

CHILDREN, FAMILIES, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE
SELECT COMMITTEE



Monday, 18 October 2021

THE IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON EDUCATION AND LEARNERS IN SURREY

Purpose of report:

Children, their families and Surrey's education leaders and staff have shown tremendous resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic over two challenging academic years. This report outlines the continuing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education and Surrey learners and the plans that have been put in place to address the impacts, so that children and young people are supported to achieve their potential and no one is left behind. It provides further information on the recent destinations of post-16 learners.

Introduction:

1. Much has been written over the last seventeen months about the impact of the pandemic on children's learning and development, their physical health and their mental well-being. It is generally well understood that children are at very low risk of severe illness from Covid-19, and they are far better off being in school. This report will not rehearse the steps that Surrey's schools, colleges and early years settings have taken to continue children's education while in lockdown, including children of key workers and vulnerable children, and to welcome children back into schools as safely as possible when lockdowns eased. The monthly reports to Cabinet on Covid impacts provide a regular account of the response the Council has taken to support schools through the challenges of the past.
2. This report will look ahead to schools and colleges reopening for academic year 2021/22, the likelihood of continuing impacts of Covid on education and the steps that are in place to mitigate these. As context, in July 2021 the Department for Education released a significant amount of new guidance for educational settings, in line with the move to Step 4 of the roadmap, as schools and settings entered the Summer holidays. The guidance confirmed:
 - a) Pupils will no longer be required to be kept in consistent 'bubbles' while in school;

- b) Face coverings will no longer be routinely advised in educational settings, unless advised due to a local outbreak;
 - c) From 16 August, children under the age of 18 will no longer be required to self-isolate if a close contact;
 - d) Educational settings will no longer undertake contact tracing and this will move to NHS Test and Trace;
 - e) On the return to school in September, all secondary school children will undertake 2 lateral flow tests in school, and continue to undertake twice weekly at home testing until the end of September;
 - f) Rigorous infection control measures should continue, including good hygiene, ventilation and cleaning.
3. In practice, this means that from the start of the new academic year in September, school life should look and feel much more ‘normal’ for pupils, staff and parents and carers. However, we know that with the continuation of rates of community infection, there are likely to be cases of transmission in educational settings. For this reason, the Council’s Public Health Service and School Relationships Service are continuing to provide access to advice, support and guidance to education sector leaders to support the successful return to school of all children from September. This includes support for schools to do all that is reasonably practical to ensure the health, safety and welfare of all staff and students.

Responding to the impacts of Covid-19

4. We know that children and young people are not solely learners and, to support learning, their holistic needs must be met. For this reason, we drew upon the advice of our schools and early years settings, and worked with partners across the voluntary and community sectors and health, to introduce a range of initiatives and resources over the Summer to support children’s physical, emotional and developmental needs. We identified these summer months as crucial for preparing children to return to learning successfully from September.

Support for children over Summer 2021

5. While Summer is a time for rest and relaxation for children and families, we were concerned that some children’s development could be further held back while out of education, especially younger children and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. For this reason, the Council with support from schools and early years settings, launched a new campaign in mid-July aimed at parents of 0-5-year olds. The campaign was created in response to concerns from school and early years leaders and national research that demonstrates that the last two lockdowns have had a negative impact on young children’s language skills. The campaign raised awareness of five simple things parents or carers can do at home to help their child thrive such as singing and reading

together. Short videos were shared through social media, early years resources and materials available on our and partners' websites to support parents. The resources were distributed across libraries, family centres and partner channels. The results of this campaign are currently being analysed and an update will be provided at the Select Committee meeting.

6. We also ran two initiatives with our libraries this summer to encourage reading amongst primary aged children. Surrey Countryside delivered 'Surrey Nature Explorer' aimed at children aged 4-12. The Reading Agency's Summer Reading Challenge, who have partnered with the World Wildlife Fund, delivered 'Wild World Heroes' a celebration of reading that will inspire children to stand up for the future of the planet. More can be shared about this project by the Library Service at the Select Committee meeting.
7. Following a successful virtual launch over the Easter holidays, Surrey's holiday activity and food programme rolled out in physical locations across the county this summer. Backed by Department for Education funding and branded as 'Club4', the programme offered 55,000 places over the summer holidays to children and young people who receive free school meals. Active Surrey worked on our behalf with 70 providers, many from the voluntary and community sector, to offer holiday camps with a range of enriching activities, a minimum of 1 hour's physical activity and a meal.
8. To complement the camp provision, the virtual offer which ran at Easter was enhanced with new online content for dance, yoga and meditation classes including for children with additional needs. Active Surrey also delivered six virtual parent workshops over the summer holidays to increase parents' understanding of healthy living topics such as hydration, sleep, and screen time. Our evidence from children's enthusiastic participation in these camps is that they have played an important role in easing the transition back into school this September for children who may have been most disadvantaged by the pandemic.
9. We do not underestimate how demanding the coronavirus pandemic has been for the education community – students, parents and teachers. In addition to encouraging all to recharge over the Summer holidays, we widely publicised the range of free and confidential wellbeing support available: [Mental wellbeing - Healthy Surrey](#).

