



**IT'S TIME TO ACT:
COUNTERING THE IMPACT
OF COVID-19 ON PUPILS
AND SCHOOLS**

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Executive summary

The Covid-19 pandemic caused an unprecedented experience for society, both in the UK and globally. All children and young people deserve to benefit from education, support and social relationships to help them thrive, yet because of the pandemic they experienced a year of their lives in and out of lockdown, mostly away from friends and largely away from school as part of the national effort to reduce the impact of the virus. Equally many of them spent more time with family, learnt new skills and experienced a new way of living.

It is too early to decipher all the nuanced and mixed impacts of the pandemic across the country. However, by waiting for the picture to become clearer, we risk seeing trends too late. This report shares insights from a Covid-19 response partnership between Cheshire West and Chester Council's local Averting Exclusions programme and the Our Way of Working programme (West Cheshire Children's Trust), with Social Finance, supported by the Westminster Foundation. This work takes stock and learns from the last year, understanding as much as possible about the experience of pupils, their families, schools, and local agencies to invest and plan for recovery. It builds on insights from previous analysis commissioned by the council, released in the 2020 report *Maximising Access to Education: Who's at risk of school exclusion? An analysis in Cheshire West and Chester*, to recognise changes locally, celebrate successes, mitigate the impact of trauma and reduce the risk of a sharp increase in school exclusions in coming months and years.

This work was made possible by the incredible dedication and expertise of local schools and agencies who collectively went above and beyond to support this work, despite continuing to work within the evolving and often challenging context of the pandemic. These contributors felt it was crucial to learn from, and start responding to, the impact of the pandemic as early as possible, to provide the most effective and evidence based support for pupils and their families.

The partnership is responding proactively to the findings by embedding these insights into their recovery planning, targeting support to those who need it most (see below). This report shares the insights to support others in understanding the impact of the pandemic in their local areas and/or nationally. Although the findings are specific to the sample size within West Cheshire, as was the case with previous analysis, they may indicate national trends that are relevant elsewhere, many of which call for an urgent response nationally.

Analyse: use data to understand pupil experience and journeys

Our analysis learns from the first term of the 2020/21 academic year, when all pupils were welcomed back to school after national lockdown. It brings together a range of datasets covering 1 September – 1 December 2020 and compares this to the same period in the previous three years (2017–2019). It shows that even with strengthened partnership working locally and proactive trauma informed practice, the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic have been far reaching, particularly for pupils experiencing disadvantage. The analysis shows inequalities in school attendance have been exacerbated during this time, meaning hundreds of children and young people did not attend school as they had prior to the pandemic, when schools reopened after the first lockdown in September 2020. Our findings showed that pupils eligible for free school meals, pupils who have previous or current contact with children's services and pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

(SEND)¹ were the most impacted, alongside pupils from areas of high deprivation and who had previous fixed term exclusions. Whilst repeat exclusions (pupils who have had previous fixed term exclusions) declined, there was a significant increase in the number of first time fixed term exclusions.

1. Covid-19 related absences (primarily due to self-isolation requirements) contributed to a **5.2% decline** in average attendance, with those from more deprived areas and those in secondary schools most impacted.
2. When excluding Covid-19 related absences, we saw the **attendance gap widen dramatically across all students**. Average attendance figures cover this trend and show only a slight decrease in overall attendance (5.2% as above). Further analysis quickly shows an increase in both pupils with almost full attendance and pupils persistently absent, widening the attendance gap between these groups.
3. With these Covid-19 absences excluded, the number of pupils that were **persistently absent² has increased by a quarter** (from 13% to 16%).
4. This was driven primarily by groups of pupils experiencing disadvantage, with 61% of those who were persistently absent in the Autumn term 2020 either **eligible for free school meals, with previous or current contact with children's services or with SEND.**³
5. Pupils experiencing these same disadvantages were also disproportionately missing more than 20% of school, or **one day a week** during this time. Alongside them were pupils living in the most deprived areas and/or with previous fixed term exclusions, with almost **1 in 10 pupils living in the most deprived areas and a quarter of pupils with previous fixed term exclusions missing the equivalent of 1 day per week or more**.
6. In this Autumn period of 2020, **over half (54%) of the pupils receiving fixed term exclusions had not received one previously**, whilst those who had previous experience of this type of exclusion received less than previous years.

Codify: learn from lockdown to support the next phase of the pandemic

Local schools, agencies and communities showed resilience, expertise and capacity for innovation in their response to the pandemic, but resources are stretched. Many of these stakeholders reflected shared challenges, including interpreting and implementing national guidance, adapting to a virtual way of working and mitigating against the impact of the pandemic on pupil mental health and emotional wellbeing. The importance of understanding the impact of the pandemic on children and young people and their families in the medium and longer term, particularly pupils experiencing disadvantage, was highlighted. Locally, there is a strong sense that many pupils were not able to engage, participate and benefit from school, due to experiences and needs that were created or exacerbated by the pandemic.

1 This included both those Special Educational Needs with and without Education Health Care Plans. This cohort of pupils include a diverse group with differing experiences and needs, while the potential protective factor ECHP could provide is unclear in the data, there may be alternative reasons within the context of the pandemic that led to both groups having similar experiences.

2 Persistent absence is equivalent to missing more than 10% of school, as defined by the Department for Education.

3 This included both pupils with and without EHCP. This cohort of pupils represents a diverse group with differing experiences and needs, while the protective factor of ECHPs is unclear in the data, there may be alternative reasons within the context of the pandemic that led to both groups having similar experiences.

Key themes identified were:

1. Trauma informed collaborative working drove effective and innovative approaches to supporting children and young people experiencing disadvantage
2. Some children and young people who did not reach statutory thresholds for support, are likely to be experiencing more disadvantage than before the pandemic
3. Interpreting and implementing evolving national guidance locally was testing, leading to some confusion and inconsistencies across schools and communities
4. Increasing levels of pupil mental ill health presented in schools alongside changes in behaviour, with some pupils at increased risk of exclusion
5. Unknown impact of the pandemic on child and adolescent development, with more investment in research needed to understand this further
6. Despite resilience of staff and trauma informed approaches, working in the context of the pandemic has significantly impacted staff wellbeing
7. Although demanding, online learning was a lifeline for many schools and pupils, however pupils experiencing disadvantage or digital exclusion faced significant barriers to learning
8. As children and families have been more isolated than usual during the pandemic, the emphasis needs to be on spotting signs for 'hidden harms' and responding early

Target: evidence-based decision making to support recovery

As the complex impacts of the pandemic on children and young people become clearer, Cheshire West Children's Trust is committed to a trauma informed and evidence led response. The positive legacies of the pandemic must not be lost. The Local Authority is committed to continuing to support local stakeholders to work closely together, ensuring schools, agency staff and communities feel trusted and valued for their expertise in responding to local trends as they emerge. The use of data, local knowledge and lived experience is fundamental to this, which will look different in each local area across the country. **There is an opportunity for national Government to support innovation and efficacy nationwide through translating this learning into flexible support for local areas, removing the expectation of a 'one-size-fits-all' recovery model.** We believe many of our findings will hold national relevance and share recommendations here for these insights to help improve support for children and young people beyond Cheshire West and Chester.

