COVID-19 South Lanarkshire Research Briefing:
Family Wellbeing
December 2020

Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus the inequalities affecting children and families in South Lanarkshire communities, and how these have been heightened by the crisis. The aim of this research was to examine service responses to the COVID-19 virus pandemic and the experiences of families, children and young people. This briefing focusses on learning in relation to the impact of COVID-19 on inequalities and family wellbeing during and after the first lockdown.

An overview of the research methodology and approach used in this research is presented as an Appendix at the end of this briefing.

This briefing paper forms one of a suite of resources published from the CNS COVID-19 research programme. The full research report, other thematic briefing papers and short insight papers are available on the CNS website.

Key points and recommendations

- COVID-19 has exacerbated the social and economic vulnerability of families, children and young people, with the greatest impacts in high poverty areas. Geographical isolation and reduced access to services in rural areas is an additional risk factor for families and children.
- Many families previously in work have fallen into financial hardship as a result of the pandemic. There has been a rapid increase in the number of people now on Universal Credit in South Lanarkshire.
- UK and Scottish Government action is needed to increase social security payments to families on low incomes, for example, by making the £20 Universal Credit uplift permanent.
- A lack of digital devices and not being able to afford broadband or mobile data considerably restricted the ability of children to learn at home during lockdown especially in rural areas.
- In South Lanarkshire, families' experiences of lockdown were variable. For some, the closure of schools was challenging due to the loss of the sense of community and support that schools provide. However, some children found benefits in the shift to home-schooling, as it removed the pressure of attending school.
- Due to the 'stigma' around poverty in rural areas, some families were reluctant to accept support from food banks and charities, although it has been suggested that the community response to the pandemic may have helped to change attitudes towards poverty.
- Local authorities and their third sector partners should continue to facilitate a locally coordinated approach to food provision as part of the COVID-19 recovery and take action to reduce the stigma of food poverty by enabling families, children and young people to be more actively involved in designing and delivering local food initiatives.

The wellbeing of children, young people and families in South Lanarkshire

This briefing in divided into two sections. The first discusses the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on families in South Lanarkshire. The second section covers family wellbeing during lockdown.

The detailed research findings from this section can be found in the full research report.

The socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 in South Lanarkshire

Socio-economic and geographical inequalities are predicted to increase in the coming months as the full impact of the COVID-19 economic crisis is realised (Bambra et al., 2020). Three key areas of socio-economic vulnerability in South Lanarkshire were identified by our research: financial distress, geographical isolation and digital exclusion. These are discussed in brief below.

Financial distress

During the first COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, many families in South Lanarkshire turned to Universal Credit (UC) for emergency support, some for the first time. As lockdown began there was an upsurge in claims to UC. Between March and October 2020 around 12,000 people in South Lanarkshire began receiving UC, a 70% increase in the UC caseload (DWP 2020). This increase is in addition to the people already receiving benefits that have not yet moved on to UC.

In South Lanarkshire, approximately 15% of children are in receipt of free school meals (Scottish Government 2018). Interviewees in this research described families who were previously *'just coping'* or on *'the verge'* of poverty as struggling to afford basic necessities. This added to the distress and uncertainty of unemployment and furlough as well as delays in the payment of UC: '*They've either lost their job, and all the anxieties around that, or are trying to get […] Universal Credit and having to wait'* (Ruth, third sector).

Geographical isolation

Several interviewees suggested that the COVID-19 pandemic had exacerbated the sense of isolation that was already felt by many rural residents. The cost and availability of public transport was raised as a concern, particularly since bus services had been reduced further during the lockdown:

> *They're so poorly connected, and it costs a fortune as well, just to get from there to [town][…] So that's a huge problem. That makes them really quite isolated, and they've felt it, my families. A few of them have said they've definitely felt it more than ever during COVID (Audrey, public sector).*

Geographical isolation posed challenges for families trying to ensure they had enough food supplies. In one village, the local shop had limited fresh produce and was more expensive than supermarkets:

'what they were saying was that their money was not going as far either, because all they had was that shop' (Audrey, public sector).

Digital exclusion

Several interviewees felt that the biggest challenge facing families was digital exclusion. As well as low-income families having limited access to devices and struggling with the cost of broadband (Bynner et al., 2020), 'data poverty' was considered particularly problematic in rural areas. Although only 5% of premises in South Lanarkshire are without broadband access there are distinct pockets of the local authority where over a quarter of premises do not have reliable internet access (SIMD 2020).

Data and device poverty considerably restricted the ability of children to learn at home. The experience of remote schooling was highly variable and relied on access to digital devices and broadband as well as the ability to pay for materials for school activities.

The wellbeing of families, children and young people

This section describes the perceptions of service providers on the impact of lockdown on family wellbeing in relation to adult mental health; the pressures of childcare and home-schooling; disruption to normal routines; child wellbeing and welfare; and the stigma of poverty.