Support for children to return to school in September

10. As September approached, the Council launched a communication campaign for families to prepare them and their children for the return to school. The aim was to provide not only information, but also assurance, that it is safe and crucial that children resume their education.

11. At the outset of the pandemic, the Council established a group of senior officers and school leaders to monitor and support the school attendance of vulnerable children (those with an education, health and care plan and children with a social worker). This resulted in Surrey having significantly higher attendance rates for these children than was the case nationally. That group, chaired by the Director of Quality and Performance, is continuing to provide the oversight for school attendance of vulnerable children from September.
12. The number of children who are electively home educated (EHE) increased significantly over the academic year 2020/21. In September 2020 there were 1,155 children who were home educated and registered with the Council. As there is no legal requirement to register a child being electively home educated this is likely to be an underestimation of the true number. By July 2021, there were 1,666 EHE children known to the Council. Much of this increase is attributed to anxieties about school attendance due to coronavirus.
13. The overall number of EHE children always drops in August as the Year 11 cohort ceases to be of statutory school age and is removed from this list. As schools have resumed in September 2021, the number of EHE children has decreased to 1,425 as at 28 September. Some of this drop is attributed to the removal of the Year 11 cohort, however some families have chosen to return their child to a school setting, indicating growing confidence that schools are safe places for their child. In addition, so far in September 2021, there have been 70 new EHE registrations, compared to 170 registrations in September 2020 which is in line with pre-pandemic levels.
14. Council officers contact every family that chooses to home educate their child to ensure that they are making an informed decision and under no pressure to do so, and to signpost to sources of good quality teaching materials appropriate for their child. The Council also provides further health and well-being information, for instance regarding access to childhood immunisations. The ELL Leadership Team monitors the data on EHE children on a monthly basis.
15. Children missing education (CME) are children in receipt of no education at all. This can occur, generally for a short time, for a number of reasons including exclusion or medical reasons. All CME children in Surrey are closely monitored to ensure that the necessary interventions are provided so that children can access education. At any one time there are an average of 30 CME children. There has been no noticeable impact of Covid on our numbers of CME children.

Mental Health and Wellbeing support for children in schools from September

16. We know that the pandemic has had a significant impact on children's mental health, with increasing requests to children's emotional wellbeing and mental health services. A crucial part of Surrey's new Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health contract, which started on 1 April 2021, is support for schools. This new model is being co-produced with local schools and in each school there will be a named school lead with access to a menu of interventions and support to develop a whole school approach. Two additional Mental Health Support teams to be in place from September, increasing our Surrey offer to 13 teams by 2023/24. Co-production work has started with our special schools to develop the offer for children and young people in special schools, as well as in mainstream schools who have pupils with additional needs.

