sit still so we do practical activities instead of worksheets and upload evidence of that. We can take out learning outdoors. Both my children have an outdoor space to avail of and parents who encourage them being outdoors."

(Direct quote from parent participating in the CREU, Stranmillis University, 2021 survey).

- The pandemic resulted in significant restrictions on the supports and services available to CYP with SEN and disability and had profoundly detrimental effects on the education, health and wellbeing of the children, as well as on parents, carers and siblings ([NICCY, 2021](#)).
- The abrupt suspension of services, coupled with the closure of schools, meant that many parents/carers experienced a withdrawal of vital respite services and their children missing out on support received prior to the pandemic. School played a **vital role in supporting** families of children with Special Educational Needs in terms of **sensory, educational and behavioural needs** as well as the necessary referrals.
 - The majority of autistic children have additional educational needs and **86% autistic children in NI are classified as SEN** (stages 1-5).

These parents and carers are facing additional strain and stress trying to provide educational support for their child at home. The unprecedented crisis caused by the Coronavirus pandemic is having a profound effect on autistic young people. We have found a substantial number of families that are **struggling to provide visual resources** for their child during Covid-19 due to lack of resources e.g. printers, laminators, ink etc. (Autism NI)

- Research is showing the negative impact of the pandemic on disabled or seriously ill children's physical and mental health. There is an inextricable link between physical health and mental health and this link is much more pronounced for CYP with a physical disability. CYP with a **physical disability are at a much higher risk of developing a mental health condition** compared to their non-disabled peers ([NICCY, 2021](#)).
- Schools have an extensive role in the lives of CYP with disability because they often provide a **range specialist resources** and equipment that aren't easily accessible elsewhere, such as therapy pools and adapted outdoor play equipment. The loss of **specialist support** through the closure of schools, along with respite or day services has had a profound impact on this group of CYP.
- The disruption to routine was seen as having very negative effects on children with SEN, with many parents pointing to a **regression in their child's behaviour and social skills**. O'Connor et al (2020) found that almost all parents of children with SEN indicated that **support for emotional-behavioural difficulties** had been affected by the pandemic, being **stopped/postponed (61%)**, moved to **online support (21%)** or **reduced (13%)**, with similar patterns reported for access to social services and educational support.

Children in Alternative Educational Settings and Secure Care

- Evidence suggests that the pandemic placed specific challenges on EOTAS settings. As reported by Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI), a number of centres reported non-attendance for a small

number of pupils with complex needs, including severe anxiety, and for those whose parent/carer(s) who were shielding. The report also noted a decrease in educational psychology support across centres and no access to youth work support in others, which impacted negatively on the quality of interventions, especially for pupils who are extremely vulnerable ([Education and Training Inspectorate, 2021](#)).

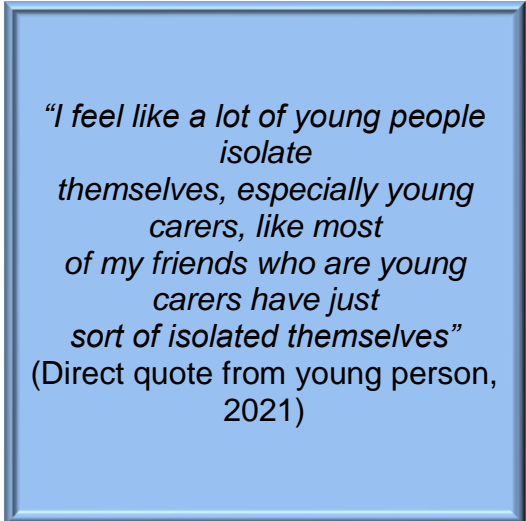
- Direct feedback from young people in secure care reflected the disruption to their education, noting that due to social distancing requirements across units, teaching was only received 1-2 times a week ([Education and Training Inspectorate, 2021](#)).

Newcomer Families

- Research shows that the pandemic has highlighted additional barriers of remote learning for children with English as an additional or new language for whom learning materials were not necessarily provided in an appropriate format.
- The pandemic has also exposed inequalities that exist between different groups of children in terms of their entitlement to educational support. For example, the QUB research showed reinforced barriers for asylum seeking families in accessing support and other resources during the pandemic, including educational provisions. It also reflected a particular impact on Newcomer children who had arrived with their families to NI in February 2020 and who would usually have received intensive support over a number of months to settle into their new homes and schools ([NICCY, 2021](#)).
- Migrant-origin young people may also experience additional difficulties as their parents may be less familiar with the curriculum, consequently making home-schooling more challenging. Asylum-seeking and refugee children could have already had disrupted education, and they are therefore now likely to fall even further behind. These children are likely to have difficulties re-joining education due to their lack of educational technology and thus opportunities to engage in online education (Darmody, M., Smyth, E., and Russell, H. 2021).