Adult mental health and wellbeing

Family financial insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic was associated with unemployment, furlough, and rapid increases in UC claimants. Families living in rural areas faced the additional challenge of reduced public transport, the increased costs of food and geographical isolation. For those who were working or planned to continue to work, the demands of home-schooling and childcare increased the cost and stress of having children at home. One service provider described the interlinked nature of these different services as akin to '*a Rubik's cube*' - when there is a change to one service such as education or childcare, there is an impact on other areas of life such as employment and mental health.

Local service providers interviewed for this research worked with parents that had pre-existing vulnerabilities such as financial insecurity, addictions, or child welfare concerns. Concerns were raised that families were more vulnerable to domestic abuse and that recovery journeys had been disrupted: '*Their recovery, I would say, has been put back quite considerably through this*' (Ruth, third sector).

Pressures of childcare and home-schooling

The loss of childcare support and normal routines during the lockdown period contributed to increased financial distress for some parents:

> *She's got a 20% cut off her income. She's trying to home school at the moment, and she understands [...] that's the way the world is. But what she's saying is [that] 'I'm expected to be*

back at my work, and I need to go back to my work, or I won't be able to pay my rent. But I won't be eligible for any childcare because I'm not a key worker. So, I'm going to have to take unpaid leave half the week' (Carrie, public sector).

In addition, there were the pressures of home-schooling, with many parents lacking the confidence to support their children's learning at home: *That's been a real pressure in terms of them feeling really inadequate, really concerned about how they can support their own children (Ruth, third sector).*

Interviewees gave varied accounts on the success of remote learning provision from local schools. Many schools made significant efforts to provide interactive and creative learning opportunities at home. However, in some cases, communication from schools to parents was seen to be inconsistent and service providers from across the public and third sector were concerned that some children were not fully engaging with online learning: '*whenever it came to the actual engagement with [Google Classroom], and with the learning, it was minimal, absolutely minimal' (Audrey, public sector).*

Disruption to normal routines

Interviewees reported that families had varied and different experiences of lockdown, with some families reporting positive experiences while others found it more challenging. The closure of schools was considered to be particularly difficult for those families who relied on the sense of community and support that schools provide. Schools were said to offer a *'secure base'*:

> *And that has been taken away without any warning. So, they are missing the human contact. They're missing the familiar faces. […] They're missing the whole structure and routine of getting up, going to school and seeing people that, beyond their family, have got their wellbeing at heart (Carrie, public sector).*

Despite the challenges, in some cases, families benefitted from the slower pace of life associated with lockdown and with the ability to spend valuable time together. Some interviewees reported that families of children with additional support needs found benefits in the shift to home-schooling:

> *Some of the parents have said that my child with the additional needs has been far easier to manage during this period than my other child, whose routine has been disrupted and is missing her friends more (Monica, public sector).*

However, parents and education professionals were concerned about the transition back to school for all children.

Child wellbeing and welfare

It was suggested that the lack of routine had resulted in young children becoming increasingly '*wary*' or '*subdued'* on the one hand, and on the other hand exhibiting challenging behaviours which parents were struggling to manage. Concerns were also raised about risky behaviours and the mental health of young people. It was acknowledged that the direct impact of the pandemic on children and young people was not fully known.

Further concerns were raised about children's welfare with the temporary loss of trusted adults in schools and other settings. Third sector organisations continued to monitor and respond to the child or adult protection concerns which emerged during the lockdown period.

Stigma of poverty

Interviewees emphasised the complex nature of rural poverty and the existence of pockets of *'hidden deprivation'*. It was suggested that there are a range of issues including a *'stigma'* around poverty and people internalising the idea that they themselves are to blame:

> *If you're in Hamilton, it's perhaps more acceptable to be poor, because people around about you are. Down in Clydesdale, it's less so, because people round about you are not necessarily in the same place (Rachel, public sector).*

The nature of small villages where *'everybody knows everybody else',* was considered to heighten the potential for people to feel judged for accepting support during the pandemic. In some cases, families who were entitled to support from social work refused the offer of daily meals delivered to their door because they did not want their neighbours to know their circumstances. The isolation normally felt by those experiencing poverty may have lessened, with some families that were already in poverty feeling that *'we are not the only ones now' (Leah, third sector).* Despite the stigma of poverty, interviewees suggested that the pandemic, and the community response to it, may have helped to shift opinions:

> *They're [saying that] we are all struggling here. We all need to support each other. Whatever kind of judgemental aspect they would have had, has been left to one side. (Rachel, public sector).*

Frontline workers expressed the hope that this sense of *'community coming together'* would continue.

Discussion

This briefing has presented research findings in relation to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the wellbeing of families, children and young people in South Lanarkshire. In this final section we summarise the key themes and learning gained from the research.

