

Children's Neighbourhood Scotland – Early insights into the COVID-19 response 30th April 2020

[Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland](#) (CNS) is based in the University of Glasgow, working in partnership with the [Glasgow Centre for Population Health](#). In collaboration with [Policy Scotland](#) and the [Network for Social and Educational Equity](#) CNS is undertaking a [programme of research and intelligence gathering](#) in high poverty settings across Scotland that seeks to understand how local responses are working in the current rapidly changing context and provide insights that can support the next phase of COVID-19 action at both local and national levels. This document is the second of a regular series that will share insights emerging from the research.

The impact of lockdown on children and families – lessons from frontline practitioners

"It's coming in waves" – deepening crisis for vulnerable families

Frontline workers have explained that they are seeing increasing numbers of families struggling to cope with the impact of lockdown. This is particularly challenging when parents are dealing with existing issues such as poverty, mental health problems, addiction, or domestic violence. These issues have been exacerbated by the 'new normal' of isolation, loss of social networks, fear and uncertainty of what the future holds, and a sense of feeling trapped, particularly for those in overcrowded homes. Single parents in particular are experiencing loneliness and the impact of being unable to have any time away from their children (and vice versa).

Financial stress

Families are experiencing 'financial fragility', particularly if they were precariously employed, and coping with increased fuel and food bills.

Food insecurity has been responded to well by services, and provision of food parcels and regular hot meals to families has been greatly welcomed in terms of 'easing the burden' on parents.

Frontline workers are seeing more families falling into fuel poverty and are using voluntary funding to top up electricity keys and gas cards as well as providing data and minutes for pay-as-you-go mobile phones and SIM cards to help families stay in contact.

Parent A is a single mum with three children. She normally works part time and has been furloughed. However her employer (a small company) has said they are unable to pay her until they receive the money from the government's furlough scheme. As a result, she has lost £115 per week income, and as the family are at home all the time, she estimates that her food and fuel bills have increased by at least £20 each. The family were already experiencing in-work poverty prior to the lockdown.



“We’re going to be facing issues we’ve never faced before” – supporting families beyond the crisis

Frontline workers in the third sector are anticipating a ‘mental health storm’ as a result of the covid-19 crisis and lockdown.

As well as families who are currently engaging with services, practitioners are concerned about families who in the past were just about coping but are now struggling to access food and are suffering financial hardship as a result of the current crisis. With the lockdown they may have lost family support with childcare. These families are ‘less fluent in asking for help’ who may not know how to access services having not needed to before.

It will be challenging to support families to re-engage with services after lockdown, and there are concerns about what this period of lockdown will mean for children’s wellbeing and education (especially due to rates of digital exclusion, the varying ability of parents to support learning, and the variability of contact with schools). One service manager raised the issue of the attainment gap and suggested that “the current situation is the opposite of what we’ve all been working towards for the past number of years.” In light of this the tight focus on raising attainment in literacy and numeracy without a much larger focus on wellbeing, at least in the initial stages when schools reopen, may be counterproductive. This would make a strong case for adopting a more holistic and integrated neighbourhood-based approach to the next phase of the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

Impact on children’s health and wellbeing

Day-to-day and face-to-face interaction with frontline staff from the third sector and at schools and early learning and childcare centres gives parents the opportunity to ask for advice informally in relation to concerns they have about their child. This support is currently largely missing or being provided via phone or video call. It is difficult for frontline workers to pick up the feelings of children and young people on the phone, although some said that in one-to one online video chats young people have been more open about their feelings than they might have been in the past. It was noted by some key workers that the delivery of food parcels was providing an alternative way of communicating with families about what other types of support they might need and how this can be provided by services.

Parent B has a child with complex needs who was awaiting an autism diagnosis before the crisis. As clinical responses in areas like this have slowed, the family are ‘in limbo’ and the child has been ‘absolutely distraught’ at the disruption of his routine and his interaction with his key worker at nursery. The situation is difficult for the child, his parents and his siblings. Services are supporting them as best they can, including by organising a nursery place for the child for respite.

As plans develop to ease the lockdown there are opportunities to consider how best to re-engage families with services and what the transition will look like as new collaborations and ways of working are emerging.

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