

Contents Page

Introduction

Chapter One: Education and Special Educational Needs

Section 1 – Covid and the Classroom: Accelerating and Attaining Beyond the Pandemic

Lorenzo De Rosa & Taliesin Stevenson

Section 2 – SEND Education: The Consequences of the Pandemic and Future Implications

Alexandra Mountain & Nina Lacroix

Section 3 – Importance of parental support during home-schooling.

Nada ElBeshy

Chapter Two: Mental Health and Young People

Section 1 – Covid-19, Economic hardships, and its Impact on Children and Adolescents

Jennifer Hookham

Section 2 – Covid-19: A Look into the Impact of Increased Screen Time on Young People's Mental Health

Célia Hounsou

Section 3 – Behavioural Manifestations of Mental Health in Foster Care

Precious Oppong-Gyimah

Reference

Appendix

Introduction

Our brief was to investigate how young people in Essex have been affected by the pandemic. By directly focusing on young people, education and mental health, we assess the symptoms of the difficult transition to a socially distanced world.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been and remains a major disruption for millions of learners around the world, leading authorities to close schools and pivot toward remote learning. Essex County Council's strategy aims to enable inclusive growth, but Covid-19's detrimental effects have not been equally distributed. The key to an equitable and inclusive recovery from the pandemic for young people lies in educational and mental health support. In reinforcement of these strategic aims, we individually address facets of these topics with research we have conducted throughout the project. We hope that our research will help young people in Essex have the opportunity to fulfil their potential, to become engaged and active members of society.

Firstly, we explore multiple factors related to education. Particularly, vulnerable students face barriers to accessing e-resources, therefore we investigate broadband provision and its connection to attainment. We prioritise examining how 2020 has changed student results and the extent of an impact this has on career prospects, estimating lost earning potential.

With everyone having to adapt to an online world, it is important to ensure all young people maintain steady progression of their personal and educational development. Secondly, ramifications of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) provision throughout the pandemic are brought into focus, with an evaluation of how students with SEND Support and/or Educational Health Care Plans (EHCP) have been supported.

Third, but not least important, is the impact from lockdowns on young people's mental health. While physical health was prioritised, local governments swiftly acted toward stopping the spread of the virus, yet mental health crept up in its own pandemic for the youth population in Essex. The collateral damage COVID-19 had on the mental health of children and adolescents is thus explored through; financial difficulties and

household stress affecting families' mental wellbeing, in addition to the effects of increased screen time during lockdowns and lastly, the effect on foster children and high demand for social support.

Chapter 1: Education and Special Educational Needs

Section 1

Covid and the Classroom: Accelerating and Attaining beyond the Pandemic

How different was the 2020 cohort to prior years?

Due to uncertainty over GCSE and A-Level grading in 2020, we noted a drastic increase in attainment scores, arguably because of the introduction of teacher-assessed grades. We find that the 2020 'bonus', resulting in higher GCSE scores, are conditional on attendance, where absences in Year 10's cohort are useful measures for the impact on attainment. See Figure 1 below, comparing 2017–2019 as a benchmark against 2020. Contrary to what has been suggested as an artificial 'levelling up' of lower attainers, this 2020 'bonus' decreases greatly with increased absences. Therefore, Year 10 'persistent absentees' had on average less of an increase in attainment because of the changed approach to marking.

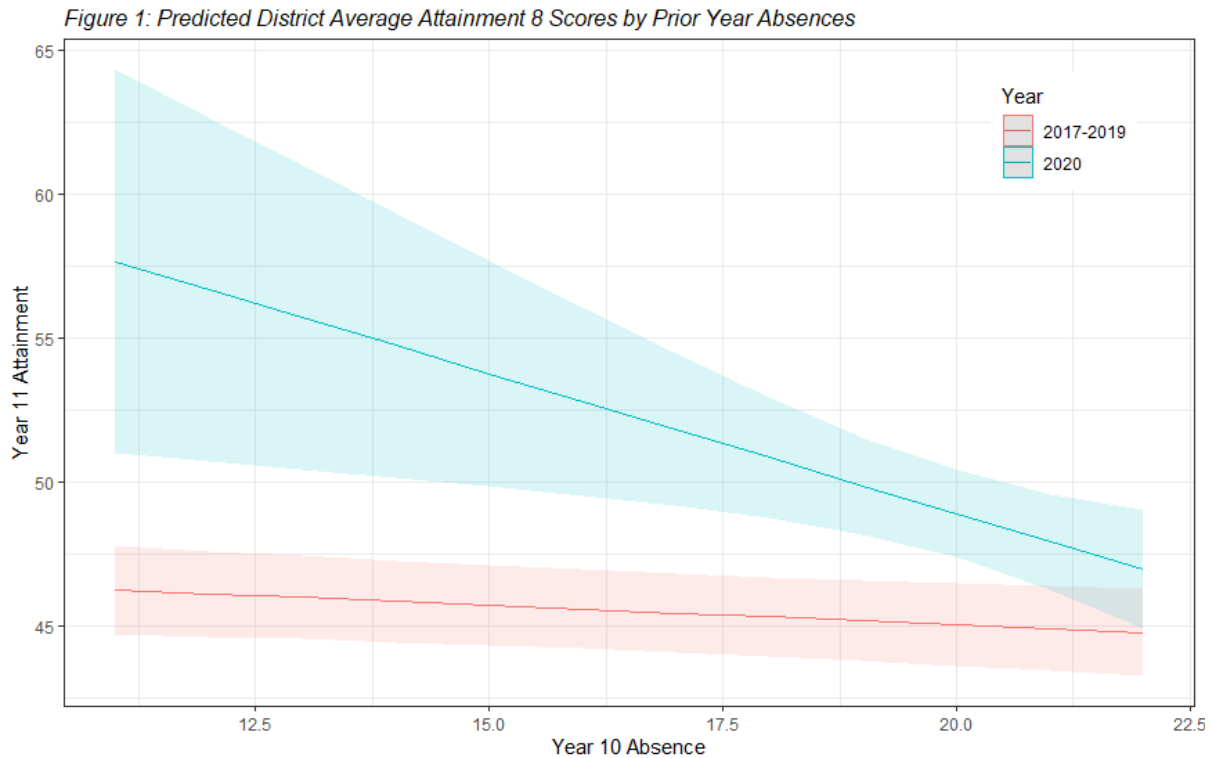


Figure 1

Figure 2 visualises the regional grouping of districts in Essex and their performance from 2017–2020. Differences in attainment are explained by the level of absences and deprivation, as we also found that a higher level of deprivation is associated with lower performance.

For Grammar school districts, namely Chelmsford and Colchester, a 7-point increase is solely attributed to their performance, without the 2020 bonus. This highlights educational inequalities within Essex, as Selective schools are typically outliers. Their stringent prerequisite grades and wide catchment areas contribute to a concentration of high-achievers, who will on-average outperform most other schools within their district. Moreover, with teacher-assessed grading, there is a slight, negligible decrease in grammar-districts. Presumably, attainment in these districts could not improve any further, thus were not affected by the bonus. The 2020 bonus shows a clear difference between lower-performing districts, such as Tendring that displays a negligible improvement from 2017, and higher-performing ones. As the distribution of the 2020 bonus is not equal across Essex, we expect an increase in the attainment gap in accordance with differences in deprivation and absences between districts.