Recommendations:

1. Join up and analyse existing data to spot early trends and share these with local authorities and schools to practically support decision making, giving them value and an incentive to improve data collection.
2. Invest in data infrastructure for creating and sharing analysis, including better standardisation of data sharing practices and tools to support replication of interesting pieces of analysis in other local authorities.
3. Build on the pandemic's positive legacy of strengthened multi-agency working by investing in early intervention infrastructure, not just services, and related data sharing protocols locally.

4. Make national funding available for local recovery that allows schools and local authorities to work together to prioritise the way funding is spent, to match support to local need amongst staff and children and young people rather than top-down decision making to allocate funding in a 'one-size-fits-all' approach.
5. Prioritise wellbeing and take a strengths based approach to support attainment, by removing pressure to "catch up" quickly. Take this opportunity to look at pupil and school outcomes holistically.

Cheshire West and Chester Council has pioneered this approach to understanding Covid-19 within its wider Maximising Access to Education programme, in partnership with Social Finance. Since 2019 the programme has been working with schools, agencies, parents/ carers and young people to coproduce⁴ an early intervention approach to supporting pupils across a continuum of need, who may become at risk of school exclusion in the future. The learnings from this report will be embedded into early intervention infrastructure locally. Throughout this time, the programme will continue to share learnings and insights to support evidence based policy and practice locally and nationally.

⁴ Coproduction is a process of gathering evidence and insight from the experiences of pupils, parents/carers, schools and agencies to feed into the design of the local response. The pilot programme has been designed in partnership with these local stakeholders, ensuring it is relevant and effective in responding to the opportunities and challenges specific to Cheshire West and Chester.

1 Introduction

Cheshire West and Chester Council is pioneering an early intervention approach to children and young people at risk of exclusion from school. The Maximising Access to Education programme evolved from a local authority taskforce that responded to changes in patterns of local school exclusions in 2017, in the context of rising exclusions nationally in recent years.⁵ Although Cheshire West and Chester Council's exclusion rates are below the national average, over the last 18 months, the council has invested in data analysis and coproduction with local schools, parents and children to build a multi-agency response to support children likely to become at risk of exclusion from school.

When the Covid-19 pandemic began in spring 2020 and an unprecedented nationwide lockdown first took place, most pupils were sent home and did not return to school until September that year.⁶ Cheshire West and Chester Council, like so many local authorities, worked tirelessly to support schools, pupils and their families to adapt to the new and changing context as schools responded to peaks of the pandemic. Schools play a vital protective role for children and young people. It is critical to understand the impact of these unprecedented lockdowns on pupils, so they can be effectively supported. The national picture remains unclear, with significant concerns about pupil wellbeing.

For this reason, the council partnered with Social Finance, supported by the Westminster Foundation, to learn from the first term of the 2020/21 academic year, when all pupils were welcomed back to school after national lockdown. This report shares the partnership's approach to analysing the data available, codifying learnings from lockdown and targeting support in an evidence based and timely way. This includes sharing learnings from interviews with schools and local authority agencies. The work also builds on the 2020 report *Maximising Access to Education: who's at risk? An analysis in Cheshire West and Chester*.

The analysis

We set out to explore the impact of the lockdown on pupils by focusing on the emerging attendance and exclusions data from autumn term 2020. We brought together a range of datasets covering 1 September – 1 December 2020, when schools were mandated to welcome all pupils back after the summer holidays, comparing this to the same period in the previous three years (see Figure 1).

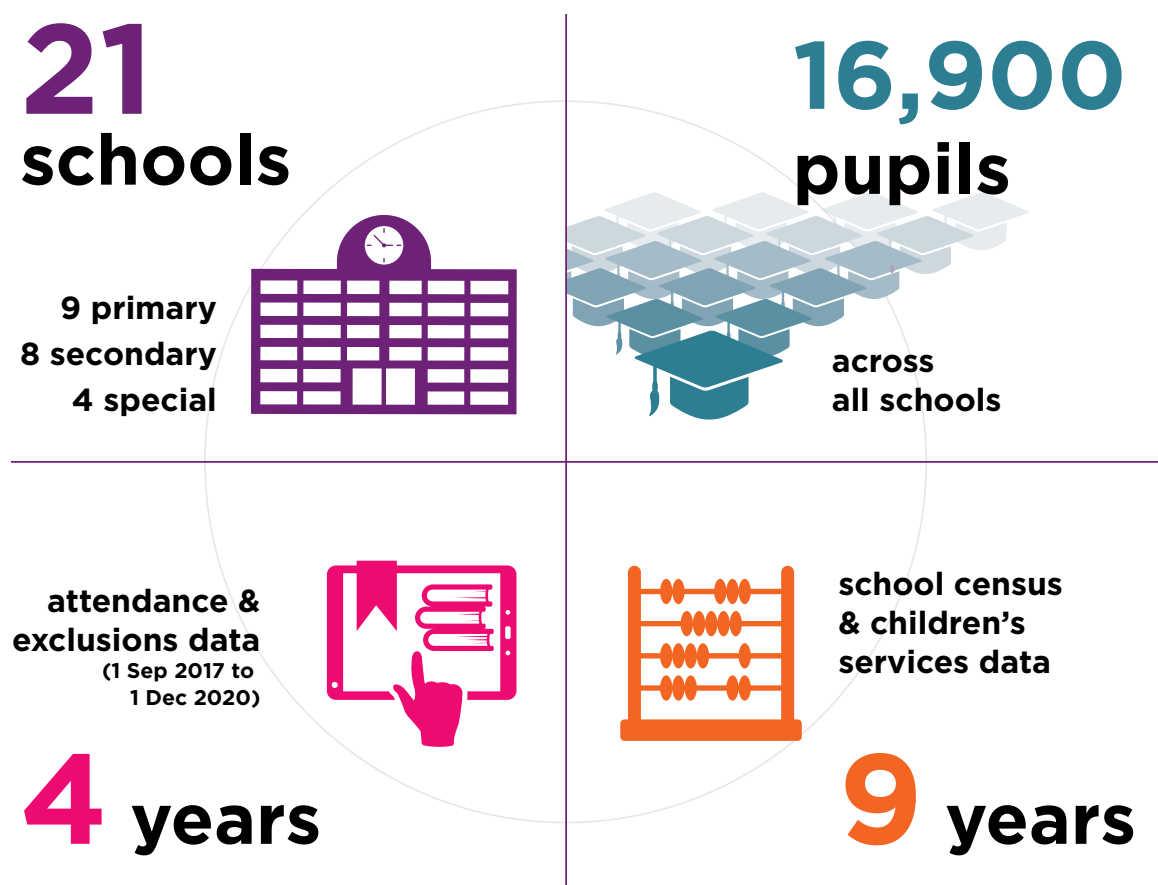
Attendance data is a useful measure as it is often an indicator of wellbeing, as well as being vital for education and for safeguarding (as supported by the Department for Education's guidance on Children Missing Education).⁷ Our previous analysis also found

5 Timpson Review of School Exclusion, May 2019. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807862/Timpson_review.pdf

6 In line with national guidance, school places were offered to children with Educational Health Care Plans, current support from a social worker and pupils identified to be vulnerable by professionals.

