



UNISON Scotland response: Vulnerable children during the coronavirus pandemic – May 2020

UNISON is Scotland's largest trade union with members across the public, private and voluntary sectors. Our members work in a wide range of occupations within children's services, including education, health and social work services. UNISON also represents members in areas such as housing which is vital to children's wellbeing and in a number of children's charities in Scotland. These key workers have continued to work hard finding solutions to support vulnerable children and their families during the lockdown.

It is important that the Education and Skills Committee examines the response to vulnerable children during the pandemic. Even before its onset, the disproportionate cuts to local government budgets had adversely affected the ability of services to meet the level of need presented in many communities, and the needs of children with ASN in particular.

Summary: challenges exposed by the pandemic

- Digital exclusion is disadvantaging children educationally and socially
- Families of children with disabilities are under stress as services used to support children at home and provide respite are less available, while children with ASD have lost the routine that helped them manage.
- The true extent of hunger amongst children and families.
- We urge the Committee to consider how we prepare to support children and families with complex difficulties after the pandemic, given the huge increases in unemployment and poverty which have occurred.
- A significant investment of resources and services in communities is needed, which requires the proper funding of local government. UNISON calls for the £155m received from the UK Government in Barnett Consequentials to be distributed in full immediately to Scottish local authorities.

Hub support

Arrangements have been put in place for vulnerable children and young people to be supported through local hubs or through other types of supports at home as appropriate for their needs. Local authorities have, rightfully, been afforded flexibility over their definition of 'vulnerable', and how to respond to needs in current circumstances, building on existing partnership working to provide the level of support that best meets children's needs.

This also means there is variation in approaches taken. Many local authorities have decided education hub provision is not appropriate for vulnerable children. We are aware in at least one of these areas social workers have established alternative dedicated hubs. In some areas hub provision has felt like a two tier system, with the children of key workers prioritised, and the needs of vulnerable children coming second.

Generally authorities have prioritised those children assessed as benefiting from access to a hub either by a child's social worker, or by their school. UNISON has called for individual risk assessments to be undertaken for all children being considered for a hub and for a response to be in place for those findings as part of the process of pupils returning to school and early learning sites. Local authorities need to assess the impact on the other children with whom a child would be educated, for example, if a child lives with persons known to be flouting public health guidance. These are issues raised in section 42 of the 2019 Presumption to provide education in a mainstream setting guidance.¹ In some areas staffing arrangements have been put in place to ensure capacity is flexible enough to allow a full range of needs to be met.

It is testimony to the commitment of our members that so many have volunteered to provide support for children within the hubs. For example, where the children of key workers have additional support needs, staff who know the children have volunteered for the hub so there can be continuity and familiarity for the child.

The attendance of vulnerable children appears to be highest where transport is provided to and from hubs. We are aware of very high attendance where this is organised. There is variation in how this has been provided, whether it is the responsibility of education or of social work, and sometimes a perceived lack of parity. We are also aware that some parents have preferred to transport children themselves, depending on the child's needs.

If children do not attend, we are aware that either education or the social work staff who support them and their family are in contact to support attendance or to re-evaluate the needs of the child and the family.

Level of demand & types of needs during the pandemic

After 6 weeks of lock down, our members in children's services identify the following impacts of prolonged lockdown on vulnerable families.

- the pressure on families of being together, of enforced contact with family members;
- the absence of any respite via school and from social work carers;
- financial pressures; the high levels of need around food, electricity and basic essentials before the pandemic have increased further;
- for children with disabilities: the lack of availability during the lockdown of services used to support families at home and provide respite;
- children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder are struggling in lockdown as the routines and structures which helps them manage daily life have been removed.

These can all have an impact on mental health difficulties, domestic abuse and substance use within families.