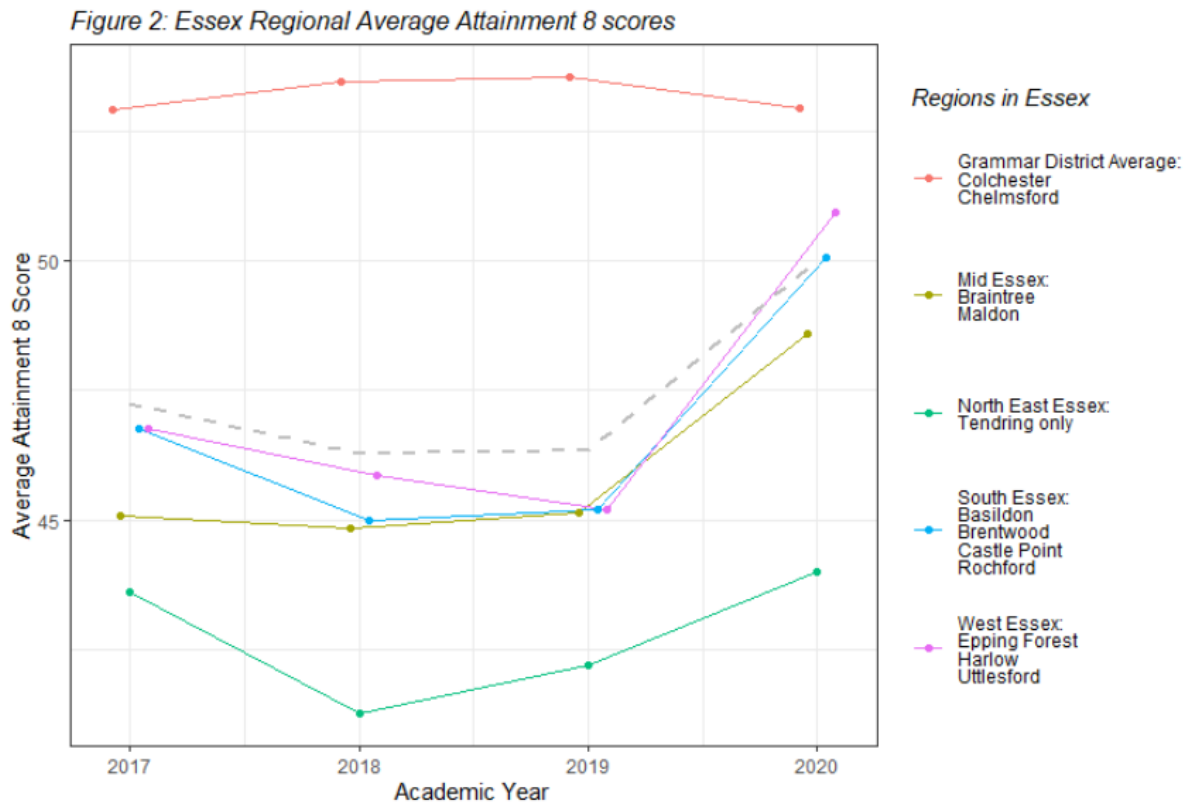


Figure 2

Inequalities in Broadband

The nationwide lockdown closed schools in March 2020, forcing students, with the exception of children of essential workers and those considered as vulnerable, to study from home. An estimated 37% of the 2019-2020 academic year was completed virtually.¹ Broadband access has been the vital connection to the virtual classroom at home. Potentially, broadband speeds may impact online learning in more deprived, less-connected areas, exacerbating pre-existing educational disparities in Essex.

¹ Halterbeck, M., Conlon, G., Patrignani, P., & Pritchard, A., 2020. Lost Learning, Lost Earnings. *The Sutton Trust*, [online] pp. 1-10. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/lost-learning-lost-earnings> [Accessed 23 April 2021].

Figure 3: Download Speed by District

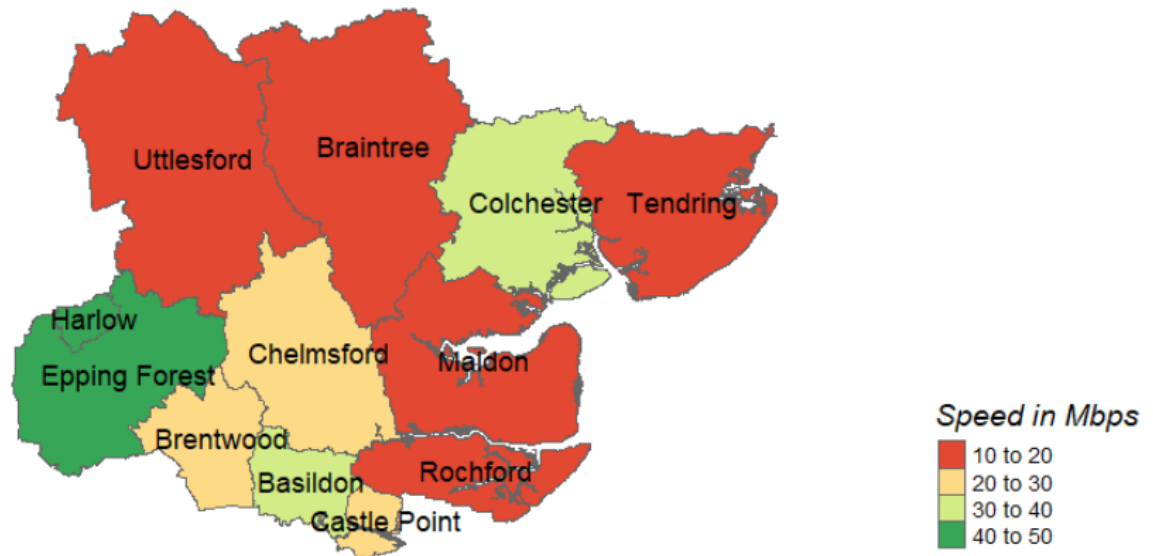


Figure 3

Figure 3 illustrates the median speed in 2018 for each district, weighted by an index of rurality. The western districts closer to London enjoyed a far higher download speed than their eastern and southernmost neighbours. Overall, we observe a relatively low speed. By the Superfast website's standard, 'market failure' is determined when broadband speeds fall below 30mbps in the majority of the District boroughs.²

Intervention and improvement in broadband can be crucial. We expect disadvantaged students from more rural localities with poorer internet provision to endure greater difficulties with online learning. Since we found that less deprived areas tend to be associated with lower broadband speeds, we suggest targeting specific areas – those who are deprived and rural. To put it simply, wealthier rural areas make a less compelling case for intervention.

As an area of interest for intervention, we focus on Tendring due to its level of digital poverty and income deprivation. Upon breaking it down to a population of 1-3,000 people, we notice a cluster of higher speeds on the coastline near Clacton, yet a majority of rural areas are subject to Market Failure.

² Superfast Essex (2020). *What's Happening Next? State Aid Map*
<https://www.superfastessex.org/about/whats-happening-next/state-aid-map/>