Many families that were *'just coping'* and managing on low incomes pre-pandemic have now fallen into poverty. The lockdown resulted in loss of income through unemployment, delays in UC and furlough payments, increased costs, lack of access to affordable food and the financial pressures of children spending more time at home. For people recently unemployed, service providers identified challenges with managing expectations of the services available and difficulties with overcoming the stigma of using food banks.

COVID-19 has shone a light on the nature of pre-pandemic inequalities and the extent to which individuals and families, particularly those in high-poverty areas, are more vulnerable to its social and

economic impacts. Government policies of self-isolation and social distancing exposed the disadvantage faced by those reliant on public transport in rural areas where there is a lack of healthy and affordable food available locally.

The experience of lockdown was reported to be variable across families. Heightened stress in some children and young people was associated with long periods at home and the loss of the *'secure base'* of school. However, the *'slower pace of life'* and removal of the pressure of attending school helped some children, including those with additional support needs, to be more settled. Despite the efforts of third sector organisations in South Lanarkshire to maintain contact and respond to the needs of children and young people, the full emotional and psychological impact of lockdown was difficult to assess.

Service providers interviewed for this research were concerned for parental mental health. Many parents stated they did not have the capacity or confidence to home school their children and trying to meet those expectations created additional stress. Service professionals reported increased levels of anxiety, self-harm, stalled or reversed addiction recovery, and increased risk of domestic abuse during lockdown. Previous research has also shown that high levels of family stress increase the likelihood of domestic violence, alcohol and substance abuse and untreated mental health problems (Schonkoff 2020). The mental health and wellbeing of young people were also key concerns for service providers in South Lanarkshire. Research demonstrates that home confinement during a health pandemic can have profound and enduring effects on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people (Sprang & Silman, 2013; Wang et al., 2020).

The interviewees in this study anticipated that the first COVID-19 lockdown would have a negative impact on learning and widen the gap in educational attainment. Learning for children and young people during lockdown was affected by the availability of digital devices, reliable broadband, and the bespoke nature of remote education. Research has shown that the gap in educational performance by background widens during school breaks and this may account for two thirds of the attainment gap by age 14 years (Alexander, Entwisle & Olsen, 2007). Reliance on digital learning during lockdown is likely to have widened the educational attainment gap and disadvantaged the poorest students.

The vulnerability of families living in high-poverty rural areas was compounded by their geographical isolation and the stigma of poverty, including the fear of being judged for receiving help from a food bank or other charity. Yet, the pandemic lockdown meant that those already experiencing poverty were suddenly *'in the same boat'* as many other people. They may have experienced a sense of social solidarity, if only momentarily.

Conclusion

One in four children in Scotland are living in poverty (Scottish Government 2020). This figure is likely to increase with predictions from the Child Poverty Action Group and the Trussell Trust (2020) that an additional 300,000 children and 1.7 million adults will be living in poverty by 2021. Child poverty has profound effects on the life chances and opportunities of children and young people in employment, learning and health. Given the current context, the Scottish Government's targets for reducing child poverty by 2030 look challenging. Without action to provide direct support to those who were already

in poverty; as well as families who have recently fallen into poverty; social, economic and health inequalities are likely to widen.

This research in South Lanarkshire found evidence of widening inequalities in relation to reliance on universal credit; access to healthy and affordable food; geographical isolation, digital access, and remote education and childcare. These inequalities negatively influenced the mental health and wellbeing of parents, children and young people. Many families have now fallen into poverty as a result of the pandemic and the financial hardship and anxiety is set to continue. The sense of shame and embarrassment at having to receive food from charities, highlights the risk of that many people could *'fall through nets'* and not receive the support that they need. The mobilisation of volunteers within communities in South Lanarkshire offers hope and the potential to engage families in organising community-led food larders and other local initiatives. The pandemic as sparked a sense of social solidarity which, if valued and nurtured, could mitigate some of the worst socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19.

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Appendix: Research approach and methodology

From June to September 2020, 10 qualitative interviews were conducted with service providers, working across a range of services in the public and third sectors including: youth work, family support, befriending, education services, health improvement, and community planning. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by phone or on Zoom video conferencing software and lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

A decision was taken to interview frontline professionals in South Lanarkshire with established and trusting relationships with children and families in high poverty areas to understand the breadth of experience of service delivery during lockdown. This was achieved without risk of causing harm or difficultly to families at a time of high anxiety. The research met the highest standards of ethical research conduct, research integrity, data management and data protection, as approved by the University of Glasgow.

The voices and perspectives represented in this report are those of service professionals. Research participants were anonymised to ensure confidentiality. Services and organisations were categorised by sector (public or third sector).

The detailed research approach, methodology and interviewee pseudonym and designation is presented in the [full research report](#).

This report is published by Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland.

About us

A children's neighbourhood is an initiative that brings together people, resources and organisations in a neighbourhood area, so that all of those things can work together towards better lives for the children living there.

Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland is a collaborative centre, developed by Glasgow Centre for Population Health, Policy Scotland and Robert Owen Centre at the University of Glasgow.

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