7 Children missing education Statutory guidance for local authorities, Department for Education. September 2016. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-missing-education>

Figure 1. Overview of the analysis



that absenteeism is often a precursor to safeguarding need and that attendance tends to deteriorate before an exclusion event and does not recover after.⁸

Fixed term exclusions are also strongly correlated with adverse impacts on life outcomes for pupils and often indicate unmet need.⁹ We sought to understand to what extent these may have changed due to the lockdown.

This work analysed changes in attendance rates and levels of fixed term exclusions compared with previous autumn terms, which used data as shown in the diagram above.

By joining these datasets, we built a detailed picture of pupil characteristics (such as SEND, contact with children's services, eligibility for free school meals and indices of multiple deprivation) and their experiences of attendance and exclusions from 1 September to 1 December over the last four years.¹⁰

⁸ *Who's at risk of exclusion? An analysis in Cheshire West and Chester, Social Finance*. July 2020. Available at: <https://www.socialfinance.org.uk/resources/publications/whos-risk-exclusion-analysis-cheshire-west-and-chester>

⁹ *Making The Difference: Breaking the link between school exclusion and social exclusion*, Institute for Public Policy Research. October 2017. Available at: <https://www.ippr.org/publications/making-the-difference>

¹⁰ Given this analysis is focused on a sample set of 21 schools within the West Cheshire area, these trends should also be explored more widely to ensure the sample has not misrepresented them.

2 Analyse: Our findings

Our analysis shows the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated inequalities in school attendance and therefore in access to education. This means hundreds of children and young people did not attend school as they had prior to the pandemic, when schools reopened after the first lockdown in September 2020. Our findings showed that pupils eligible for free school meals, pupils with previous or current contact with children's services and pupils with SEND¹¹ were the most impacted, alongside pupils from areas of high deprivation and who had previous fixed term exclusions. Many pupils were experiencing more than one of these disadvantages. We also saw a significant increase in the number of first time fixed term exclusions, whilst repeat exclusions (pupils who have had previous fixed term exclusions) declined. As found in our previous report,¹² pupils experiencing these disadvantages are likely to be at increased risk of exclusion with absenteeism representing a key indicator for increased risk. The below findings indicate a local trend, that may be reflected nationally: even with strong support locally, pupils who experienced the most disadvantage during lockdown are likely to be at increased risk of exclusion in future, highlighting the need for a national response to this issue.

Higher rates of Covid-19 absences for secondary school pupils and those living in areas of deprivation

Over the course of the Autumn term, increasing rates of Covid-19 locally meant that many pupils were required to self-isolate due to either having the virus, showing symptoms of it, or coming into close contact with someone who did. These Covid-19 related absences contributed to a **5.2% decline** in average attendance. For the most part, the effects of these Covid-19 related absences were relatively equal across all groups, with a few key exceptions:

1. Pupils living in the most deprived areas¹³ had higher Covid-19 related absence (6.1%) than those from the least deprived (4.6%).
2. Pupils in Secondary Schools saw a higher average rate of Covid-19 related absence (5.8%) than those in Primary schools (3%) and Special schools (4.5%).

Given the relatively consistent effect across different groups, we excluded these Covid-19 related absences for the remainder of our analysis.

Average attendance figures hide a widening attendance gap

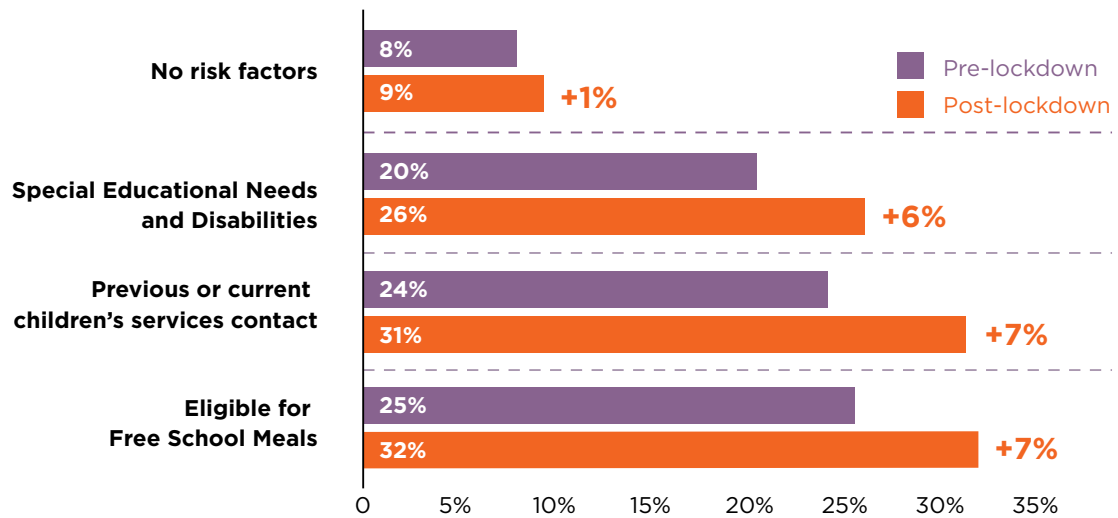
When excluding Covid-19 related absences, we saw the attendance gap widen dramatically across all pupils. This widening gap cannot be seen in the average attendance figures which dropped only slightly, but analysis uncovered two opposite effects driving this. The number of pupils with almost full attendance (between 98-100% attendance) grew, while at the

¹¹ This included both pupils with and without EHCPs. This cohort of pupils represents a diverse group with differing experiences and needs, while the protective factor of ECHPs is unclear in the data, there may be alternative reasons within the context of the pandemic that led to both groups having similar experiences.

