

REPORT UNDER RULE 2 (VI) OF THE COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULES

Report by Councillor Helena Mair, Children and Young Person's Advocate

A reflection of how a pandemic has changed lives for young people.

The past year has been a difficult and challenging time for all of us. Some of us have lost loved ones, we have missed our contact with our friends and families and we all just want our lives to get back to normal. This report is a voice for the young people of Lincoln who so often don't have a voice. They too have missed their friends have had concerns for their families and have lost loved one.

The pandemic has impacted on all of us and although children have fewer health risks related to Covid-19 the Children's Commissioner in her report 'Childhood in the time of COVID-19' states that children have "suffered disproportionately from the nations efforts to contain the virus"

The report below is not a report on what we have achieved as a council over the past year but a reflection of how Covid-19 has affected children and young people across the world, the Country and The City of Lincoln.

Poverty

Over the past year more families have faced financial instability with low-income families unable to budget for unexpected expenses. It is estimated that in Britain more than 120,000 children have been plunged into poverty due to the COVID-19 economic crisis. These figures would equate to approximately 200 children in living in Lincoln.

The controversy over free school dinners which has been highlighted by Marcus Rashford shows how close to the edge of survival many families have been forced by the pressures of the pandemic.

During the half term holidays in October The City of Lincoln Council showed leadership by making emergency funding available to support food for children who would not have been supported through the school holidays.

Young workers are some of the hardest hit by the economic crisis. Many young people work in low paid jobs and zero-hour contracts in sectors such as hospitality and retail which have been hardest hit. Newly qualified school leavers and university leavers have been unable to enter the world of work as all the vacancies have dried up for them. Many young people have had to return to their parental home adding to their family costs and losing their sense of independence.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation reported that by August 2020, almost 4.6 million households were in receipt of Universal Credit, an increase of nearly 90% from the start of the year. Most of these households will have seen their incomes fall, putting them at risk of falling below the poverty line. Families with children continue to account

for nearly four in ten households on Universal Credit, exposing large additional numbers of children to the risk of falling into poverty.

Education

Whilst school closures were essential to help control the spread of COVID-19 the results of the school closures have had a big impact on the lives of children, causing social isolation for young people and stress and pressure for so many families. Access to e-learning got off to a rocky start and highlighted more inequality with some children having no access to computers and internet services. Not only have children lost access to schools during lockdown but their education when schools have been open has been disrupted by intermittent unpredictable breaks caused by outbreaks of the virus.

By mid-February children will have lost half an academic year - as much as 5% of their school career - in learning time. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has estimated that each pupil will lose an average of £40,000 in lifetime earnings from lost time in school. But it's not just about money. The United Nations Convention on the rights of the child mandate that "Education should develop every child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to the full" These are not things which come from online tutorials but are nurtured in the classroom and developed in the playground. The impact of Covid-19 and children's ability to grow and develop will be felt for many years to come.

Young people are now facing the news that they won't be taking exams this year and many are anxious about their future as it is not even clear yet how their work will be assessed. Last summer the algorithm system caused more confusion than clarity and these results can play a huge part in determining a young person's future.

Homelessness

Young people have been among the hardest hit by the economic impacts of the pandemic, with many job losses concentrated in the hospitality and retail sectors. Half of all eligible workers aged 16-24 were furloughed in the first three months of the pandemic, and youth unemployment has reached 13.6%, more than three times the figure for all ages.

There is clear evidence that thousands of young people across the country are facing homelessness and housing insecurity due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Centrepoin research has found that young people across the country were finding it harder to access support and find accommodation, as local authorities and other organisations closed physical spaces and moved services online.

Organisations across the country have been continuing to provide support to vulnerable young people, in spite of the many challenges thrown up by the COVID-19 pandemic. But there is deep concern that levels of youth homelessness are likely to increase further, and current policies and investment decisions may not be enough to provide young people with the specialist support they need.

During the period from April 2020 – January 2021 we received 4 approaches from 16/17 year olds. In 3 cases we were able to prevent their homelessness and in the

fourth we were able to relieve the homelessness by assisting the young person to access safe and suitable accommodation. Our work with this age group generally involves close partnership working with other agencies including Children's Services and specialist providers.

For 18-25 year olds, within the same period we received 157 approaches. The outcomes of these varied according to individual circumstances however we prevented 17 instances of homelessness and assisted 58 young people to secure alternative safe and suitable accommodation. We provided housing advice to 19 people and still have 18 people under assistance. The remaining cases were closed as no further contact was made after initial advice or because the Council owed no further duty to the applicant. Again the council works very closely with a range of specialist accommodation and support providers in ensuring young people receive quality advice and assistance.

Physical Activities

In terms of physical activity and the health of our young people, Covid and lockdown has greatly reduced the physical exercise our young people are getting. This lack of physical activity involved in outdoor games/sports and the social interaction that comes with these activities has impacted on their wellbeing.

Mental Health

Children and young people in Lincoln and across the UK have had their lives turned upside down by the pandemic. Almost every young person has had to adjust to dramatic changes in their education or employment, routine and home life. Some have experienced bereavement or other traumatic experiences during the lockdown period, while groups who were already marginalised or disadvantaged are now likely to become more so. Children with existing mental health needs have struggled to get help due to the lockdown,

A survey of young people with existing mental health needs for the Young Minds Charity found that:

- **80% of respondents agreed that the coronavirus pandemic had made their mental health worse.** 41% said it had made their mental health "much worse", up from 32% in the previous survey in March. This was often related to increased feelings of anxiety, isolation, a loss of coping mechanisms or a loss of motivation.
- **87% of respondents agreed that they had felt lonely or isolated during the lockdown period,** even though 71% had been able to stay in touch with friends.
- Among more than 1,000 respondents who were accessing mental health support in the three months leading up the crisis (including from the NHS, school and university counsellors, private providers, charities and helplines), **31% said they were no longer able to access support but still needed it.**

In the coming months and years, the impact of COVID-19 will effect young people dramatically and It is important that we put children and young people at the heart of our thinking and that any policy decisions and money spending should consider the impact of young people in our City. This report was made possible due to recent reports published by the Children's Commissioner, Young Minds, Centrepont, The Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Institute for Fiscal Studies. I would recommend that councillors take the time to look at recommendations made by these reports. As a council we will work towards reducing inequality and help young people reach their full potential and thrive in our City. We will work towards highlighting and changing policy for children and young people in the months and years ahead.

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