Young Carers

- Covid-19 impacted greatly on the role of Young Carers. Young Carers have particularly spoken about the increased social isolation and the anxiety of returning to normal life, including in the context of where a parent or sibling may be shielding (NIRYCS Annual Report Card, 2021).
- With a lack of social interaction and activity with friends due to school closure and an increase in caring responsibilities over the course of lockdown, this has had an adverse impact on Young Carer's mental health (NIRYCS Annual Report Card, 2021).
- Young Carers who receive support from Northern Ireland Regional Young Care service, highlighted difficulty communicating openly with their support workers via virtual or online methods. They were also unable to avail of the usual respite activities or peer support in a setting away from home. The responsibilities of caring for a parent or sibling often meant it was challenging to get time and space in the home for online learning (NIRYCS Annual Report Card, 2021).



"I feel like a lot of young people isolate themselves, especially young carers, like most of my friends who are young carers have just sort of isolated themselves"
(Direct quote from young person, 2021)

Impact of School Closures on Safeguarding CYP

There is growing evidence that the Covid-19 precautions of social distancing and self-isolation reduced the visibility of children and young people and limited many of the social support structures for children and families.

- The lockdown regulations and public health restrictions created new, or exacerbated existing challenges and risks for many vulnerable children, young people and their families as it removed the usual formal and informal support networks. Children and young people were potentially

at a greater risk of harm in the home, as evidenced by increased domestic abuse rates. (Department of Health, 2020).

- Lockdown created financial pressure and home life became a stressful environment for some families, especially in instances where alcohol or substance misuse was an issue. School closures meant some children potentially lost their “safe space” and referrals to social services could not be made by teachers.
- Children generally have been less visible than before and this was reflected in a reduction in the number of referrals in the early stages of the pandemic. However, the number has steadily increased over time and now exceeds the number received during the same period last year; this is likely to be as a result of building pressure and challenges within the family home (Department of Health, 2020).
- ChildLine highlighted that they received a significant increase in contacts from children about a wide range of safeguarding concerns in their home environments during the pandemic, including **increased use of physical punishment, exposure to domestic abuse and coercive control, the impact of increased parental use of alcohol as well as children being subject to physical and sexual abuse** (ChildLine, 2021).
- In addition to noting concerns relating to trends in referrals and reporting, it must be highlighted that there were workforce pressures at play. Staff and services who play a key role in safeguarding, such as health visiting, were redirected elsewhere within the health system and significant reductions in workforce availability due to Covid-19 related absences at key points in the pandemic. There was a necessary shift during the pandemic from early intervention and prevention support to crisis intervention responses (CYPSP, 2020).

Impact of Returning to School for CYP, Teachers and Schools

While schools re-opened to all pupils in September 2020, this period faced its own unique challenges as pupils and school staff adjusted to restrictions and measures to curb the spread of transmission.

- Face masks become a part of the daily uniform for post-primary pupils when walking in the corridors or sitting in large groups in communal areas. Some research suggests that wearing face coverings may have physical side effects and impair face identification, verbal and non-verbal communication between teacher and learner. This means there are downsides to face coverings for pupils and students, including detrimental impacts on communication in the classroom (DfE, 2022)
 - Some schools contended with localised outbreaks, with positive cases and their close contacts being required to isolate at home. There were a total of **88 positive cases** in schools within the first 2 weeks of reopening. For many, pupil absence and school closures due to the spread, hampered with a return to previous routines.
 - Almost **1 in 10 pupils** did not attend during their first week and there were a view among some teaching unions that schools had been left to navigate the challenges of safety risks with insufficient support (Education Authority).
- "I found returning to a social setting after shielding was hard as I was very anxious and nervous about seeing people at the risk of possibly catching the virus. However, since I have returned to school I was a lot more relaxed and especially now since I have got my two vaccines, I am not as anxious or worried."*

(Direct quote from young person, 2021).
- While schools had been advised to focus on mental health and emotional wellbeing, the pressures of trying to limit the spread of Covid-19 and prepare young people for assessments added to the stresses on those returning to school.
 - Further disruption to education was evident in the form of an extended mid-term break in October 2020, while parental concerns around the

transfer test and children with SEN continued to grow. By this stage, over 2,000 positive Covid-19 cases had been reported in schools.

