



Association of
Child Protection
Professionals

PROTECTING CHILDREN AT A DISTANCE

A multi-agency investigation of child safeguarding and protection responses consequent upon COVID-19 lockdown/social distancing measures

RESEARCH BRIEFING

Education and the role of schools

Key points

- Survey respondents overall were more likely to report that joint working between their agency and other agencies had improved than that it had deteriorated and **all agencies were more likely to report improvements in strategic joint working with Education than deterioration.**
 - In contrast, **Education respondents were more likely to report deterioration than improvement in joint working with all other agencies, both strategically and operationally.**
- Interviewees expressed **considerable concern regarding the impact of school closures during the first lockdown on safeguarding in the light of low numbers of children identified as 'vulnerable' attending school.**
- **78%** of survey respondents **expected that Elective Home Education (EHE) would rise in their local areas as a result of the pandemic.**
- Respondents considered that the **primary reasons** contributing to **non-attendance of vulnerable children** at school were: **carer's concern for child's health (95%); elderly/high risk carers (91%); 'stay at home' messaging (87%); and families taking advantage of the opportunity to disengage from professionals (85%).**
- Most respondents agreed that **school attendance should be mandatory for all primary school (87%) and secondary school (85%) vulnerable children with low clinical risk.**
- **97%** of respondents reported using **'encouragement of DSL (Designated Safeguarding Lead)/school staff known to family'** as a strategy to improve attendance of **vulnerable children.**
 - **83%** felt that this approach appeared to improve attendance to an extent/significantly.
- **80%** of respondents overall **agreed or strongly agreed that schools had taken on more responsibility for safeguarding during the pandemic than previously.**
 - **90%** of **Education respondents** thought **schools had taken on more responsibility for safeguarding as a result of the pandemic.**
- Respondents reported **provision of support for vulnerable children not in school during the first lockdown and when schools were open to most children, including: regular contact during termtime (and holidays); food parcels; IT for online learning; in-person/doorstep visits; books and games.**

Study overview

This research briefing provides key findings concerning education and the role of schools in safeguarding from a multi-disciplinary study on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on safeguarding/child protection practice in England. The study was designed to engage safeguarding leaders in all professional disciplines involved in safeguarding practice. The first stage of the study took place between June and September 2020 and comprised 67 interviews with London-based safeguarding and child protection leaders within seven professional groups: Children's Social Care, Health, Mental Health, Police, Education, Law and Safeguarding Partnerships. Interviewees' priorities and responses informed the questions and response options for the second stage, a national survey distributed to similar professional groups in February–March 2021, which elicited 417 responses for analysis. Respondents represented all regions in England with London and the South East accounting for 45% of overall survey representation. We accessed a very senior and experienced group of respondents with a predominantly strategic perspective, including Directors of Children's Social Care, Safeguarding Partnership Independent Scrutineers/Business Managers, head teachers or Designated Safeguarding Leads, Named and Designated Health and Mental Health Professionals, Police safeguarding leads at area level, and local authority and children's panel lawyers. Respondents had a mode of 20 years' experience. The survey generated over 1,000 comments (some are highlighted within this briefing).

Education and the role of schools

A key focus of our study is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on multi-agency working, and we were particularly interested in whether joint working between agencies had changed (improved/deteriorated/remained the same) over the pandemic, at strategic and operational level. Survey respondents overall were more likely to report that joint working between their agency and other agencies had improved than that it had deteriorated and **all agencies were more likely to report improvements in strategic joint working with Education than deterioration**. 58% of Children's Social Care respondents reported improved strategic joint working with Education and 48% improved operational joint working. In contrast, **Education respondents were more likely to report deterioration than improvement in joint working with all other agencies**, both strategically (43% reporting deterioration) and operationally (51%). This contrasting perception of joint working between Education and other agencies may **provide a sense of the immense pressure experienced by schools during the pandemic**. Commentary from Education respondents provides additional insight into potentially strained joint-working relations with Children's Social Care:

'The care systems have been woefully inadequate. Schools are constantly checking if our vulnerable families are coping, have had contact with social workers and in many cases, we are providing the link between them and chasing them up more than ever before.'

– **Education, London**

'Massive lack of communication between social service and schools and pressure to close cases at beginning of pandemic.' – **Education, East of England**

Another comment from an Education respondent reflects the sense felt by some schools that their views and knowledge of children and families are not adequately considered at local level:

'The lack of shared understanding and the lack of acknowledgment that in the significant majority of cases, schools will know families best - there is a reluctance to accept this and take advantage of the knowledge schools have. Also, other agencies are reluctant to take overall responsibility for specific cases and even when that has been agreed, communication is poor and actions are not carried out in a timely manner.' – **Education, London**