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/guidance-presumption-provide-education-mainstream-setting/pages/4/>

Types of support for vulnerable children and families

We are aware of the following types of supports being provided by local authority staff:

- Schools maintaining contact with children and families by phone, e-mail or through dropping off learning packs;
- Schools identifying children and families who they are more concerned about and calling and e-mailing more regularly. In one authority schools phone twice a week and in some cases, make regular visits to families.
- Local authorities providing food rather than vouchers to families who are entitled to free school meals with school staff are delivering the food so that they can see the family and speak to the children.
- Home visits by social workers continuing where assessed as necessary, in accordance with health and safety.
- Social work teams are supporting families to participate in Microsoft Teams meetings for virtual Team around the Child meetings..
- Older young people staying in contact with their workers through WhatsApp and using Mind of My Own so children can directly contact their social worker if they need to.
- School staff and parent support teams offering practical support and advice in managing behaviour and emotional challenges when these emerge for children and young people.
- Efforts being made by Youth Work services, either local authority or voluntary sector, to reach out to vulnerable teenagers.
- Social work funds being used to buy and distribute electronic devices so that vulnerable children can access the curriculum.
- Joint working between social work, the school meals service, school transport and voluntary sector youth work services to deliver food parcels to children & families in need.

Provision for children with complex ASN

There appears to be wide variation in how well childcare hubs are meeting the needs of children with additional support needs. These are children who require clear routine and structure and who would struggle without some education in place. They may also have an additional support need that would be extremely difficult for one carer to manage alone.

In one area members report provision is 'woeful', with very few children able to access places and with families having to refer matters to their local elected member. In other areas we are aware that capacity for children with ASN within hubs is good.

It has taken time to develop provision for children with ASN, which means that many have waited weeks for this to be up and running.

Outwith hubs

Some of the arrangements reported by our members include:

- Bespoke provision being put in place for some children and young people with complex ASN, many of whom are preferring to stay home;
- Time with support workers through outreach arrangements;
- Twice weekly phone calls from school staff to assess support required. This has included delivery of food parcels, laptops and iPads from school, paper packs of work, equipment used in school for help with self-regulation, offers of outreach or places in a hub, etc.
- Social Work teams maintaining contact virtually and through socially distant garden visits when required
- Local authority staff taking children out for their daily exercise;
- Contact being maintained by phone with parents/carers to offer emotional support and to offer other support, for example, if a referral is required for financial support or access to local food bank.
- Staff use of Whatsapp video calling to see/speak to children and young people where appropriate;
- Offer of outreach or respite to children and young people through a voluntary sector organisation.

Key challenges for the attention of the Committee

Unmet needs highlighted by the pandemic include:

1. The extent to which children are being educationally and socially disadvantaged specifically in terms of internet access. A shift to online provision of school work has been the mainstream education response during the pandemic.

It is clear we need a national approach to ensure free universal access to the internet, including free provision of electronic devices to each individual child and young person. This must now be considered an essential public service for tackling attainment and opportunity gap.

While individual schools are highly sensitive to the Cost of the School Day, and many local authorities are making efforts to ensure digital inclusion, there needs to be a clear and consistent national policy commitment to ensure that every child can exercise their right to education.

2. The services used to support families at home and provide respite are less available for children with disabilities during the pandemic. There are currently even greater unmet needs than usual for this population of children and their families.

One issue raised by members is the need for some children and adults with additional support needs to have greater access to outdoor areas, without feeling criminalised.

3. There are concerns that lone parents are not receiving the extra support they need, particularly if they have one or more children with additional support needs, and currently no access to any usual networks of support through family, friends or neighbours.

Preparing for life after pandemic

The pandemic is not a leveller, but has dramatically exposed pre-existing levels of social and economic inequality. The challenges are not new, but heightened versions of existing ones, exacerbated by current conditions.

We would urge the Committee to consider how we prepare to support children and families with complex difficulties after the pandemic, given the huge increases in unemployment and poverty which have occurred.

A significant investment of resources and services in communities is needed, which will require proper funding of local government. UNISON calls for the £155m received from the UK Government in Barnett Consequentials to be distributed in full immediately to Scottish local authorities.

In terms of our most vulnerable children, additional local government funding is needed for example:

- to address the huge gap in respite provision, both overnight and community based, for families who have a child with additional support needs and/or complex health conditions.
- for young people leaving care to receive more support to access decent, liveable and safe accommodation;
- for safe free indoor and outdoor play opportunities for younger and older children and the expansion of youth work, particularly in our most deprived communities;
- for emotional and practical support for children and families in communities, to help tackle the legacy of complex needs the pandemic will leave behind.

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