*Figure 4: Download Speed
in Tendring*

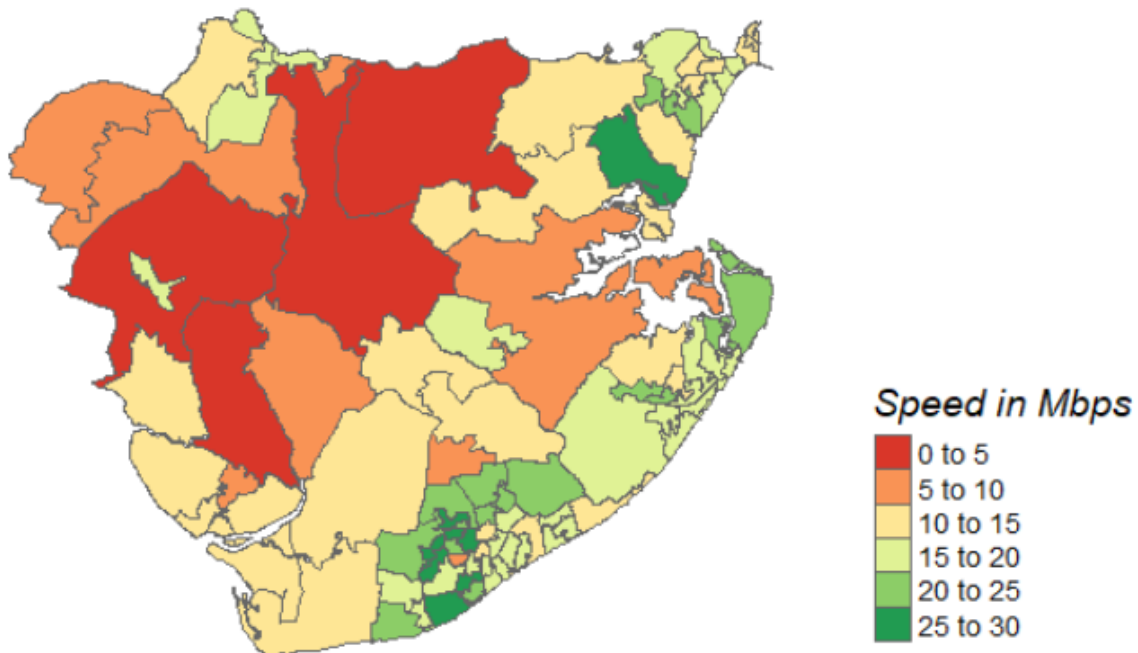


Figure 4

Long Term Impact on Earnings

Irrespective of the 2020 bonus, the prolonged closure of schools and the related learning losses are expected to have repercussions in the long term for students. This implies diminishing future labour market prospects for many pupils, especially the disadvantaged. Accordingly, we present a projection for the long-term earnings loss suffered by the 2020 cohort of students.

The Sutton Trust, assuming a 20-year persistency effect, estimated the long-term earning losses associated with the closure of school for Key Stage 4 students in England in 2019–20³. In net present value, the predicted losses would be £3,870 and £3,800 for low

³ Halterbeck, M., Conlon, G., Patrignani, P. and Pritchard, A., 2020. Lost Learning, Lost Earnings. *The Sutton Trust*, [online] pp. 1–10. Available at: <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/lost-learning-lost-earnings> [Accessed 23 April 2021].

socio-economic groups (SEGs) – men and women respectively. By contrast, for high SEGs the losses are £1,570 for men and £710 for women⁴. We applied these estimates to Essex in order to evaluate the potential impact for each local authority district. The key message here is the distribution of these impacts and inequalities across Essex, rather than the exact loss.

In assessing the distribution of Low and High SEGs⁵ for each district, we drew data on employment by occupation from the ONS’s NOMIS portal⁶. Assuming that the same distribution of SEGs for the Economically Active population applies to students, we computed the number of high and low SEGs, for males and females aged 16 for each district.⁷ Lastly, we applied the Sutton Trust’s estimates to the computed student population in order to get a forecast for the earning loss in Essex.

Figure 5: Long-Term Loss per 100 Inhabitants

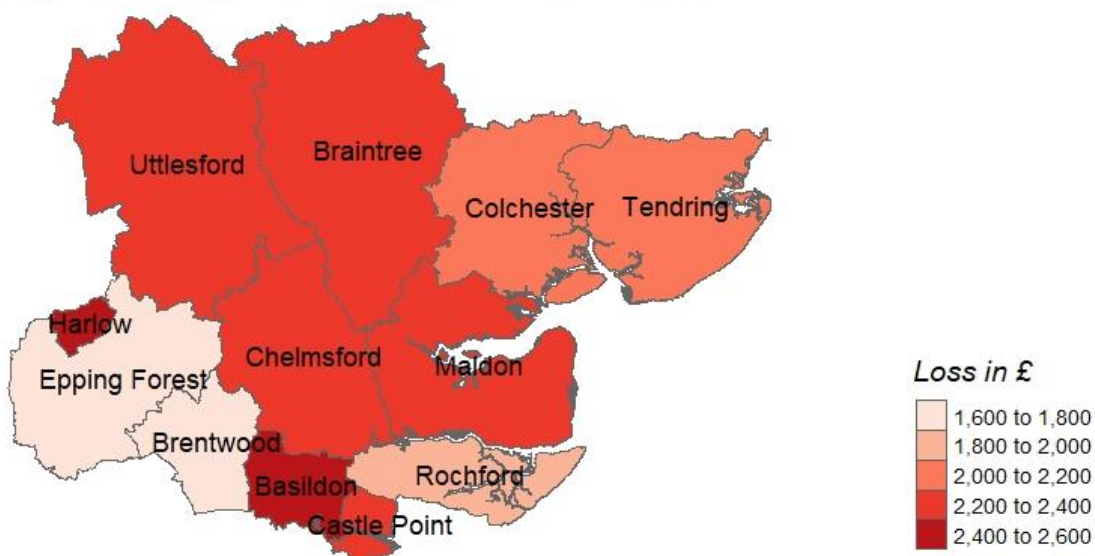


Figure 5

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ See Appendix, Table 1.

⁶ Office of National Statistics (2020). *Annual population survey*.

Missing information was estimated using available data.

⁷ Here, we assume that the population of those aged 16 were enrolled in full-time education at the time of analysis, as is legally required.

Figure 5 shows the expected income loss for each district per 100 inhabitants. Accordingly, the estimates reflect not only the number of students but also the total population. It illustrates that the two most affected districts will be Harlow and Basildon; these areas were indicated in the 2019 Indices of Deprivation report as the second and third most deprived in Essex, respectively.⁸ On the other hand, the lowest predicted estimate is for Brentwood, likely related to being the second least deprived district. This meets previous expectations, as already in 2015, Brentwood had the lowest level of economic inactivity and unemployment in the county.⁹

Figure 6: Long-Term Loss for ages 16-64, per 100 Inhabitants

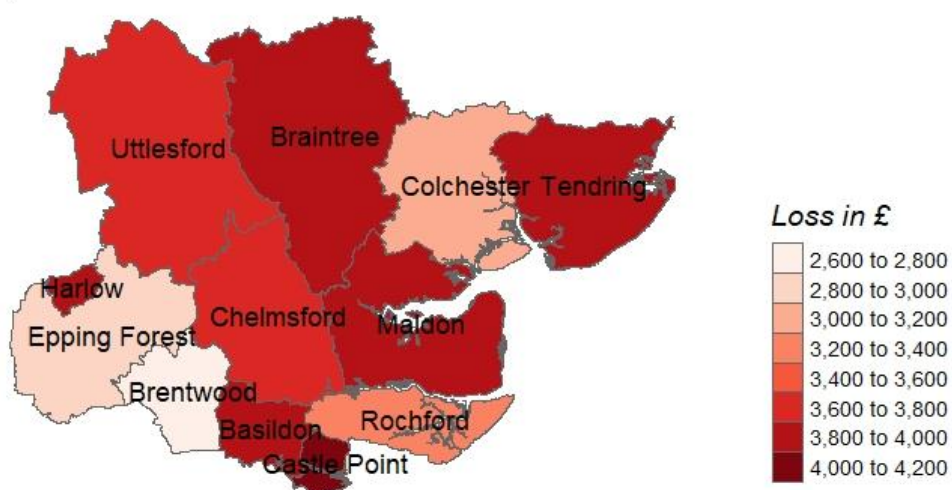


Figure 6

Since the most productive fraction of society is likely to bear the brunt of the cost, we include Figure 6 showing the losses for the working age population (i.e., 18 – 64). The impact will be larger in Castle Point, Harlow and Basildon. Here, the forecast for coastal areas, such as Maldon, is less positive, as the estimates shown previously were mitigated by the inclusion of retirees. In contrast, the estimate for Colchester is

⁸ Essex County Council (2019). *Indices of Multiple Deprivation full report*

⁹ Knight, A. (2017). *Brentwood Economic Statement 2017, Appendix*.

3rd lowest, reflecting an improvement compared to Figure 5, due to its substantial working-age population.