¹² *Who's at risk of exclusion? An analysis in Cheshire West and Chester*, Social Finance. July 2020. Available at: <https://www.socialfinance.org.uk/resources/publications/whos-risk-exclusion-analysis-cheshire-west-and-chester>

¹³ Based on Indices of Multiple Deprivation, a relative measure ranking neighborhoods by Income; Employment; Education; Skills and Training; Health and Disability; Crime; Barriers to Housing Services; Living Environment.

Figure 2. Rate of pupils persistently absent before and after lockdown



same time the number of pupils missing more than 10% of school - the official designation of 'Persistent Absence' - also increased. Within this growing group of 'Persistently Absent', there was also a significant increase in those pupils missing 20% of school or more.

More pupils were 'persistently absent', driven by those experiencing disadvantage

Overall, the rate of **persistently absent pupils increased by a quarter** (from 13% to 16%). This was driven primarily by pupils already experiencing disadvantage, who represent 36% of all pupils. **61% of those who were persistently absent were either eligible for free school meals, had previous or current contact with children's services or with SEND (see Figure 2).**¹⁴ This shows a significantly disproportionate impact on these groups whose historically higher rates of absence increased further, after the first national lockdown.

We also saw that for pupils with more than one of these factors, the risk of persistent absence grew further. **The rate of persistent absence was the highest at 39% for pupils experiencing all three of these disadvantages** (this group represents 6% of the persistent absent population).

Pupils missing one day a week or more of school, are more likely to be experiencing known risk factors for permanent exclusion

A particularly concerning finding is a sharp rise in pupils missing more than 20% of school, even disregarding the Covid-19 absences. This is equivalent to **a pupil missing a day a week or more of school** over the three month period.

The increase in this high rate of absence was prevalent in the groups we had previously identified (pupils with SEND, pupils with previous or current contact with children's services and pupils eligible for free school meals) while also rising significantly in some smaller groups, such as those living in the most deprived areas¹⁵ and those with previous

¹⁴ This included both pupils with and without EHCP. This cohort of pupils represents a diverse group with differing experiences and needs, while the protective factor of ECHPs is unclear in the data, there may be alternative reasons within the context of the pandemic that led to both groups having similar experiences.

¹⁵ Based on whether they are in the bottom two deciles of the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, a relative measure ranking neighborhoods by Income; Employment; Education; Skills and Training; Health and Disability; Crime; Barriers to Housing Services; Living Environment.

Figure 3. Rate of pupils with >20% absence before and after lockdown

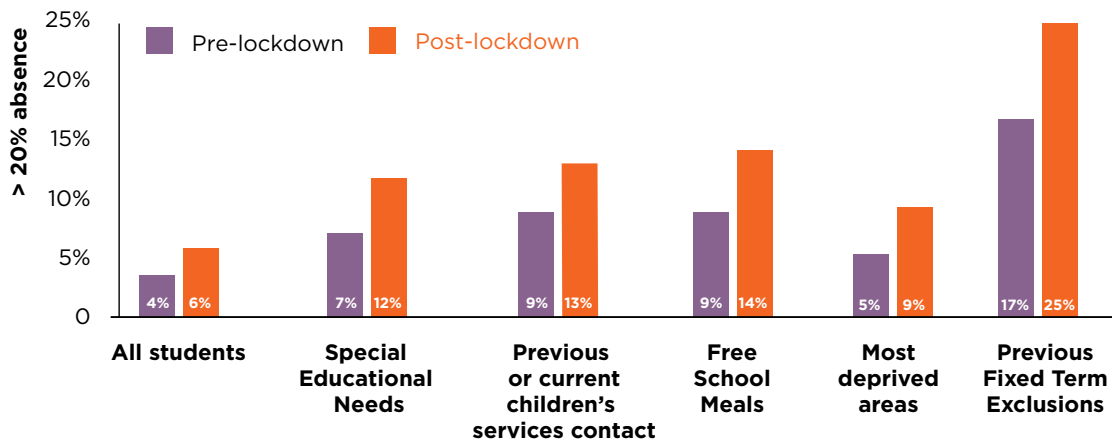
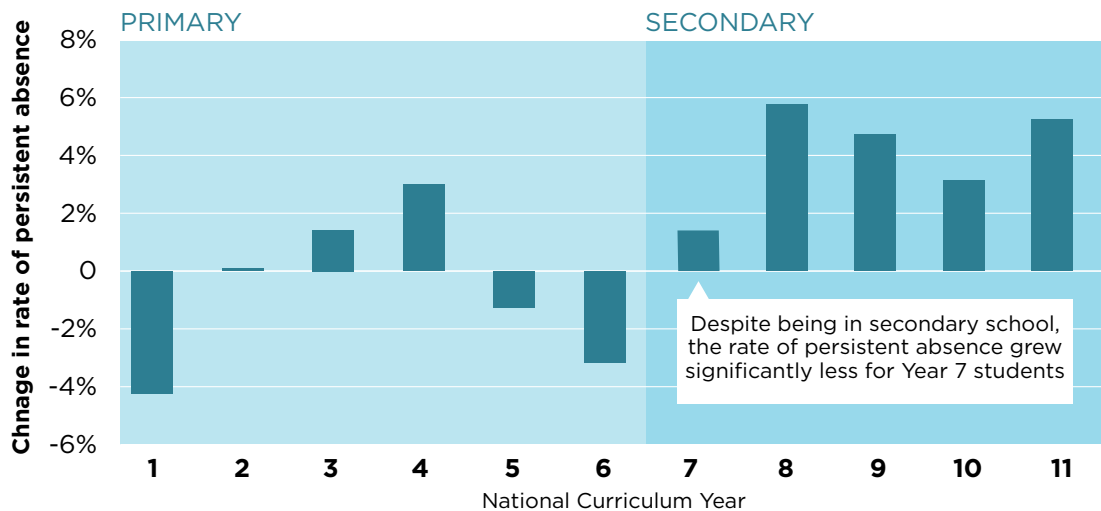


Figure 4. Change in rate of persistent absence, Autumn 2017-19 to Autumn 2020



fixed term exclusions (see Figure 3). **One in four of pupils with a previous fixed term exclusion were missing the equivalent of one day per week or more.** Pupils with a previous fixed term exclusion were therefore more than four times more likely to be missing one day a week of school or more. **Almost one in ten pupils living in the most deprived areas were also absent for equivalent of one day a week.** As shown in our previous analysis, alongside findings from the Government’s Timpson review, pupils with these experiences are at increased risk of permanent exclusion in future.¹⁶

Primary school environment may protect pupils from increasing absence

One promising finding is that pupils who were in primary school in academic year 2019/20, did not observe the same increases in persistent absence as secondary school pupils, with years 1, 5 and 6 showing a decline in the rate of persistent absence. The clearest indicator of this, however, was Year 7 (see Figure 4). These pupils, who would have been in primary school prior to the first lockdown, experienced a significantly lower increase in the rate of persistent

¹⁶ Timpson Review of School Exclusion, May 2019. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807862/Timpson_review.pdf

absence compared to other secondary school years. This trend will be explored further locally and should be looked into nationally to help understand what it relates to. Teachers felt this could relate to the learning environment such as smaller classes and/or additional support, particularly in relation to pupils transitioning to secondary school who were the focus of support following concerns of the impact of lockdown on their move into Year 7.