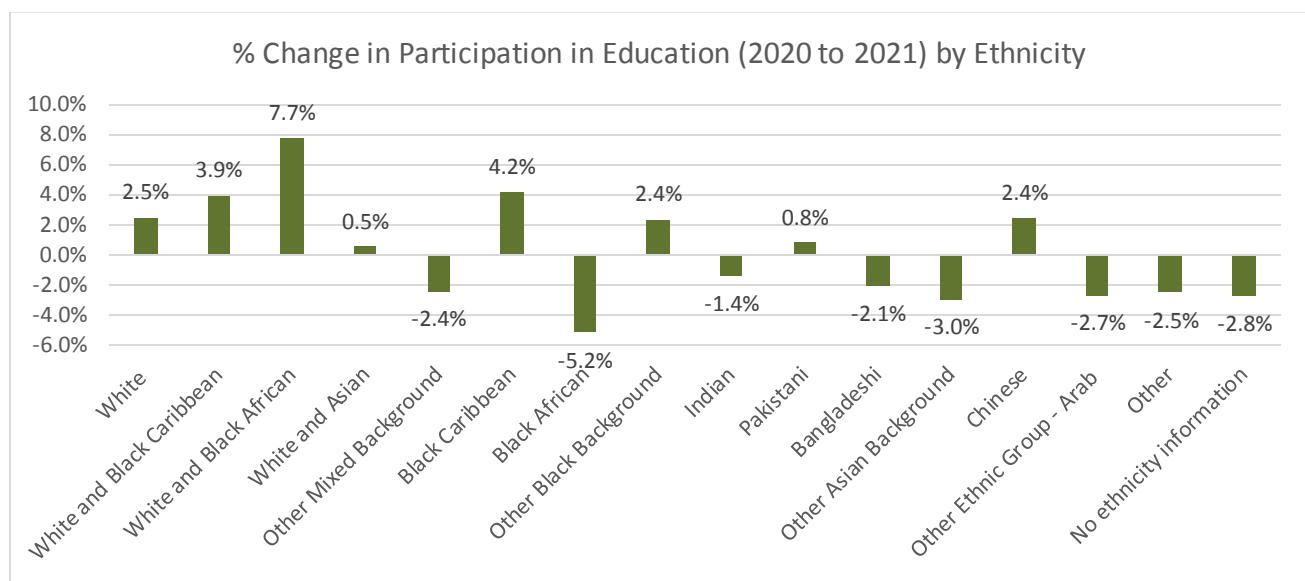
Ameliorating the Covid-19 gap

17. The education community and teachers came together to support Surrey children and parents during the unprecedented challenge of COVID-19. An incredible effort was made to maintain education through home and blended learning wherever possible, and as children and young people returned to on site education in September 2021, schools and settings continue to assess and address the impact of COVID -19 on children and young people's learning and progress.
18. The Schools Alliance for Excellence (SAfE) are continuing to work directly with school leaders to share good practice and last year launched a COVID -19 Recovery Fund to support Language and Literacy for all state funded Surrey schools. SAfE has been working with outstanding school leaders and the Education Endowment Fund (EEF) to support schools on their Catch-up strategies. The EEF suggests that Catch-up strategies can be grouped into three categories:
 - a) Teaching and whole-school strategies
 - b) Targeted support
 - c) Wider strategies
19. Full details of the Catch-up support for schools is available at:

[Annex 3 - Ameliorating the COVID Gap and supporting schools.pdf](https://www.surreycc.gov.uk/annex-3-ameliorating-the-covid-gap-and-supporting-schools.pdf)
[\(surreycc.gov.uk\)](https://www.surreycc.gov.uk)

Participation for Post-16 learners

20. As was the case nationally and regionally, Surrey saw an increase in young people in years 12-13 participating in education between June 2020 and June 2021. The percentage change of 1.4% in Surrey was however below that seen in the South East (2%) and Nationally (1.8%).
21. When comparing participation rates by ethnicity, this gap between Surrey's performance compared to that averaged across the South East and nationally appears to link largely to specific ethnic minorities. Across nearly all ethnicities at both regional and national level, excluding Black British at a national level and Black Caribbean in the South East, participation rates in education increased. In contrast, Surrey saw a decrease across a number of ethnic minorities groups as set out in the table below. The decrease in participation for these groups has been identified as largely linked to education in Sixth Form colleges and further work with the sector is underway to establish the cause of this and whether it is linked to Covid.



22. Surrey's Year 11-12 Transition Service, working to prevent young people from becoming NEET, recently implemented a new prioritisation for all Looked After Children, including the Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) cohort. In addition, resource has been allocated for the implementation of the interpretation services offered by the Council's REMA service. This is enabling these young people to engage more effectively with the Transition Service for post-16 destination planning.
23. We are working closely with our Post-16 providers to implement early identification of those at risk of early withdrawal from provision in order to ensure support is available to enable the young person to sustain the placement, including grant funding and signposting to local opportunities.

