30th April 2020

The Scottish Children's Services Coalition – vulnerable children and coronavirus pandemic inquiry

'The lost COVID generation'

The Scottish Children's Services Coalition (SCSC), welcomes the opportunity to respond to the inquiry into the practical problems that relate to the Coronavirus pandemic as it impacts on vulnerable children and young people.

Vulnerable children are among a group disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, many of whom are being denied the protection, statutory support and routine that comes with regular attendance at school.

Failure to act now will lead to a lost COVID generation, where issues are stored up for the future with an impact on the individual concerned and resultant cost to society as a whole.

About the SCSC

The SCSC is an alliance of leading providers of education, care and support to vulnerable children and young people, as well as to their families.

We are committed to improving the lives of vulnerable children and young people and our vision is for Scotland to be the best place in the world for them to grow up in. We will achieve this through campaigning for the provision of a wide range of high-quality, well-resourced and quickly accessible services. This is so that these children and young people get best possible care and support, tailored to their individual needs, helping them achieve their full potential.

Our members deliver specialist care and education services to children and young people with ASN**,** as well as direct help and support to their families. They also provide independent advocacy, advice and support to children and young people with care experience.

Members of the SCSC are**:** *Falkland House School - www.falklandhouseschool.org, LOVE Learning - www.l-o-v-e.org.uk, Spark of Genius* **-** *www.sparkofgenius.com* and *Young Foundations - www.youngfoundations.com.*

Background

In closing schools and ELC settings the Scottish Government guidance (31st March)[1] stated that access to these would still be available for children of key workers and vulnerable children.
It noted that:

Children and young people may be vulnerable for a range of reasons including: being on the child protection register; looked after; on the edge of care; being eligible for Free School Meals; having complex additional support needs; being affected by poverty and deprivation.

It further noted:

Vulnerable children and young people

The overall position remains that, if pupils can learn safely at home, they should. However, we know that some children and young people rely upon the care and protection provided by schools and other agencies in relation to a range of circumstances.

Where appropriate, local authorities will need to ensure and prioritise continued care and support for these pupils during the period of school closure

Complex additional support needs

Children and young people with complex additional support needs may have a broad range of needs, which require different support to be provided.

These include children and young people who: require a range of interventions and support to meet their needs; have complex health needs that require medical support which cannot be provided at home; have a disability where support required cannot be provided at home; attend a grant-aided special school or independent special school and would be considered as having complex additional support needs.

Definition

One issue that has created some concern is the definition of "vulnerable" children, which was highlighted in John Swinney's statement below:

The Cabinet Secretary told Parliament on 19th March: "I am not going to set a definitive definition of what a vulnerable child is; our schools and local authorities know our children and families well and are best placed to identify which children need care, protection and support the most during the period that lies ahead."[2]

Some clarification is however provided by the Scottish Government data intelligence report on 24th April which puts the figure of those classed as "vulnerable" as 97,000 (around 10 per cent of the

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[1] Scottish Government, *Coronavirus (COVID-19): school and early learning closures - guidance about key workers and vulnerable children*, 31st March 2020. (accessed 28th April 2020). https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-guide-schools-early-learning-closures/

[2] Scottish Parliament (PDF Link), 19th March 2020, Col. 36. Available at: http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=12591&mode=pdf (accessed 28th April 2020).

population aged 0-17). It defines this as those who have a multi-agency plan, although notes that there is no central record of this.[3]

This includes:

- 16,900 children and young people who had a child protection investigation (and might be deemed either in care or 'on the edge of care').
- 2,600 children on the child protection register.
- 14,000 looked after children, of which 3,500 are looked after at home.
- 10,000 school aged children with complex ASN.

It should however be noted that there is a lack of consistency across local authorities as to what is classed as "vulnerable" and greater clarity in this area would be welcomed.

Latest statistics from the Scottish Government covering the period 20th-24th April highlight that approximately 6,060 children and young people attended local authority hubs, of which 83 per cent are the children of key workers and 17 per cent are classed as vulnerable children.

This means that of the 97,000 defined as "vulnerable", a mere 1,030 are attending such hubs, just over 1 per cent of those classed as vulnerable.

The vast majority of vulnerable children are therefore being supported via telephone and online contact with school staff, which we know in some situations can be extremely challenging, or by other services including third sector initiatives.

The Department for England has pointed to data shows that 5 per cent of the most-needy have attended an educational setting in the week before the Easter holidays due to coronavirus (22nd April).[4] This amounted to 29,000 vulnerable children of the more than 723,000 children were known to children's social care services in 2019.

This has prompted concerns from the Children's Commissioner for England that "at risk" children are facing increased danger in the lockdown, while schools and teachers struggle to get hold of them.