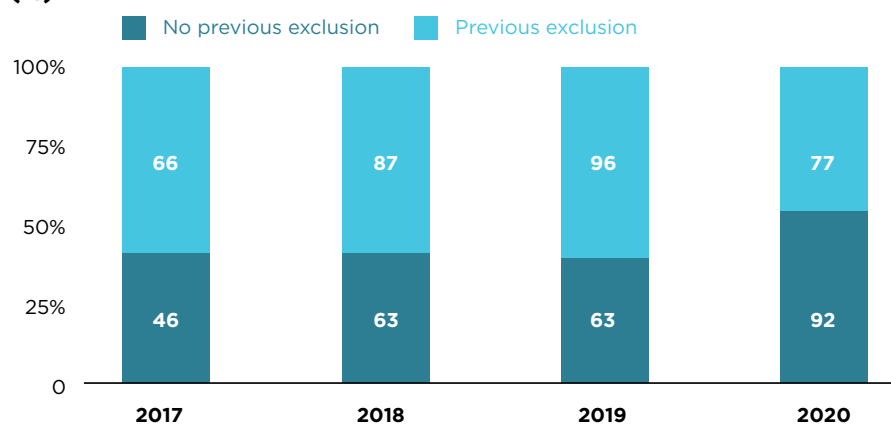
Fixed Term Exclusions

School exclusions are a strong indicator of unmet need and increased risk of adverse impacts on future outcomes, as shown through the Timpson Review and other literature.¹⁷ Analysis found a significant increase in first time fixed term exclusions compared with previous years. **Over half (54%) of the pupils who received a fixed term exclusion had not received one previously**, whilst numbers of those given to pupils who had previously, decreased (see Figure 5). This may indicate a change in needs for a significant group of pupils who are presenting with new behaviours in school, driving exclusions among a wider pool of pupils. Another driver could be school behaviour policies, particularly in relation to Covid-19 guidance. Notwithstanding the drivers, as evidenced by our previous analysis, fixed term exclusions can act as an indicator of increased risk to permanent exclusion, so this finding may be another significant indicator of a potential sharp increase in permanent exclusions in coming months and years.

It will be important to identify and understand the drivers behind both these trends: increasing first time fixed term exclusions and declining repeat exclusions (for pupils who have had previous fixed term exclusions in the past). Both will help target better support to pupils at risk of permanent exclusion, including those with increasing levels of absenteeism.

As shown in our previous report, recent trends in Cheshire West and Chester align with national trends; pupils most likely to experience fixed term exclusions are pupils with previous or current contact with children’s services and pupils specifically with Social and Emotional Mental Health needs.¹⁸ In this early data, it is unclear to what extent historic trends have driven the findings, as opposed to the impact of the pandemic alone. This data does however support the council’s proactive approach to the issue, allowing them to target services to mitigate either or both these drivers, ensuring they are responding to needs as they emerge.

Figure 5. Students issued Fixed Term Exclusions who had received a previous Fixed Term Exclusion (%)



¹⁷ School exclusion: a literature review on the continued disproportionate exclusion of certain children, Department for Education. May 2019. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/800028/Timpson_review_of_school_exclusion_literature_review.pdf

¹⁸ *Who’s at risk of exclusion? An analysis in Cheshire West and Chester, Social Finance*. July 2020. Available at: <https://www.socialfinance.org.uk/resources/publications/whos-risk-exclusion-analysis-cheshire-west-and-chester>

3 Codify: Learning from lockdown

Through group and one to one interviews with local authority staff and schools this work takes stock and learns from the last year, understanding as much as possible about the challenges and successes of responding to the conditions and early impacts of the pandemic. Local schools, agencies and communities showed resilience, expertise and flexibility in their response to the pandemic, often going above and beyond the remit of their roles to support children, young people and their families despite stretched resources. Many of the contributors reflected shared challenges, including interpreting and implementing national guidance, adapting to a virtual way of living and mitigating against the impact of the pandemic on child mental health and emotional wellbeing. Many contributors highlighted the importance of understanding the impact of the pandemic on children and young people and their families in the medium and longer term, particularly pupils experiencing disadvantage. Locally, there is a strong sense that many pupils were not able to engage, participate and benefit from school, due to experiences and needs that were created or exacerbated by the pandemic.

1. Trauma informed collaborative working drove effective and innovative approaches to supporting children and young people experiencing disadvantage

The Our Way of Working programme (West Cheshire Children's Trust) led the Covid-19 Recovery Response locally, through their already embedded *Recovery Model and Guide*. This trauma informed way of working supported the immediate response to the pandemic locally, which contributors felt was collaborative and efficient, with a focus on pooling expertise to offer the most appropriate response for children and young people and their families. The legacy of this way of working was reflected as positive in terms of establishing or strengthening local relationships across different stakeholders.

As was the case nationally, this work was largely remote, bringing challenges and opportunities for the local response.¹⁹ Contributors reflected on the importance of the cultural shift that accompanied the technological one, with some noting a sense of permission given by the context of the pandemic, allowing them to go beyond their remit or historic norms, to do what was needed to support young people and their families.²⁰ This cultural shift allowed innovation based on local expertise, which could be another positive legacy of the pandemic.

Other potential positive legacies include:

- Stronger relationships locally between agencies and/or schools who did not work regularly together previously, with schools mentioning the invaluable support of local public health teams in particular

¹⁹ *Learning in Lockdown*, Sutton Trust. January 2021. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Learning-in-Lockdown.pdf>

²⁰ Anecdotal examples included schools driving around communities and knocking on doors to check in with families and provide learning materials or youth workers having better contact with children and young people as they used less formal means of communicating directly with them.

