



Children's Rights Alliance for England



Briefing: Ensuring that children and families are safe and supported during the CV-19 pandemic

This briefing sets out issues which require careful thought by local and national government, and professionals working with children and families. At this time of national emergency, we acknowledge and pay tribute to the huge effort being undertaken at all levels of government to address the wide range of important issues for children and families, and the services and systems that they rely on for support. Given the magnitude of the task at hand, the organisations supporting this briefing are keen to work collaboratively with government to ensure that the needs of children and families are met during this period in relation to the following issues:

- Child protection and safeguarding
- Child poverty and household financial insecurity
- Children's mental health and well-being

1) Child protection and safeguarding

Increased pressure on social care, school closures, self-isolation, families under extreme stress, and the flexibility granted by emergency legislation could result in children being at heightened risk at the same time as being hidden from view.

There are some groups of children who could be particularly impacted by the Covid-19 emergency. These are:

- Looked after children and care leavers, including those in unregulated settings, secure units and those placed outside of their home local authority
- Children at risk of or experiencing abuse, neglect or exploitation
- Children who are missing from home or from care
- Young carers
- Children living in temporary accommodation and in insecure housing
- Disabled children and children with special educational needs
- Children in the criminal justice system

In addition to existing guidance and legislation, politicians and professionals should be paying special attention to the following:

- **Safeguarding.** Government must support local authorities and community organisations to ensure that each vulnerable child can continue to have contact with an identified trusted professional, usually their social worker, who will regularly engage with them to help ensure their safety and wellbeing at this time. Contingency plans need to be put in place to ensure that this can happen even as a result of staff absence.
- **Communication.** Availability of support may be affected but care should be taken that children always receive age appropriate communication about changes and helped to deal with situation they face.

- **Reducing delay.** While some delays with provision of support may happen as a result of COVID 19 it is important that monitoring is in place to provide service once it is possible and as soon as possible
- **Advocacy.** Children's wishes and feelings should continue underpin support and can they receive.
- **Resources.** Children's social care is one of the biggest pressures on council budgets at present following cuts to funding and rising demand. Before this public health emergency, the system was struggling to cope. Government should ring-fence additional resource for councils to be spent on children's social care.

2) Child poverty and household financial insecurity

Financial instability will rise during the CV-19 crisis and low-income families already unable to budget for unexpected expenses will be hit the hardest. There are particular pressures which result from:

- School closures
- The risk of sustained reduction in earnings
- Likely increased difficulty for families to respond to financial emergencies

In addition to measures already taken to shore up families, the following should be considered by government:

- **Free School Meals.** During this emergency, a child's immigration status must not preclude them from having a healthy meal. We therefore propose that children in families who have No Recourse to Public Funds be included in the Free School Meals voucher scheme. Schools should also have the option of providing cash to families, which offers greater flexibility to meet children's needs than a voucher scheme.
- **Child Benefit.** In recognition of the additional costs that this crisis may bring about for families, child benefit should be temporarily increased by £10 per week.
- **Universal Credit.** The uplift in standard allowance announced by the Chancellor will provide an extra £20 per week extra for working and non-working families – but more attention needs to be given to Tax Credits as the majority of families have not yet migrated to Universal Credit.
- **Tax Credits.** The additional £1,000 in Tax Credit payment announced will only support working families in the Tax Credits system. This needs to be extended to non-working families.
- **Hardship Fund.** A significant portion of the announced hardship fund to be allocated to Local Welfare Provision so that discretionary support can be allocated to all of the most vulnerable families who are experiencing financial emergencies as a result of the CV-19 outbreak, regardless of immigration status.
- **Spare room subsidy and Benefit cap:** During this emergency, where advice is for non-infected members of a household to isolate along with the infected member of a household, the government should temporarily suspend the spare room subsidy. To ensure that larger families can feel the benefit of uplift in support under Universal Credit and Tax Credits, the benefit cap should be lifted accordingly.
- **Protection against eviction and homelessness.** During this emergency, all families, including homeless families living in temporary accommodation, must be protected against eviction and have access to suitable self-contained accommodation, including households with no recourse to public funds, for example, through the use of empty properties or hotel apartments.

3) Children's mental health and well-being

Children's well-being will be significantly affected by the Covid-19 outbreak. We know that stories that regularly make the news, and are the subject of national debate, are important to young people and they can find them particularly worrying. Further, access to mental health support could be impeded as children who may have got help through school stay at home, closure of open access provision and staffing shortages.

- **Loneliness.** With schools closed to many and social isolation becoming the norm, many children will feel isolated from their friendship groups and extended family. This could be felt particularly acutely where households do not have access to the internet as a means of keeping in contact. Government and professionals should be sharing advice for parents and carers at this time on how to support a child who feels lonely and details of services where they can seek advice and support, such as Childline and NSPCC Helpline.

- **Provision of virtual support.** For children who receive mental health support in a school or community setting, the providers of those services should consider switching to providing therapeutic support via telephone, allowing young people and professionals to attend from home.
- **Inpatient units.** Children receiving inpatient care during could feel particularly cut off from family and friends at this time. They must be supported to have contact with family and friends and have continued access to advocacy during this time.
- **Children not feeling able to attend appointments.** Local services should relax the rules around missed appointments during this time and they should not close cases. Instead, they should be proactively reaching out to children who have missed mental health appointments to check-in that they're managing and offer an alternative means of engagement.
- **Children living in unsuitable and overcrowded temporary accommodation.** Local authorities should identify those with particular physical and mental health needs and enable social workers and other specialists to provide support, including remote support, where necessary.

For further information, please contact Matthew Hussey, Public Affairs Manager, The Children's Society on matthew.hussey@childrenssociety.org.uk or 020 7841 4485.