Interviewees expressed considerable concern regarding the impact of school closures during the first lockdown on safeguarding children and young people. Several interviewees felt that the definition of 'vulnerable' was widely interpreted, therefore **many vulnerable children who were eligible to attend school did not do so.** This was thought to be most commonly due to concern about the child (95%) or carer's health (91%) and/or a response to the national message to stay at home (87%), but **85% of respondents cited families taking advantage of the opportunity to disengage from professionals as a contributory factor.** Additionally, respondents also reported that some children felt more secure/happier at home (85%) and some refused to attend (82%). When asked about strategies to improve vulnerable children's attendance and perceived effectiveness of certain strategies, most respondents (97%) reported using 'encouragement of DSL (Designated Safeguarding Lead)/school staff known to family' and **83% felt that this approach appeared to improve attendance to an extent/significantly.** Other commonly used strategies included using parental concerns about behaviour or schoolwork and encouragement from a social worker but appeared to be less successful. Most respondents felt that **school attendance should be mandatory for all primary school (87% agreed; n=295) and secondary school (85% agreed; n=285) vulnerable children with low clinical risk.** In line with interviewee concerns regarding an increase of EHE numbers, **78% of respondents (n=255) expected that EHE in their local area would rise as a result of the pandemic.** **Eighty per cent of respondents overall (n=111) agreed or strongly agreed that schools had taken on more responsibility for safeguarding during the pandemic than previously** (Figure 1): this rose to 90% of Education respondents (n=40). Over half of respondents who agreed that schools had taken on more safeguarding responsibility felt that this enhanced role should be retained in the future, but that doing so would require additional investment (n=93). However, Education respondents were most likely to consider that it is not an appropriate role for schools, or only appropriate in circumstances where most children are not attending school.

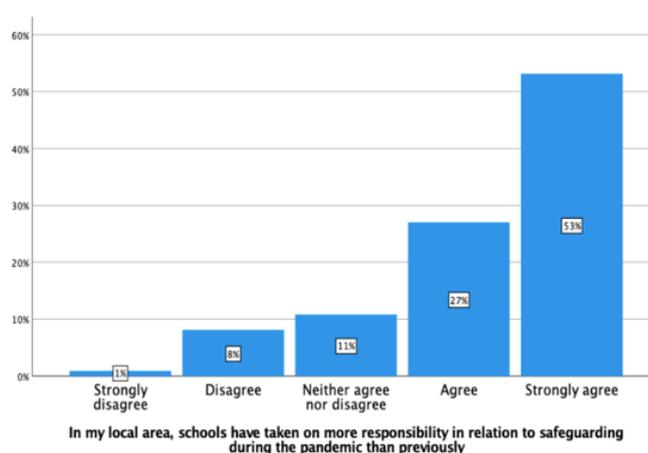


Figure 1: Schools taking on more safeguarding responsibility during the pandemic

'Schools need more support- the expectations have increased so much and it is not only time consuming but a huge responsibility for schools. We have different regulations and expectations around parents so it makes it really hard to navigate areas around home which are not part of education. It feels as if we are taking responsibility for families without the power to make changes or hold families to account. The responsibility is really stressful and certainly not part of education. As professionals we are dealing with situations we aren't trained for or supported with.'

– **Education, South West England**

‘Schools need help...Over time there has been a gradual creep towards schools taking on more responsibility for communities and what would traditionally be social care. This has been vastly accelerated during the pandemic. We cannot sustain this. It needs to be planned for and supported with staff who can fulfil the specialist roles.’

– **Education, South West England**

‘It is also concerning that we are seeing a significant increase in the number of children being electively home educated as a result of the pandemic, a number of which could be at risk of harm.’ – **Independent Scrutineer /Chair, East of England**

When asked about **provision of support for vulnerable children not in school during the first lockdown and when schools were open to most children**, respondents reported providing: **regular contact during termtime (and holidays); food parcels; IT for online learning; in-person/doorstep visits; books and games**. Respondents also felt that most of these actions would continue in the event of future lockdowns. **Over half of respondents also reported using follow up by CSC or with police liaison to contact non-responsive families**. Interviewees noted that families may have **perceived school interventions as less threatening and more supportive than usual**, and this was similarly echoed by respondents as most agreed/strongly agreed that **‘keeping in touch’ arrangements initiated by schools (63%) improved relationships with families**. 35% agreed/strongly agreed that KIT arrangements by CSC improved relationships with families.

‘Teachers have been amazingly proactive in contacting students/ children regularly - phoning / online contact, chasing up on concerns and even visiting children at home. They have gone way beyond their remit, in schools which have reduced pastoral care due to cuts.’

– **Designated Doctor for Safeguarding, Yorkshire & The Humber**

Recommendations

- Concerted intervention by both education and safeguarding professionals to reengage ‘vulnerable’ children not attending school during the pandemic, to limit numbers of children who do not return to mainstream schooling.
- Legislation to improve monitoring and regulation of Elective Home Education.
- A review of the role of schools and school staff in safeguarding, including specialist provision within schools, staff training, and the appropriateness and burden of early help work, and monitoring and evaluation of recent investment in mental health support in schools.
- Consideration of how to ensure that schools’ knowledge of children and families is fully respected in multi-agency discussions and taken into consideration in individual safeguarding / child protection cases.

For more information about this study and to download stage 1 and 2 summary of findings reports and the final report, please visit the study project page:

<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/protecting-children-at-a-distance>

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