- Remote working to enable local partners where in-person attendance is not possible or is not necessary, an example of the latter being informal drop-ins between headteachers to share experiences and learning, which previously required a lot of travelling for face to face meetings
- More regular meetings with a safeguarding focus, driven by some schools – building a stronger sense of oversight locally and going further in acknowledging that safeguarding is both contextual and dynamic, while ensuring it is ‘everyone’s responsibility’²¹
- Strengthening the local approach to understanding a child or young person’s needs holistically, supported more contextual conversations, information sharing and person centred practice locally
- Trust in schools to apply expertise and have opportunities to drive decision making locally, in partnership with agencies, facilitated by national conditions of the pandemic

Contributors reflected that pupils who reach statutory thresholds and guidance likely benefited most from these positive aspects of the local response. Particularly those who received more bespoke support in schools during lockdown (due to small numbers of pupils being offered places in line with guidance). Anecdotally, we heard from schools that pupils who attended school during the first lockdown fared better when returning to school in September, however we were unable to analyse this due to the inconsistency in how this data was captured by schools. Contributors felt the lockdown represented golden time for some of these pupils, as they were able to have regular contact with school and more focused time for learning. However, needs remain high amongst these groups, sparking concern that the potential benefits of this time could be lost as schools welcome back all pupils, unless education settings have the permission and resource to be flexible and innovative in supporting them in future.

2. Some children and young people who did not reach statutory thresholds for support, are likely to be experiencing more disadvantage than before the pandemic

Contributors were committed to all children and young people getting the support they need during the pandemic. In this context, concern was reflected for pupils who may have slipped through the net and missed out on support they could have benefited from due to high statutory thresholds or criteria in national Covid-19 guidance on ‘vulnerable children’. Pupils with unidentified SEN and therefore without support or an EHCP in place were mentioned, as they wouldn’t have been able to access specialist support and would have been unlikely to be offered a place in school during lockdown.

Another cohort mentioned by contributors were pupils who were permanently excluded from school at the start of lockdown, when review processes were often delayed, meaning they were not able to access the review process to challenge the decision and were left in a sense of limbo where cases were unresolved. Given the data has shown one in four young people with a previous fixed term exclusion missed a day a week of school or more during this period,²² pupils with past or present experience of exclusions should be a focus of local and national support moving forward.

²¹ As per Government guidance: *Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*, HM Government. July 2018. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/942454/Working_together_to_safeguard_children_inter_agency_guidance.pdf

²² 1 September to 1 December as per the analysis.

Finally, the need to support pupils with previous contact with children's services, not only current, was emphasised by contributors. This cohort was mentioned as potentially having had adverse experiences during lockdown and not being given the opportunity to access support due to not currently reaching thresholds. This lack of access may be contributing to high levels of persistent absence in this group, which the analysis showed to be as high as those with current support.

3. Interpreting and implementing evolving national guidance locally was testing, leading to some confusion and inconsistencies across schools and communities

As was the case nationally, the initial rapid nature of school closures was testing for schools and services across Cheshire West and Chester, putting strain on their ability to plan staffing, identify children for support and ensure adequate safeguarding was in place. As the pandemic evolved, the high numbers of changes to the guidance meant contributors worked relentlessly to operationalise each update. Of particular note was most primary schools welcoming pupils back in January 2021, which required thorough risk assessments and large amounts of reading to ensure all guidance was properly implemented, only for the guidance for schools to change the next day. The unpredictable nature of changes to the guidance and when they were released (including evenings, holidays and weekends) compounded the wider sense of uncertainty for school leaders in the context of the pandemic.

Despite the evolving and often challenging context, contributors were proactive and completely committed to understanding the guidance and its implications. Large amounts of reading were required to do this, and schools noted that teachers played a crucial role in then translating it to parents and carers, many of whom had questions for schools. This translator role was of particular importance where parents experienced barriers to engaging with the documents themselves, such as lower literacy levels. Related to this, contributors highlighted a practical way that could have reduced the time spent on understanding guidance – if changes, particularly smaller ones, were highlighted within the documents. This would prevent them having to re-read all the content to spot changes.

As above, since the start of the pandemic Cheshire West and Chester Council remained committed to providing communications and guidance that aligned with, and did not undermine, that of central government. However, delays between public announcements and the issuing of guidance by the Department for Education meant the local authority had to delay communications while awaiting clarity and schools sometimes felt they needed to make assumptions to respond to changes in a timely manner. This sometimes led to conflicting interpretation of guidance, creating confusion locally. Also, some guidance was challenging to implement due to lack of existing infrastructure or data, leading to likely inconsistencies in approach across schools or local authorities. Local examples of these, that may reflect national trends, include:

- *The recording and use of data:* the right approach to marking Covid-19 related absences for pupils caused debate, for example depending on whether they were awaiting a test, were ill or had tested positive. Although this was later clarified, it caused some confusion and may have impacted the quality of the data collected locally and nationally.
- *Support for vulnerable children:* pupils with SEND with an ECHP were offered a place in school in line with guidance, but schools' approach to pupils with SEND without support varied due to differing interpretations of guidance. Many schools only offered a place to

these pupils where they had other vulnerabilities that met Government thresholds, this may indicate another trend of inconsistent support across the country.

- *The use of 'bubbles' in schools:* schools took different approaches to structuring 'bubbles' due to lack of uniform national guidance, which is likely to have had some impact on varying levels of 'Covid-19 related absences' specifically, for pupils and staff. It also may have had an impact on levels of transmission, although beyond the scope of this work.
- *The use of codes for exclusions:* despite the introduction of a new set of codes to give greater detail into the reasons for exclusions and reduce the use of the 'Other' code, the latter was still prevalent in the autumn term 2020 (the use of the code grew, representing a quarter of all fixed term exclusions in 2020). The lack of clarity on the use of codes for Covid-19 related behaviours may have contributed to this.

4. Increasing levels of pupil mental ill health presented in schools alongside changes in behaviour, with some pupils at increased risk of exclusion

Contributors noted that emotional and mental health needs took longer to manifest than expected as schools welcomed back all pupils in September 2020. However, high levels of anxiety and worry amongst children and young people were identified by schools and agencies and some linked this to behaviours such as absenteeism. Other mental health trends were seen by CYPMHS (Children and Young Peoples Mental Health Services, formerly CAMHS) locally, such as an increase in eating disorders and early onset psychosis among young people, as has been the case nationally.²³

Schools are acutely aware of the link between changes in emotional wellbeing, routine, mental health and behaviour, observing that more pupils who did not present with distressing behaviours prior to the pandemic, were receiving fixed term exclusions, for example for getting into fights with other pupils. This was perhaps the trend indicated by the data, which showed more fixed term exclusions experienced by pupils who had never had one prior to the pandemic. Schools also noted that, in line with national trends, the pupils receiving fixed term exclusions are often those experiencing the most disadvantage such as those with Social and Emotional Mental Health needs.²⁴ There was clear concern of the risk of a sharp increase in exclusions of these pupils, which local stakeholders felt should be avoided at all costs, but seemed likely unless local areas are given more support for early intervention for pupil social, emotional and mental health. Contributors reflected that addressing and supporting pupil wellbeing was fundamental to learning, with some noting that pupils who could benefit most from the Government's national tutoring programme, might miss out due to the impact of other unmet needs.