Recommendations

To summarise, we relate lower absences to better performance and establish a link from income deprivation to lower district attainment and higher absences. The analysis on attainment and the related earning loss projections show Areas of Interest in Essex where children are most at risk of falling behind. Understanding the 2020 attainment bonus, we suggest focusing on educational recovery to narrow the gap between districts. This calls for intervention in areas with an abnormal increase from prior years and those with no bonus due to high absences. By guiding schools in areas in need of educational reinforcement, government funding can be utilised to initiate summer schooling programmes¹⁰. Through building school-community resilience with information networks, such as Parent-Teacher Associations, Summer Schooling programmes need to be encouraged for maximum participation.

We also suggest that low internet speed, coupled with deprivation, potentially hindered online learning. Therefore, we recommend further review of broadband in poorer rural areas in a feasibility report to target infrastructure development.

¹⁰ Education Endowment Fund (2021). *Teaching and Learning Toolkit: Summer Schools*

Section 2

SEND Education: The Consequences of the Pandemic and Future Implications

Why does SEND Education matter?

The percentage of pupils in England with SEND is approximately 1.3 million children¹¹. Where needs are substantial, students can benefit from an EHCP. This is a legally binding document that schools have with a plan on how to support children with SEND, tailored to their needs. Within Essex, there are approximately 24 in 1000 children with SEND (0-17 years old) with an EHCP.

Our survey encompassed a range of topics including the impact of lockdowns, home-learning, and what is needed going forward. We surveyed Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) in 500 schools across Essex county and received 25 responses allowing us to focus more on individual experiences through qualitative data. Our findings allowed us to understand the consequences on schools, the teaching staff and general wellbeing. We had respondents from primary schools (48.39%), secondary schools (25.81%), special schools (6.45%), and pupil referral units (9.68%).

Covid-19 and home-learning: the consequences

A lot of students with SEND have not been able to cope with homeschooling and the transition in and out of lockdowns has been a hardship.

Students with SEND have unique needs that need tailored provision. For example, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) students rely on school routine to thrive academically and for their wellbeing and stability. During the homeschooling period, different standards of education created gaps in the students' learning. As a consequence, when students transition back to school there has been an element of re-teaching. This highlights the

¹¹ Department of Education, (2018), *Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2018*

need for an adaptive and flexible curriculum to reduce the focus on academics and prioritise practical activities and mental health. Life-skills are disproportionately important to students with SEND.

Different education standards created variations in academic achievement between students with or without an EHCP. This is due to EHCP students generally being lower attainers and therefore requiring tailored environments that were not always accessible at home. For all students with SEND, we find it is impossible to replace the in-person class conditions and their contingent benefits. Teaching staff are essential to scaffolding learning and monitoring pupils' progress in an immediate manner. Furthermore, accessing online resources and navigating through the Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) have proven difficult.

Several respondents indicated that the change in teaching conditions facilitated a lack of social interaction and physical presence and also led to a myriad of drawbacks for pupils with SEND. Lack of concentration and focus coupled with lack of support from parents and Learning Support Assistants (LSA) made the home environment pretty hostile to home-learning. Some short-term benefits emerged as well as highlighted by some SENCOs. Pupils were able to study in a quieter and calmer environment, at their own pace, without routine and peer pressure, which decreased their anxiety level. This learning environment in some cases encouraged closer bonds with parents and siblings through increasing parental understanding of SEND.

The way forward

Overall respondents said they had not been provided with adequate resources to cope with the pandemic and its educational challenges. Furthermore, investment in equipment and resources was the key suggestion of respondents in this survey. Though some schools successfully adapted through research of their own, based on previous interviews with SENCOs, we suggested in our survey tools, approaches and resources and asked about the likelihood of schools' implementing them. As Figure 7 shows below popular measures that SENCOs are extremely likely to implement are: noise cancelling

headphones, break out rooms and SEND specific software. These measures are cost-effective and could be easily supported by the Essex County Council.

How likely would you be to implement these approaches?

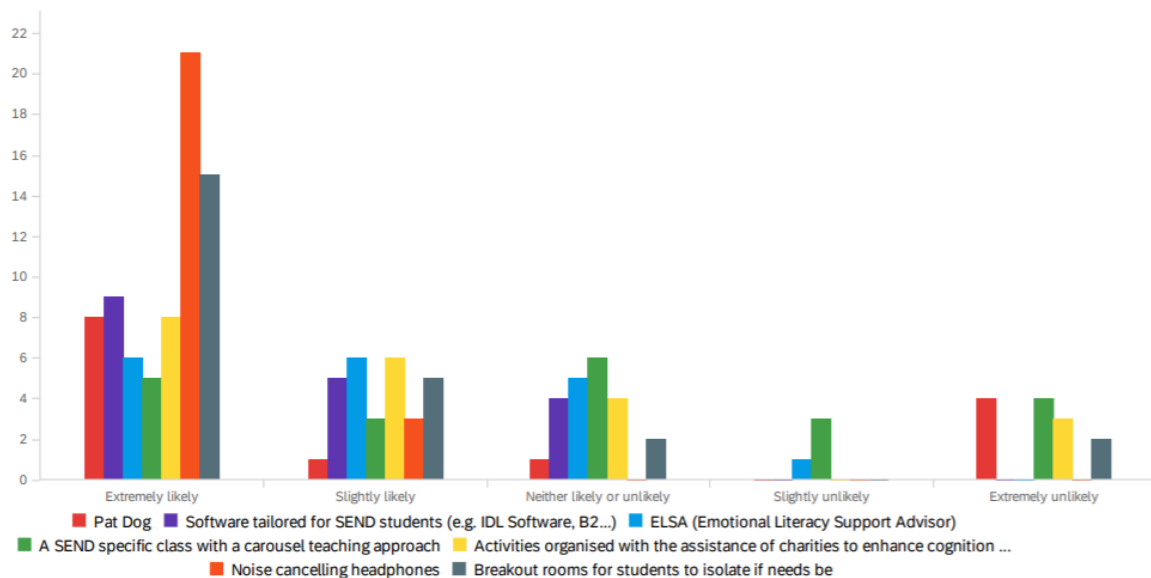


Figure 7

We prioritise recommendations for the improvement of SEND education, bringing light to a range of topics. Among them were: changes to the curriculum, a focus on inclusivity to bring awareness, funding, and increased needs and parental support systems. All recommendations below have been suggested by SENCOs in our survey.

Several respondents demanded changes to the curriculum toward a blended learning approach, flexible for home and school. Another suggestion concerns accessible, country-wide remote lessons like the Oak Academy, but for students with SEND. This would create a break from social demands and prove especially beneficial for the mental health of children with SEND. Scaling this down from country to county, a recommendation could be to apply this in Essex county on the support of the Essex Inclusion Partners and/or school links. Without neglecting the importance of academia, prioritising life skills as in Physical Social and Health Education (PSHE) classes means the blended learning approach would benefit greatly.

Awareness of SEND should be raised by increasing well-being, inclusivity, and a sense of community in the classroom. The teaching of emotions and how to deal with them through use of images should become the norm and will help enable independent skills, self-esteem and confidence that will help children with SEND feel part of the community.

To help the wellbeing of children with SEND, a crucial recommendation is mental health support. These include: extra and external support, such as an in-house counsellor or therapist for every school and a need to liaise with external services to support overwhelmed staff, especially in the case of speech and language therapy. This can be addressed with increased advertisement of Essex's many mental health providers and actions.

Funding was an essential necessity that was consistently mentioned by respondents throughout the whole survey. Lack of funding has led to a lack of specialist schools and teachers for children with SEND and therefore leading students to be wrongly allocated and parents not being advised correctly.

Additionally, although we are aware of virtual parent support group drop-ins already being organised by the SEND Navigations Leads, the possible increase of these to parents who need them could alleviate a couple of issues raised in this survey. Virtual drop ins could also be beneficial, especially amidst the pandemic. This extra parental support could help those that have a lack of awareness on how to best address their child's educational needs and assist those that may also be struggling with SEND needs themselves.