48.9% of teachers responding thought pupils would be dealing with anxiety, fear and trauma and **45.2%** identified disruption to children's routine and relationships as key concern for their mental health and wellbeing
(Barnardo's NI, 2020)

- Schools were instructed in early November 2020 to hold PE classes outside, which was not ideal given the NI climate.
- As the rate of transmission and the number of cases increased, the Minister for Education announced on 5 January 2021 that all schools, apart from Special Schools, had to close to the majority of pupils, with the exception of children of key workers and vulnerable children. This period of closure lasted until 8 March when P1 to P3 pupils returned, followed by pupils in P4 to P7 and years 12 to 14 on 22 March, and all other pupils on 12 April 2021.
- Pupils in bubbles were sent home to self-isolate at some point during the term, with more children were sent home in bubbles from secondary schools than primaries. Some schools were extensively affected by Covid-19-related absence. And a few school leaders said that a significant proportion of their pupils had to **self-isolate on 2 or 3 separate occasions** (Gov.uk, 2020).

Service Delivery during Covid 19

The report linked below provides an overview of service delivery in response to mental health and emotional wellbeing needs of children and young people during the Covid-19 crisis. The report provides a summary of information collated as a result of engagement and feedback from the key stakeholders who form the CYP sub cell of Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing Silver cell and was accurate in July 2020. Service delivery changed and was reviewed on an ongoing basis throughout the pandemic.

Managing the impact of Covid 19 on the Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing needs of Children and Young people in Northern Ireland

Next Steps

- The NAOG School Disruption Task and Finish group will utilise the information in this report in action planning to address urgent priorities for children and young people's wellbeing within education.
- Consultation with children and young people will take place to scope:
 - The experience of school post-lockdown
 - Their concerns around education and the future
 - What they believe can be done to mitigate the impact of school disruption caused by Covid-19
- Data released on the 21/22 academic school year will contribute to a follow-up report.

Appendix

References

[Barnardo's NI: New Term, New Challenges, New Opportunities, August 2020](#)

[Department of Health: Rebuilding Health And Social Care Services, Strategic Framework, June 2020\)](#)

[CYPSP: Managing the impact of Covid-19 on the Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing needs of Children and Young people in Northern Ireland, July 2020](#)

[Gupta and Jawanda: The impacts of Covid-19 on children, July 2020](#)

[NICCY: A New and Better Normal: Children and Young People's Experiences of Covid-19 Pandemic Report, August 2021](#)

O'Connor-Bones U, Bates J, Finlay J, Roulston S and Taggart S Ulster University Experiences of Supporting Children's Home Learning during Covid-19 Northern Ireland Parent Surveys, UNESCO, 2020

[OFCOM: Children and Parents- Media Use and Attitudes Report, April 2021](#)

[Ofsted: Examining Education Recovery, 2022](#)

[Joseph Rowntree Foundation: Poverty in Northern Ireland, March 2022](#)

Shankill Family Survey, 2020

[Social Mobility Commission: State of the Nation 2021- Social Mobility and the Pandemic](#)

[Stranmillis University and the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement Northern Ireland: Survey of Parents/ Carers on Home-schooling during the Covid-19 Crisis, March 2021](#)

[Post–primary transfer tests – full steam ahead? - Pivotal Public Policy Forum \(pivotalppf.org\)](#)

[youngminds-coronavirus-report-autumn-2020.pdf](#)

[Full article: “Education cannot cease”: the experiences of parents of primary age children \(age 4-11\) in Northern Ireland during school closures due to COVID-19 \(tandfonline.com\)](#)

[COVID-19 and school shutdowns: Examining the after-effects - Research Matters \(assemblyresearchmatters.org\)](#)

[Children at increased risk of harm online during global COVID-19 pandemic \(unicef.org\)](#)

[Impacts of the COVID-19 Control Measures on Widening Educational Inequalities - Merike Darmody, Emer Smyth, Helen Russell, 2021 \(sagepub.com\)](#)

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) and the use of face coverings in education settings \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)