Contributors also noted the interface between absenteeism and increased risk of exploitation and contact with youth justice services. With some highlighting the national figures on active recruitment of young people into criminal activity during lockdown.²⁵

²³ Figures lay bare toll of pandemic on UK children's mental health, *Guardian*. 21 October 2020. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/oct/21/figures-lay-bare-toll-of-pandemic-on-uk-childrens-mental-health>

²⁴ Timpson Review of School Exclusion, May 2019. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/807862/Timpson_review.pdf

²⁵ 'Hidden in Plain Sight' - A Youth Work Response to Gangs and Exploitation during Covid-19, National Youth Agency. June 2020. Available at: <https://nya.org.uk/2020/06/hidden-in-plain-sight/>

Locally, contributors noticed an increase in drug and alcohol related permanent exclusions, although this may be as a result of stricter behaviour policies that link directly to exclusions rather than increased prevalence.

5. Unknown impact of the pandemic on child and adolescent development, with more investment in research needed to understand this further

The evolving medium-to-longer term impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic are unclear, especially in the data. Given the collaborative and innovative nature of the local response to the pandemic, there will be many positive impacts of the support given and many children and young people would have acquired new skills and knowledge while home learning. However, contributors showed an acute awareness of the potential impact of the isolation created by the conditions of lockdown on child development, particularly communication and relationship building. Given the increased levels of anxiety amongst pupils when schools went back, there is concern about children and young people's capacity to understand and articulate their emotions. Contributors noted this could be crucial for younger children, with potentially disproportionate impacts for pupils with disabilities, while also being likely to have significant impacts on adolescents. This was considered to be a potential barrier to identification of children and young people who need additional support and may lead to distressing behaviours presenting in schools.

6. Despite resilience of staff and trauma informed approaches, working in the context of the pandemic has significantly impacted staff wellbeing

Cheshire West Children's Trust is leading in the development of a trauma informed multi agency partnership. The 'Our Way of Working' programme has been an important part of the local area's response to the pandemic through developing a *Recovery Model and Guide* building on the foundations of trauma informed practice. Our Way of Working has proactively worked with staff in this way, which was regarded as effective by contributors, in supporting trauma informed conversations locally, whether amongst staff or with children and families. Guidance on 'Emotionally Based School Non-attendance'²⁶ for example was available locally since before the pandemic, which contributors reflected meant it was readily available and accessible, and will continue to be useful through to recovery and beyond. Schools mentioned this material supported them to better identify pupils who were experiencing barriers to engagement and were likely to need more support.

Although the conditions of the pandemic allowed for schools to welcome back all pupils in September 2020, Covid-19 continued to have an impact on schools. For example, school staff capacity was reduced when significant numbers of staff had to isolate at the same time. Also, even when in school, contributors noted the day-to-day being largely absorbed by Covid-19 related tasks, contributing to higher workload for these staff. There was clear

²⁶ *Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance: Supporting Children and Young People to return to school*, Child and Educational Psychology Service Cheshire West and Chester. June 2020. Available at: https://westcheshirechildrenstrust.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/EBSN_-_supporting-CYP-to-return-to-school_COVID19.pdf

concern for national trends such as increased mental ill health amongst teachers, playing out locally, with the need for national support for staff mentioned.²⁷

The related concern for contributors, was the impact of reduced staff wellbeing and capacity on the pupils they work with, particularly where pupils need additional support. With many noting the fundamental nature of both pupil and staff wellbeing to being able to create a positive learning environment to support attainment.

7. Although demanding, online learning was a lifeline for many schools and pupils, however pupils experiencing disadvantage or digital exclusion faced significant barriers to learning

As seen nationally, the rapid shift to online learning was reported to have been hugely demanding for schools at the start of the pandemic, especially before they had access to more established platforms for online lessons.²⁸ Online learning has been a lifeline for many pupils and teachers to continue education during the pandemic. In particular, contributors noted the flexibility it gave some pupils who experienced barriers to accessing education prior to the pandemic, actually improving their access to, and experience of, learning. Schools dedicated significant time, patience and effort to changing operating practices to best support pupils and their families online, alongside other local stakeholders. Key issues they worked to overcome in doing so included:

- Cheshire West and Chester Council working to support schools consistently when different approaches were used across schools including online platforms, ways of working, materials and support
- Parents identifying which materials would best support their child's home learning, given the wealth of learning resources and materials made available by schools, charities and businesses (although these were noted as invaluable)
- Schools being able to confirm whether work had been completed remotely, as pupils could use technology to show as completed when this wasn't always the case
- Schools and local agencies supporting families experiencing additional barriers to supporting their children's online learning such as lower levels of digital literacy

Contributors identified supporting families experiencing disadvantage and digital exclusion with remote learning as the most significant challenge however, with many concerned for the impact on learning and child development.²⁹ According to the Children's Commissioner's local vulnerability profiles, Cheshire West and Chester's percentile rank amongst other local authorities is 76 for children in households where no home broadband above 2mbps is available, and 72 for children in households where no internet above 10mbps (neither home broadband nor mobile data) is available (0 = Lowest rate, 100 = Highest rate).³⁰

²⁷ Covid-19: Teacher mental health and wellbeing suffers whilst lack of appreciation or guidance leaves profession struggling, *Education Support*. September 2020. Available at: <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/covid-19-teacher-mental-health-and-wellbeing-suffers-whilst-lack-appreciation>

²⁸ *Learning in Lockdown*, Sutton Trust. January 2021. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Learning-in-Lockdown.pdf>

²⁹ Digitally excluded children and families faced significant barriers in engaging in learning and staff had to make paper based lessons available to them alongside establishing and supporting online learning for others.

³⁰ Children's Commissioner, *Local Vulnerability Profiles, 2020*. Available at: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/vulnerable-children/local-vulnerability-profiles/>

Families with lower incomes, including those eligible for free school meals, are less likely to have access to devices and connectivity for their children to participate in online learning, which is important context for the Government's Get Help with Technology Programme.³¹

However, home learning goes further than access to devices or connectivity. Contributors reflected the importance of a stable learning environment, space for activities and consistent routines at home, to support learning. Schools noted disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on lower income families and other factors such as parental ill health (whether physical or mental) as important factors in impacting engagement with online learning. The contexts of many families prior to the pandemic was also raised as fundamental to understanding their experiences during this time.

An interesting trend to explore further is an almost threefold increase in the number of children removed from school for elective home education in Cheshire West and Chester during the Autumn term (September to December 2020) compared to the same period in previous years.³² In this context, the increase of online opportunities for learning for children and young people should be maximised, while ensuring it is not at the loss of safeguarding due to reduced visibility of need in schools.