The issues mentioned in this survey to some extent have both been pre-existing and exacerbated by the pandemic, as well as new challenges arising. Though the recommendations provided are based on specific needs of pupils with SEND, we are confident on their successful applicability to neurotypical pupils as well.

Section 3

Importance of Parental Support during Home-schooling

The UK has one of the highest rates of home-schooling, with approximately 100,000 children learning from home - 3,000 of whom are in Essex. The reasons behind why parents choose to home-school include: supporting a disabled child, teaching religious values, or protecting their children from dangerous school environments and mental health issues. As a consequence of the pandemic and the closure of educational institutions, however, for a while almost the entire population was learning at home instead of the classroom.

During lockdown, students' success and educational attainment was highly dependent on parental support. The topic illustrates the importance of parental support during home-schooling in a light of a pandemic. In order to understand how parents handled the situation, we have conducted an online survey aimed primarily on parents and guardians of school-aged children that was distributed through Prolific. Our survey discussed the types of support parents provided, their ability to balance time between family and work, and their confidence in providing educational and emotional support. We have received responses from 500 parents of primary school children (57.7%) and secondary school children (42.3%) in Essex and surrounding counties. Our findings inform us that approximately 89% of students have stayed at home the entire time during the pandemic or have gone to school occasionally while 11% went to school regularly.

Responses show that parents mostly supported home studies in their free time, however while parents worked, their partner assisted the children. However, some parents relied heavily on school support. For secondary education students, parents provided less help due to the belief children can study independently. Income inequalities are exposed with regard to online learning resources and tutoring, especially affecting single parents and/or essential worker parents.

How often did you have to motivate your child(ren) to start school work?

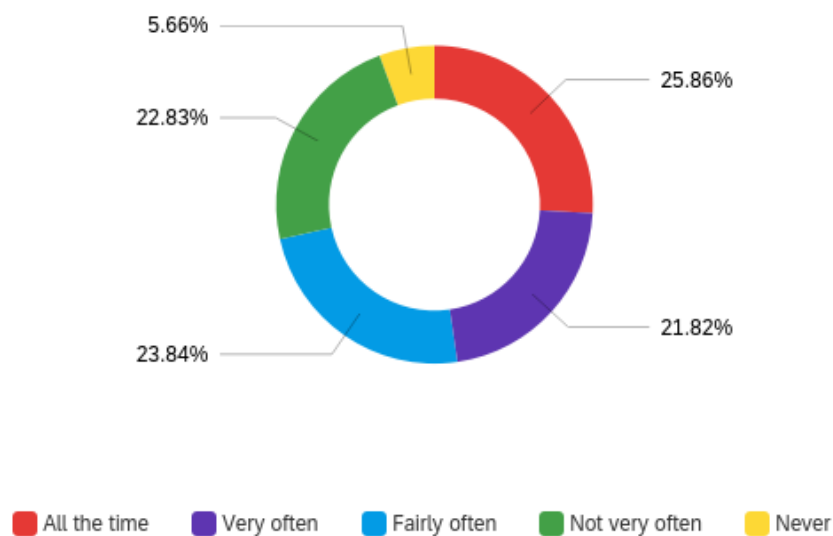


Figure 8

Figure 8 shows that 71% of parents often gave motivation to their children to begin their studies during lockdown. However, it appears that the impact of parental support has negligible improvements on the children's level of confidence. Shown in the table 3 below (see appendix), parents who are more confident in their ability to provide educational support have a higher chance in improving their children's educational self-confidence.

96.7% claimed that they have not received any support from local councils or other support services. Instead, 3.3% of respondents resorted to hiring private tutors for educational support. We recommend that councils should partner with schools to provide online educational support systems for children where parents can easily access. Local governments should raise awareness about and advertise online educational support systems funded by them to make parents aware of these platforms.

Key Takeaways for Chapter 1:

Section 1:

- At maximum, a 20-point increase in grades for those with low absences was a result of the 2020 GCSE grades. This did not extend to those with high absences in the prior year.
- Through income deprivation, a relationship between Essex's median broadband speeds have been established.
- Grammar school districts did not drastically change in 2020 (~7-point increase), compared with other districts. Evidence of a relative decline in attainment was however present.

Section 2:

- Attendance to school has fluctuated over the past year due to the numerous lockdowns
- The transition in-and-out of school has been a struggle for children with SEND
- The classroom environment cannot be replaced through home-learning. Physical guidance and monitoring by the teaching staff is necessary
- There has been both drawbacks and benefits for home-learning, though the benefits are more short-term
- Investments in adequate tools and resources as well as a focus on mental health facilities are key to overcome the detrimental consequences caused by the pandemic

Section 3:

- Parents provided educational and emotional support to their children.
- The impact of parental support has little improvement on children's academic confidence.
- Approximately 97% believe that local government plans were unrealistic and have not received any support while 3% paid to get support.

Chapter 2: Mental Health and Young People

Section 1

COVID-19, Economic hardships, and its Impact on Children and Adolescents

Do you think the financial situation of your household is better or worse than a year ago?

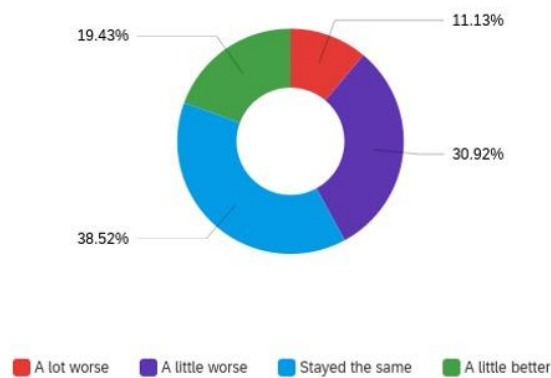


Figure 9

On a personal level, temporary lockdowns and restrictions have had a damaging effect on a family's financial status, with many individuals either losing their jobs, income or business. To gain primary data on how COVID-19 has affected families financially and psychologically, we conducted an online survey distributed via 'Prolific Academic' aimed at parents in the South East, and received over 500 responses (Table 2). As seen from Figure 9, when asking respondents how their financial situation has changed since the beginning of the pandemic, over 40% of respondents stated their financial situation was 'a little worse' or 'a lot worse' than a year ago. From these results we can conclude, as expected, that COVID-19 has had a detrimental effect on the financial situation of many households in the U.K.

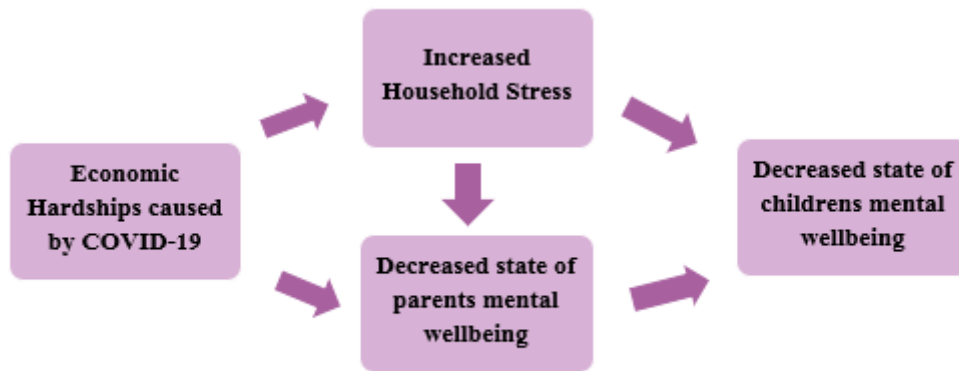


Figure 10

“Over 65% of parents felt like their mental health and wellbeing got worse since the beginning of the pandemic”

“Nearly 60% of parents believed their children’s mental health and wellbeing got worse since the beginning of the pandemic”

More importantly however, when running regressions between the variables, we can also deduce that there is a high correlation between financial difficulties and parent and children's mental wellbeing (Figure 10 provides an overview of the relations, with Table 4 providing a breakdown of the statistics). We observe from the data collected that struggling with bills and commitments is closely related to household stress (Figure 11), which has a detrimental effect on parents' subjective mental wellbeing (Figure 12). Whilst the economic hardships families face in light of the pandemic has a stronger effect on parents, the data suggests that children's mental wellbeing is also adversely affected. This can largely be explained by evidence suggesting that when a parent’s mental health decreases, this can negatively affect the children’s mental wellbeing due to the impact it has on parent-child interactions (Figure 12).