24. Participation in learning amongst those with SEND increased within Surrey by 3.9% between June 2020 and June 2021. This exceeds the increase seen nationally (0.5%) and within the South East (2.2%). This demonstrates the positive impact that the Preparation for Adulthood programme, part of the SEND Transformation programme, is having on improved outcomes for young people with SEND. This programme emphasises improvements in the opportunities and pathways to independence and employment for young people.
25. The proportion of 16-17 year old Looked After Children in education, employment or training in June 2021 was significantly greater than that recorded in June 2020. An overall increase from 68.5% to 79.4% was recorded. This is far greater than the increase seen nationally (from 77.1% to 80.1%) and in the South East (from 75.3% to 78%), although from a lower base.
26. The proportion of 16-17 year old Care Leavers in education, employment or training in June 2021 was in contrast significantly lower than that recorded in June 2020. An overall decrease from 80% to 67.3% was recorded. This is against a backdrop of a slight increase in participation nationally and regionally. There is significant mobility in this cohort. A change in accommodation part way through an academic year can impact on the accessibility of existing education or training. Furthermore, Covid reduced the number of in-year start placements making enrolment mid-year challenging. To address this Surrey Virtual School has implemented new initiatives such as a NEET intervention pilot and Surrey Youth Hubs to provide information, advice and guidance for job support.
27. It is also worth highlighting that a significant amount of work was undertaken to improve data quality in relation to our Looked After Children and Care Leaver cohort. This will subsequently have impacted the performance in both areas. This work has brought Surrey's performance more in line with that seen regionally and nationally. With regards to Looked After Children, whereas previously we appeared to be underperforming, our performance on participation is now above the regional average, although still slightly below the national average. The significant decrease in participation rates amongst Care Leavers correlates with a notable increase in the cohort size.

Attainment by age 19

28. Overall attainment of Level 2 by age 19 fell slightly (by 0.24%) in 2019/20 compared to 2018/19. A small decline was also seen regionally and nationally. In contrast, attainment of Level 3 by age 19 saw a slight increase across the

same period in Surrey (0.28%) and nationally (0.38%), compared to a slight decrease regionally (-0.01%).

29. This trend of gradual decline has occurred since 2017, locally as well as regionally and nationally. A number of factors have contributed to this. The introduction of the requirement to continue with Maths and English post-16 if a young person has not attained a Level 2/GCSE pass is not only an initial deterrent to entering further education but also contributes to some withdrawals. Similarly, changes to Maths/English requirements in apprenticeships have made these less attractive and, in some cases, less achievable for some young people. There has also been a decline in the availability of Level 2 apprenticeship opportunities as part of the change from frameworks to standards.
30. Attainment amongst those eligible for Free School Meals remains behind that of the regional and national average. Improvement however was seen amongst those achieving Level 3 by age 19, increasing by 3.14% between 2018/19 and 2019/20. Those achieving Level 2, by contrast, decreased by 0.94%. Performance amongst those with an EHCP remains above the national and regional averages for this cohort and increased at both Level 2 and Level 3 between 2018/19 and 2019/20.
31. The changes in the Further Education landscape outlined above have impacted on disadvantaged young people who are more likely to leave compulsory education without a Level 2 and/or Maths/English pass. The Council's strong focus on post-16 SEND participation pathways has had a positive impact on participation for young people with an EHCP.

Impact of Covid

32. We have received anecdotal feedback from both support services and colleges themselves that applications have escalated this year resulting in very large waiting lists. This likely reflects the increased demand from those who may historically have progressed to employment but who do not feel this is a viable option given the current economic climate.
33. Colleges have also adapted their offer to more closely meet the needs of young people following the extended period of social isolation and distance learning. Examples include:
 - a) Activate Learning are trialling an online reintegration programme aimed at those who are experiencing barriers engaging in face-to-face learning. The first term of the programme is purely online and then from January onwards they will begin to introduce face-to-face provision with a view to transition to full-time onsite learning by September 2022. This was initially established for those aged 14-16 but the Council has secured an agreement from Activate

Learning that they will also make this available to those progressing to Year 12 if eligible.

- b) East Surrey College has established a new foundation programme for those not yet ready for a full-time vocational programme, often linked to mental health issues. We are supporting recruitment, targeting those who are currently NEET.

Conclusions:

34. Surrey's schools, colleges and early years settings have been magnificent in their response to this pandemic, rooting our children and young people, including the most vulnerable, at the heart of their day to day work over some seventeen months. We owe our education leaders, teaching and support staff our appreciation for all that they have done and continue to do. They have been resilient in the face of significant ongoing challenges to maintain education while also keeping themselves and children as safe as possible. The Council has supported this resilience directly and through SAfE with a number of initiatives, including a funded coaching programme and campaigns such as 'Give your Headteacher a break.'
35. There will continue to need to be close working across the education, health and care system to support children and young people to access education and achieve their potential. While we have moved into Step 4 of the roadmap, and are now learning to live with Covid, we will also need to work together to support families and carers and children to feel safe and confident about attending school, college and early years settings.

Recommendations:

36. That the Select Committee notes the wide range of support that has been put in place to mitigate the impacts of Covid-19 on education and learners.

Next steps:

2021/22 educational attainment data to be provided to the Select Committee as it becomes available.

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