Lack of support

It is becoming clear that the current lockdown measures are having a major impact on some of the most vulnerable children in our society. Those living in poverty and deprivation as well as those with ASN may not be getting the support and services they most desperately need due to lockdown, with telephone and online school staff contact not sufficient to address need.

Mental health as an example is being impacted, both among those with existing conditions and those that did not have issue prior to the lockdown. In a survey by the mental health charity YoungMinds, which included participants up to age 25 years with a mental illness history in the UK, 83% said the pandemic had made their conditions worse. 26% said they were unable to access

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[3] The Scottish Government, *Coronavirus (COVID-19): supporting vulnerable children and young people – data intelligence report*, 24th April 2020. Available at: https://www.gov.scot/publications/supporting-vulnerable-children-young-people-data-intelligence-report/ (accessed 28th April 2020).

[4] BBC, Tiny fraction of 'at risk' children attending schools, 22nd April 2020. Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/in-pictures-52370968 (accessed 28th April 2020).

mental health support; peer support groups and face-to-face services have been cancelled, and support by phone or online can be challenging for some young people.[5]

Reinforcing this there has been a dramatic drop in the number of young people being referred to child and adolescent mental health service, with 1,133 being referred to such services between 23rd March and 24th April. This compares with the average monthly referral rate of 2,794 last year.[6]

Children and young people identified with ASN are disproportionately prevalent in areas of deprivation and with Coronavirus exacerbating already increasing child poverty levels, this is likely to increase.

For those with complex ASN we are concerned that they may not be getting the specialist support they require. It should further be noted that Under the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 (as amended), education authorities have a statutory requirement to identify, provide for and review the additional support needs of children and young people for whose education they are responsible.[7] For many these statutory requirements are not being met in the current situation.

Many of those who are vulnerable are children of families where there is known to be domestic violence, which we know is on the increase, substance abuse, parental sickness or disability, as well as poverty - which is closely associated with neglect.

In this context we have major concerns that **only around one per cent of school children** are at childcare hubs. These are very small numbers, reflecting the fact that only a tiny fraction of vulnerable children are taking up these places.

So often these children are quite invisible at home and not in the place which is best at keeping them in a safe and comfortable environment - school. The relevant support can be provided at a childcare hub which in many situations is simply not available in a home-based setting.

It is vital that action is quickly taken to assess the requirements of these vulnerable children and young people and adequate support is provided. This may necessitate multi-agency interventions, such as face-to-face contact from professionals for those most at risk, which go beyond telephone and online contact and/or a return to school.

Increase in future issues

The number of vulnerable children will increase because of the additional pressures placed on families and communities by the COVID-19 outbreak.

This means that more children will be at risk of harm and neglect. Increasingly high stress home environments will increase the likelihood that children will experience domestic abuse. Children may

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[5] Joyce Lee, *Mental health effects of school closures during COVID-19,* The Lancet, 14th April 2020. Available at: https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642(20)30109-7/fulltext (accessed 28th April 2020).

[6] Aberdeen Evening Express, *Fewer young people referred to mental health services during lockdown,* 29th April 2020. Available at*:* https://www.eveningexpress.co.uk/news/scotland/fewer-young-people-referred-to-mental-health-services-during-lockdown/ (accessed 30th April 2020).

[7] Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 (as amended),section 4. Available at: thttp://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2004/4/section/4 (accessed 30th April 2020).

be exposed to more risks because they are spending more time online and loss of income will make family life more difficult for many.

These heightened risks are happening at a time when children are less visible to the range of professionals who are normally engaged with them, and when child protection services are under acute pressure.

As the lockdown continues we are also conscious of a widening of the educational attainment gap as those in more deprived communities, which also has a higher prevalence of those with ASN, may not have the same ability access to educational resources as other sectors of society.

Conclusion

We greatly welcome the support the Scottish Government is providing, working with a range of partners to support children and families, including funding through the £350 million Communities support package. £1.5 million has also been allocated to third sector groups to promote wellbeing through community-based initiatives.

It should however be noted that there is a lack of consistency across local authorities as to what is classed as "vulnerable" and greater clarity in this area would be welcomed.

Austerity and cuts in services due to budgetary constraints has seriously impacted on the ability of local authorities, the third sector and other organisations to provide adequate support.

While telephone and online staff contact are to be welcomed, they are in many cases inadequate to address the specialist support required. They are also often not accessible to the most vulnerable and this may necessitate some measure of face-to-face professional contact or presence in a school environment.

The small number of those in an educational setting is a cause of some concern and for many of these children and young people, the safest and most effective place for them is in school.

It is essential that children who need help are identified and given the help they need via a multi-agency approach. This means adequate support for those needing it is delivered at home, where this is the right approach for their circumstances, combined with delivering relevant support at school for those vulnerable individuals whose interests are best served there.

Failure to act so will create a major backlog in issues and lead to a lost COVID generation of vulnerable children and young people, with an impact on the individual and resultant cost to society.

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