As predicted however, we see that a parent’s perception of their mental health and wellbeing significantly overlaps with their children’s mental health and wellbeing. Thus,

when parents perceive themselves as mentally unwell, they will also see their children in the same light.

The relationship between the household financial situation and stress in the home.

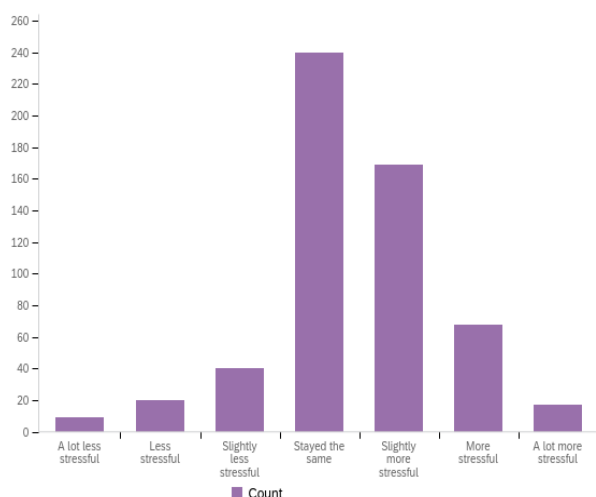


Figure 11

To what extent do you feel the following have got better or worse since the beginning of the pandemic?

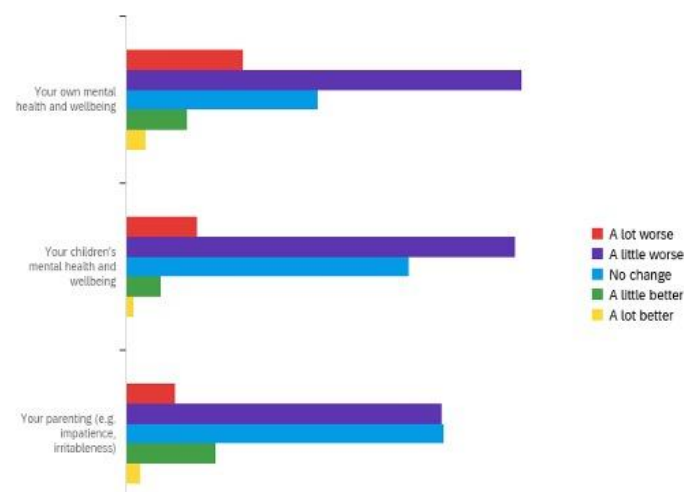


Figure 12

When comparing Essex to neighbouring counties there appears to be some promising results, with data suggesting that families in Essex seem to be coping slightly better with their financial challenges in light of the pandemic than families in fellow counties. For example, on average, 35% of parents in Essex stated their mental health had got a lot better in the past year, compared to only 14% of parents outside of Essex. Furthermore, 16% of parents in Essex stated their children's mental health had got a little better, compared to only 9% of parents in surrounding areas. With that being said, overall, the data indicates that with added financial strain on the household, the status of both the parents' and children's mental wellbeing will significantly decrease.

We therefore recommend more needs to be done to provide low level assistance to families and parents to stop the escalation of need. Thus support should be focused on working-class families who are just about managing, to prevent the decline of the mental health of both parents and children. Furthermore, as we are about to discuss, a key recommendation to support children and adolescents experiencing financial difficulties would be to raise awareness of the mental health services provided by the ECC on

electronic devices. By doing this, families can be made aware of the external support available, enhancing community resilience.

Section 2

Covid-19: A Look into the Impact of Increased Screen Time on Young People's Mental Health

Following the recent Covid-19 crisis, no shortage of efforts has been spared towards preserving people's physical health. Through the implementation of various social distancing restrictions (i.e., curfews, stay-at-home orders, lockdowns), governments across the world have fought against the spread of the Covid-19 to the best of their abilities, however, the ways in which Covid-19 has and still is impacting mental health have often been overlooked at the expense of restrictions that are having dire consequences on young people's mental health.

“According to the Health Foundation, in the United Kingdom the proportion of 18-24 year-olds experiencing negative feelings since the implementation of the initial restriction measures has drastically increased”

“When considering pre-pandemic trajectories, mental health in the United Kingdom has worsened substantially (8.1% on average) as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic” - The Understanding Society

While it is known that prolonged periods of isolation lead to high levels of anxiety, and cognitive breakdowns (Sandwood, 2000), the particularities of the Covid-19 pandemic is that prolonged periods of isolation have been coupled with an increase in screen time (i.e., online schooling; online work). This constitutes an added “strain” on mental wellbeing as longer screen time consumption has been associated with lower levels of life satisfaction and optimism and higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms.

The impact of prolonged periods of isolation, increase in screen time and young people's mental health

In order to confirm the correlation between screen time and mental health, we conduct a survey with the aim of assessing screen time consumption in relation to mental health. We survey 500 respondents from the United Kingdom between the age of 18-24 year-olds and use varying indicators of poor mental health to situate their sentiments/mental health levels according to their screen time consumption.

We find that over 43% of the respondents spend 5 hours or more on their screen every day (see figure 13), with 61% of the respondents expressing the fact “that they cannot imagine going anywhere without their mobile device”.

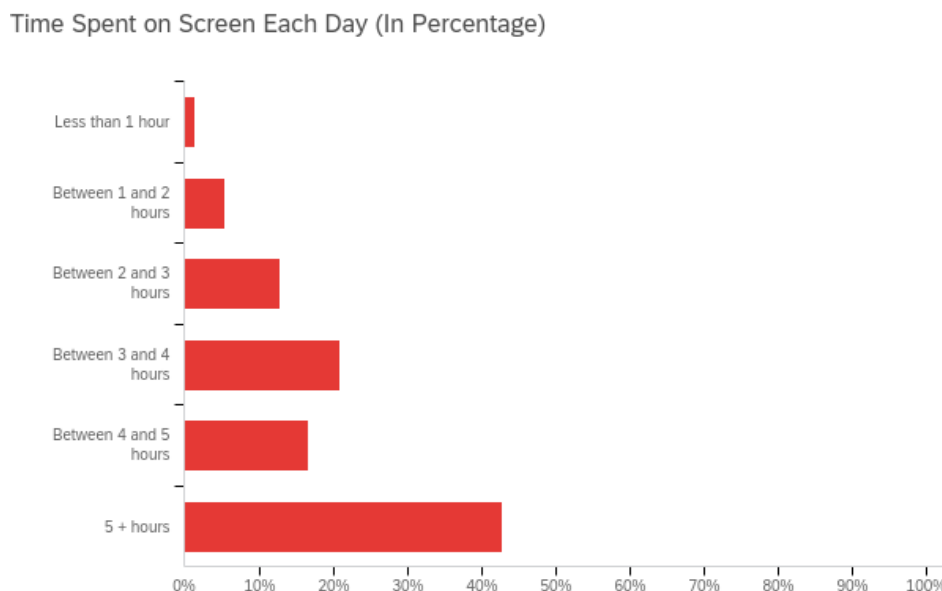


Figure 13

Additionally, when it comes to indicators of poor mental health, the survey suggests that 21% of the respondents that spend 5 hours or more on their mobile devices, have indicated that they are experiencing tiredness/a lack of energy “extremely often” as opposed to 4% for the respondents that spend between 1 and 2 hours on their mobile devices (see figure 14); and have rated their own mental health as being significantly lower than those spending less time on their mobile devices (see Figure 15).