8. As children and families have been more isolated than usual during the pandemic, the emphasis needs to be on spotting signs for 'hidden harms' and responding early

Contributors highlighted the importance of identifying and tackling 'harm hidden from sight', an issue the Local Authority is emphasising in its approach to understanding the impact of the pandemic. These harms may include neglect, physical harm, sexual harm or increased severity of eating disorders (amongst others). It is felt that the conditions of the pandemic have increased barriers to recognising and responding to harm due to the isolation of families and their children during lockdown. With increased pressures and stress for families during this time, contributors identified exposure to domestic abuse or parental mental ill health as key 'hidden harms' children and young people may be experiencing.

Whilst it is important to note that as national guidance became less restrictive contributors did not see a significant increase in the volume of referrals to local agencies, some noted an increase in the severity and complexity of the needs of children and young people accessing services. It was also highlighted that staff were working with more children who had not previously been known to their services.

The role of local multi-agency collaboration in overseeing and identifying families who are experiencing hidden harms was highlighted, with Local Authority senior managers and the Safeguarding Children Partnership working locally to make this a priority for recovery, through trauma informed working. Contributors noted the importance of encouraging referrals early due to the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, further strengthening their collective approach to safeguarding across local stakeholders before and during the lockdowns.

³¹ Get help with technology during coronavirus (Covid-19), Department for Education. April 2020. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/get-help-with-technology-for-remote-education-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

³² 163 children were removed from school between 1st September and 24th November 2020 compared to 65 children during the Autumn term 2019 and 53 during the Autumn Term 2018. It is important to note that these figures do not reflect the overall fluctuation of children in elective home education with some children being removed from school whilst others return to school.

4 Target: Ways to respond

Cheshire West and Chester Council has pioneered this approach to understanding the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic within its wider Maximising Access to Education programme, in partnership with Social Finance. Since 2019 the programme has been working with schools, agencies, parents/carers and young people to coproduce³³ an early intervention approach to supporting pupils across a continuum of need, who may become at risk of school exclusion locally in future. The learnings from this report will be embedded in this early intervention infrastructure locally.

We believe many of our findings will hold national relevance and share recommendations here for these insights to help improve support for children and young people beyond Cheshire West and Chester. The programme will continue to share learnings and insights in this way, to support evidence based policy and practice locally and nationally.

Our recommendations

1. **Make use of datasets that already exist³⁴ and join them up to understand early trends to support earlier intervention.** A wealth of data already exists that can be used to understand pupil journeys, experiences and the differentiated impact on particular groups. This analysis should provide a feedback loop for school data returns, providing valuable insights to support local decision making in response to data collection, which may in turn improve quality and standardisation of data capture.
2. **Invest in the infrastructure for creating and sharing analysis,** including better standardisation of data sharing practices and tools to support replication of interesting pieces of analysis in other local authorities.
3. **Invest in infrastructure that supports early intervention** and related data sharing protocols across schools and agencies, to build on the positive legacy of multi-agency working during the pandemic.
4. **Make funding available for local recovery by allowing schools and local authorities to work together to prioritise the way funding is spent to match local need amongst children and young people.** This will drive innovation by supporting and empowering local areas to respond to the impacts of the pandemic based on their local expertise, with a primary focus on staff and pupil wellbeing. This will allow local areas to take a trauma informed approach to those identified through data, local knowledge and lived experience.
5. **Take a strengths based approach to the future of children and young people,** by removing pressure to “catch up” quickly and rather focus on maximising access to education for all pupils, particularly those who could benefit most from extra support.

³³ Coproduction is a process of gathering evidence and insight from the experiences of pupils, parents/carers, schools and agencies to feed into the design of the local response. The pilot programme has been designed in partnership with these local stakeholders, ensuring it is relevant and effective in responding to the opportunities and challenges specific to Cheshire West and Chester.

³⁴ e.g. school census, Annex A

This could include removing pressure on schools to achieve high levels of attainment only, instead taking this opportunity to look at pupil and school outcomes holistically, in the context of the pandemic.

Timpson Review recommendations

This reports recommendations align closely with recommendations made by the Timpson Review (2019) before the pandemic, reinforcing the importance of implementing these in a timely manner. We explain below how our findings align with selected recommendations from the Review.

Timpson Review recommendation on empowering local authorities to lead on partnership working: by “clarify[ing] the powers of local authorities to act as advocates for vulnerable children, working with mainstream, special and Alternative Provision schools and other partners to support children with additional needs or who are at risk of leaving their school, by exclusion or otherwise. Local authorities should be enabled to facilitate and convene meaningful local forums that all schools are expected to attend, which meet regularly, share best practice and take responsibility for collecting and reviewing data on pupil needs and moves, and for planning and funding local alternative provision, including early intervention for children at risk of exclusion.”

Our findings show that local authorities can be effective partners in implementing national government when given clear powers to do so and can facilitate multi-agency working to improve support for children and young people. This is crucial for successful early intervention and local stakeholders should be incentivised to work with the local authority in this way.

Timpson Review recommendation on establishing a practice improvement fund: to ‘embed effective partnership working’ locally between schools and agencies including health, police and Alternative Provision to ‘better equip schools to intervene early for children at risk of exclusion and to ensure that the most effective provision is put in place for those who are excluded’.

Our findings show how partnership working has supported the response to the pandemic but schools and agencies need additional capacity to sustain and embed these ways of working. Rather than specifying what is needed nationally, local stakeholders should be able to work together to prioritise how funding is spent locally to match needs.

Timpson Review recommendation to reward schools that are inclusive and use exclusions appropriately and effectively: as updated within Ofsted’s school inspection handbook which recognises the importance of having an inclusive school culture with early identification of additional needs or disadvantage, drawing on specialist support where this is required and ensuring a positive learning experience and outcome for all pupils.

Our findings show the importance of aligning incentive structures to pupil wellbeing and early intervention for pupils experiencing disadvantage. This should be an opportunity for the Government to look at pupil and school outcomes holistically to proactively incentivise inclusive practice in response to the pandemic.

Timpson Review recommendation to review patterns of pupils' movements out of school: [local stakeholders] 'should review all pupil moves out of school, establishing a shared understanding of how the data on pupil characteristics informs local trends'.

Our findings show how imperative it is to understand these patterns within the context of pupils experiencing multiple and compounding disadvantage. Absenteeism in particular should be closely reviewed alongside other pupil movement including elective home education.

Timpson Review recommendation to review reporting categories for exclusions: Department for Education removed 'other' as a reporting category in August 2020 and added categories to improve transparency on reasons driving exclusions.

Our findings show the increased use of 'Other' as a reason for exclusion locally, the implementation of this change in policy should therefore be reviewed to ensure it is filtering down to local areas.

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