“How Often do you Experience Tiredness/Lack of Energy According to Screen Time Consumption (a comparison between 1-2 hours and 5+n hours)”

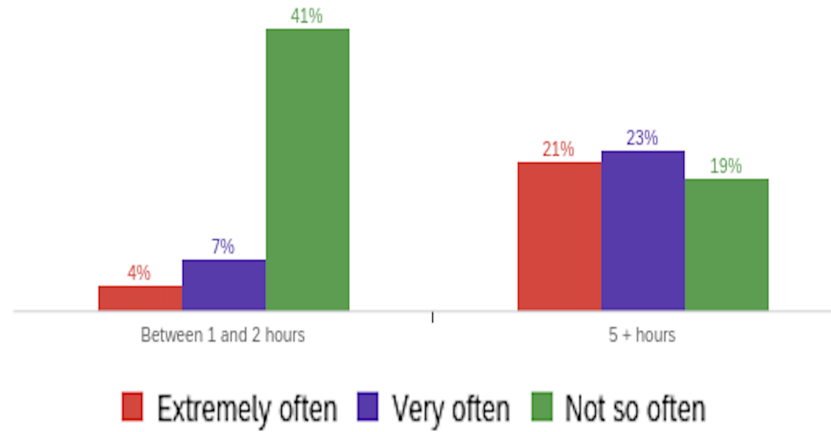


Figure 14

“Overall how do you rate your mental health” - According to Screen Time Consumption (a comparison between 1-2 hours and 5+ hours)”

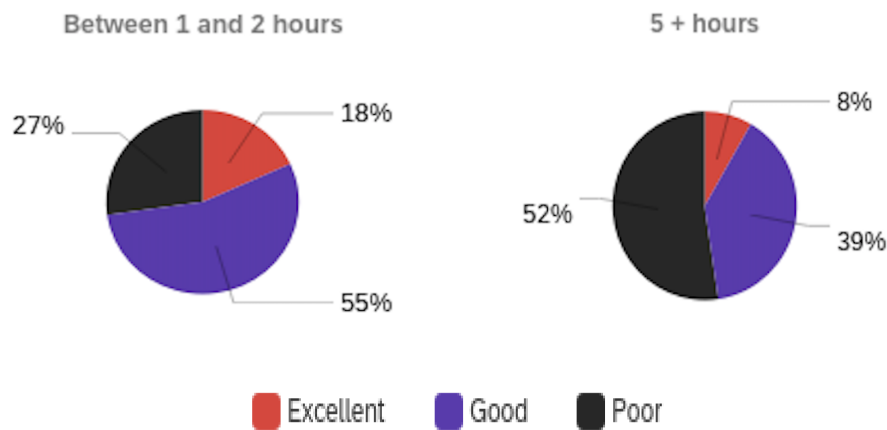


Figure 15

The relationship between poor mental health and screen time consumption is highly correlated (see figure 16), therefore overall, the relation between an increase in screen time and lower mental health seems to be confirmed.

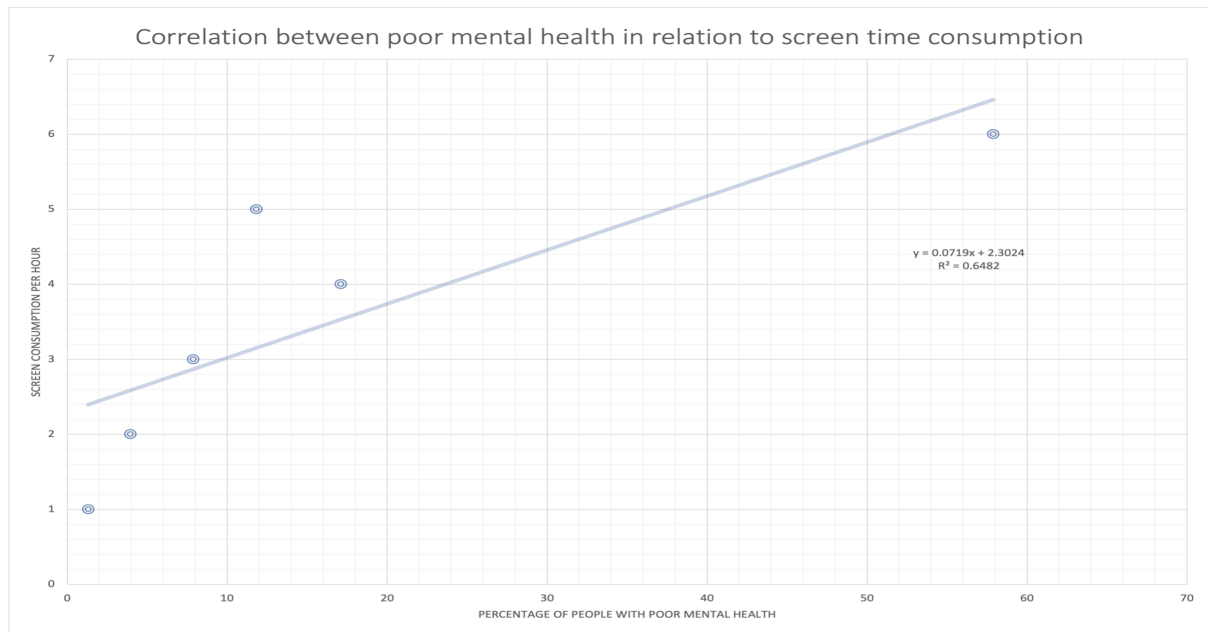


Figure 16

Fighting Fire with Fire: A Potential Recommendation

While the study has confirmed the claim that an increase in screen time (which in this case can be attributed to covid-19 restrictions), is often associated with lower mental health levels, one important finding of the survey is that it has exposed the fact that respondents are “not able to go anywhere without their phone”. This information is useful because it provides us with a tool to support mental health.

As touched upon in the previous section, since we know that a dependency seems to be developing between young people and their mobile devices, we can use mobile devices (and social media – we know for instance from our research that most respondents spend time on their phone for entertainment purposes/social media) and conduct a widespread social media campaign to a) raise awareness on the mental health services available in Essex; b) raise awareness on the impact of an increased screen time usage; c) Reduce/end the stigma surrounding mental health.

[Social media and online ad campaigns have the advantage of reaching many people within seconds of posting, at a lower cost than traditional methods.](#)

Thus, the ECC would be able to have a greater impact on improving mental health levels, and reach a greater audience at a reduced cost.

Section 3

Behavioural Manifestations of Mental Health in Foster Care

During the pandemic there has been a significant increase of teenagers put into emergency placements in Essex. The impact of the pandemic on the mental health of the foster care population has manifested in negative reactions, such as self-destruction and aggressive behaviour. Broadly, these consequences can be attributed to the restriction of physical interaction with biological families and general life. Existing data shows that 51% of communication was ‘by phone or video’, as shown in figure 17.¹² Although this data is not geographically bound to Essex, it is useful information that depicts the strain COVID-19 measures has put on physical communication with biological families. Substituting communication on virtual platforms does not fully compensate for physical interaction. It is important to bring the foster population to the forefront because generally they are “unseen” although they do make up the youth population in Essex too. Based on 7 interviews with social workers, and foster parents in Essex, the barriers of COVID-19 measures preventing interactions with biological families has accentuated pre-existing behavioural, and mental health conditions.

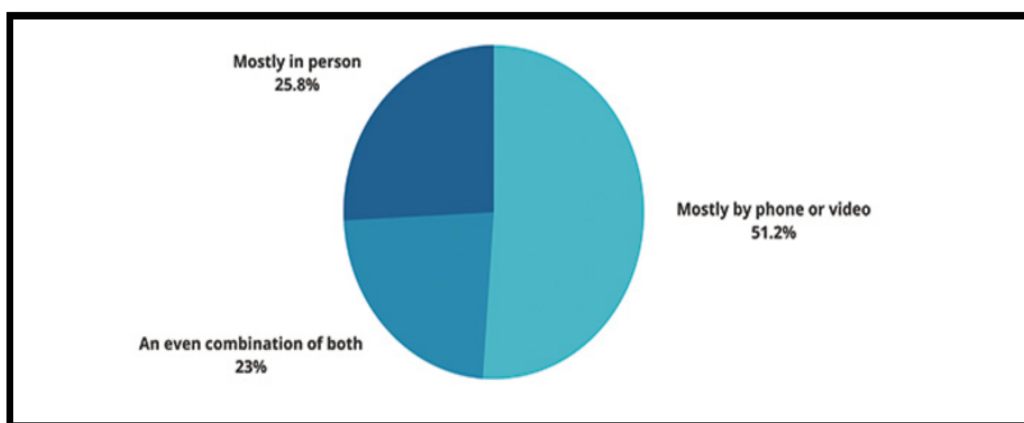


Figure 17: Diagram of communication between Foster Care Children and Biological Families

¹² Emily Jo Wharry, *The Imprint*, (2021). One Year Later: How Foster Families are Faring in the Pandemic

The key conditions mentioned in these interviews were an increase in: anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression. These mental health conditions were present prior to COVID-19, but have been amplified resulting in detrimental behavioural consequences. These behavioural consequences have manifested in different environments, at home and school, which require professional intervention. Such behaviour can have a domino effect that could lead to further marginalisation (e.g criminalisation) of this population. To frame this, quoted below are personal experiences of foster parents and social workers throughout the pandemic.

“Outreach team have been very creative to getting children out of the house”

“On one weekend I had 24 professionals in my house to help prevent a teenager in my care from suicide”

“ The anxiety of not seeing biological family has increased aggression in the school environment”

The quotes present findings that are positive and negative occurrences in the social services of Essex. The first quote showcases ECC’s good efforts in attempting to ensure that stability is still a priority for this population. However, other quotes explicitly demonstrate how COVID-19 has exacerbated destructive behaviour that could make the foster care population more vulnerable.

Implications

COVID-19’s severe impact on mental health, coupled with separation of foster children from their biological families, has increased the demand for specialist support. Indeed, foster children are more susceptible to facing long-lasting consequences of these behaviours that will impact their education, interpersonal skills and widen the inequality

between fostered children and their peers. Furthermore, necessitating preventative action and tailored responses by social services is crucial.

Recommendations

Further inter-agency cooperation for foster children in crisis, will enable a flexible and inclusive response to be given in a developing situation. One comment by a social worker suggests increasing pre-crisis intervention, inferring that monitoring and a deeper cooperative effort between schools and social services may be required. Visibility and accessibility, addressed in the prior section, will assist in these pre-crisis interventions. An App specific for foster care children in Essex is an option to consider, to render short-term guidance for mental health and behavioural support via virtual courses, and space for journaling. This is to help priority-based systems for social care to work efficiently.

Key Takeaways for Chapter 2

Section 1:

- Families in Essex cope better in comparison to families in other counties.
- The economic hardships families face in light of the pandemic has adverse consequences on both parents and children's mental health and wellbeing.
- A parent's perception of their mental health and wellbeing significantly overlaps with their children's mental health and wellbeing.
- Support should be focused on working-class families who are just about managing, to prevent the decline of the mental health of both parents and children.

Section 2:

- Prolonged periods of isolation lead to cognitive breakdowns.
- Longer screen time has been associated with higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms.
- The particularities of the Covid-19 pandemic is that prolonged periods of isolation have been coupled with longer screen time.
- 43% of the respondents spend 5 hours or more on their phones.
- 61% of the respondents cannot imagine going anywhere without their mobile devices.
- Statistically speaking, respondents who spend 5 hours or more on their phones experience lower levels of mental health.

Section 3:

- COVID-19 measures has heightened anxiety that has increased challenging behaviour like aggression, and self-destructive acts
- Further inter-agency cooperation to catalyse fast responses to demands
- App proposal specifically for the foster care population in Essex County that can provide virtual assistance. To help mitigate the issue if high demand of referrals

References

- Andrew, A., Cattan, S., Costa-Dias, M., Farquharson, C., Kraftman, L., Krutikova, S., Phimister, A. and Sevilla, A., (2020). *Learning During The Lockdown: Real-Time Data On Children's Experiences During Home Learning*. Available at:
<https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14848> [Accessed 22 April 2021].
- Department of Education (2018) *Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2018*. Available at:
[www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/719226/Schools Pupils and their Characteristics 2018 Main Text.pdf](http://www.assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/719226/Schools_Pupils_and_their_Characteristics_2018_Main_Text.pdf) [Accessed on: May 3rd, 2021]
- Education Endowment Fund. (2021). *Summer Schools* [online] Available at:
www.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/summer-schools/ [Accessed 09 May 2021]
- Halterbeck, M., Conlon, G., Patrignani, P. and Pritchard, A., (2020). Lost Learning, Lost Earnings. *The Sutton Trust*, pp. 1-10. Available at:
www.suttontrust.com/our-research/lost-learning-lost-earnings [Accessed 23 April 2021]
- The Health Foundation. 2021. *Better Housing Is Crucial For Our Health And The COVID-19 Recovery* | *The Health Foundation*. [online] Available at:
<https://www.health.org.uk/publications/long-reads/better-housing-is-crucial-for-our-health-and-the-covid-19-recovery> [Accessed 18 January 2021].
- The Health Foundation. 2021. *Emerging Evidence On COVID-19'S Impact On Mental Health And Health Inequalities* | *The Health Foundation*. [online]

Available at:
<https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/blogs/emerging-evidence-on-covid-19s-impact-on-mental-health-and-health>> [Accessed 18 January 2021].

- Wharry E. J. (2021). *One year later: How Foster Families are Faring in the Pandemic*. Youth Services Insider. Available at: <https://imprintnews.org/coronavirus/one-year-later-how-foster-families-are-faring-in-the-pandemic/52392> [Accessed 4th May 2021]

Appendix

Table 1: Socio Economic Grouping

High SEG	Low SEG
1. Managers, Directors and Senior Officials	6. Caring, Leisure and Other Service Occupations
2. Professional Occupations	7. Sales and Customer Service Occupations
3. Associate Professional & Technical	8. Process Plant & Machine Operatives
4. Administrative & Secretarial	9. Elementary Occupations
5. Skilled Trades Occupation	Unemployed

Table 2: Sources of Data and Research

Format	Author	Observations (n)	Sampling Method
Time-Series Cross-Sectional Dataset	Lorenzo De Rosa, Taliesin Stevenson	48	N/A
Survey	Nina Lacroix & Alexandra Mountain	25	Convenience
Survey	Jennifer Hookham & Nada ElBesby	613	Diverse volunteer sample recruited via prolific
Interview	Precious Oppong-Gyimah	7	Convenience
Survey	Celia Hounsou	500	Convenience

Table 3:

	Parent's confidence in their ability to provide support				
		Very confident	Fairly confident	Not very confident	Not confident at all
Impact of parental support on child(ren) academic confidence	A lot more confident	16%	4%	1%	3%
	A little more confident	42%	34%	22%	7%
	No change	32%	46%	39%	34%
	A little less confident	4%	11%	23%	31%
	A lot less confident	1%	3%	8%	14%
	Not sure	5%	2%	8%	10%

Table 4: Breakdown of Data	Do you think the financial situation of your household is better or worse than a year ago?	
Parents Mental Health	A lot worse	A little better
A lot worse	26%	7%
Children’s Mental Health	A lot worse	A little better
A lot worse	21%	13%
	Since the beginning of the pandemic, what effect (if any) has your household’s financial situation had on the environment at home?	
Parents Mental Health	More stressful	Less stressful
A lot worse	66%	5%
Children’s Mental Health	More stressful	Less stressful
A lot worse	55%	6%

