

WE ARE CARING.

WE ARE NEWHAM.



How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected Children in Care and Care Leavers?

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this report is to evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Children in Care, Care Leavers, Foster Carers and Children’s Social Services in Newham.

This report will reflect on the various periods of lockdown experienced by the UK and will make use of central government findings and research reports conducted across the voluntary and community sector and academic research to paint the national picture. It will also reflect on how, with COVID-19 restrictions lifting and the future still uncertain, Newham could better support and meet the needs of our Children in Care and Care Leavers in order for them to live a happy and safe life in the wake of a global pandemic.

The following report and subsequent series of recommendations has been constructed using feedback transcribed from one-to-one interviews with Children in Care, Care Leavers and Foster Carers, as well as multi-agency workshops with colleagues who provide support services for these cohorts in Newham – please find more detail on the research methodology used to inform this paper on page 10.

These recommendations have been laid out in line with the eight priority areas defined in **Newham’s Corporate Parenting Strategy** (2022) and can be found on page



19 of this document. These recommendations form a sub-section of the Corporate Parenting Strategy Action Plan which provides a quarterly highlight report to the Corporate Parenting Board.

In summary, Children in Care and Care Leavers experienced many of the same challenges brought by the pandemic as their peers who are not in or leaving care.

The UK’s three lockdown periods (timeline in Figure 1 on page 6) disproportionately affected the mental health of Children in Care and Care Leavers as a result of the following factors:

CHILDREN IN CARE AND CARE LEAVERS WERE UNABLE TO SEE THEIR BIOLOGICAL FAMILY and



even sometimes siblings in person for significant periods of time. If they were able to have contact, it was over the phone or via video call.

THE TRANSITION TO VIRTUAL SUPPORT SERVICES TO SUPPORT AND SAFEGUARD THEM, as well as the increased



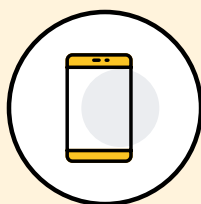
backlog of referrals for mental health support, made it extremely difficult for Children in Care and Care Leavers to access crucial support services face-to-face.

CARE LEAVERS OFTEN LIVE INDEPENDENTLY FROM A FAR YOUNGER



AGE than their peers. As a result, they were more likely to experience lockdown alone. This resulted in them having to navigate housing and financial difficulties, isolation and other challenges of lockdown without an in-person support system.

THE YOUNGEST CHILDREN IN CARE WHO WERE TOO YOUNG TO HAVE A PERSONAL MOBILE PHONE,



or access to social media accounts, struggled to keep in touch with friends during lockdown in a way that their older peers could.

CARE LEAVERS WHO EXPERIENCED ISSUES WITH THEIR ACCOMMODATION



saw increased delays organising housing repairs through their Housing Associations.

RESIDENTIAL HOMES WERE GRANTED INCREASED POWERS TO RESTRICT THE LIBERTY OF RESIDENTS



which included when they were allowed to leave the premises. This led to increased isolation amongst some of our Children in Care.

HOW HAS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AFFECTED CHILDREN IN CARE AND CARE LEAVERS?



In addition, lockdown also disproportionately impacted those who care for this Children in Care and Care Leavers. Their Social Workers, Social Care staff and their foster families, reported struggling with their mental health, feelings of isolation, burn out and feelings of overwhelm.

These challenges are also reflected in children's support services, where colleagues reported many of the same negative consequences to their mental health.

The pandemic has had a significant effect on the rate of service improvement in Children's Social Care nationally. It is therefore crucial that Local Authorities as corporate parents, do not lose momentum when it comes to service improvement. Looking forwards, a significant cultural shift is required in order:

- For all colleagues in Newham Council to recognise and understand their Corporate Parenting responsibility;
- For services to continue to evolve and adapt to new and upcoming technologies;
- To refine practice and ways of working to promote efficiency savings;
- To 'flatten' the hierarchy of Children's Social Care settings to encourage open, transparent, honest, two-way conversations around service improvement to obtain feedback from those starting their careers in social care, all the way up to senior leaders;
- For all colleagues across services supporting Children in Care and Care Leavers to understand that service improvement is everyone's responsibility. Newham's journey to excellence will only be possible if every colleague pursues excellence within their own role, team and service.

In light of these findings, it is recommended that the following additional lines of enquiry be explored further. The following themes have not yet been fully dissected as part of this research report and have been identified as areas that are likely to have an impact of service delivery and service priorities over the next few years.

Additional lines of enquiry include:

- The impact of the pandemic on the experiences of unaccompanied asylum seekers settling in Newham;
- The longer-term impact of newly qualified social workers experiencing their placement year during a global pandemic;
- The impact of the relaxation of statutory adoption laws on the adoption process and the emotional wellbeing of young children being adopted;
- The physical health impacts of the pandemic that are yet to be fully realised, e.g. the backlog of dentistry and opticians appointments for NHS patients, the potential for increased obesity rates as a result of periods of lockdown, etc.
- A more in-depth study into the experiences of Children in Care and Care Leavers in residential homes, especially with respect to the changes in statutory Social Care laws affecting residential settings.
- The additional potential longer-term impacts of the pandemic that are yet to be fully realised.

For more detail on these lines of enquiry and possible hypotheses around the importance of these key themes in Newham, please go to the 'Impact' section of this report on page 23.



2. SCOPE

This report focuses on Children in Care and Care Leavers. The definitions listed below are based on definitions from Newham's Corporate Parenting Glossary (2022).

Children in Care and Care Leavers are an extremely diverse group of young people, united only by their care experience. Even though this cohort have this life experience in common, their lived experiences of being care are also extremely diverse. It is impossible to make assumptions about this cohort of children and young people who have all experienced having the Local Authority as their Corporate Parent, but who all bring with them a wide range of life experiences and family backgrounds. As a result, it is important that we do not generalise the life experiences of this cohort and assume that one child or young person's feedback is representative of the entire community in Newham.

As a result, it is important to note that the feedback, life experiences and recommendations proposed by and shared in this paper will not be the experience of every Child in Care, Care Leaver or Foster Carer.

Feedback from interviews has been anonymised and aggregated to ensure confidentiality for all participants involved. When a direct quote from one of the one-to-one interviews is referenced, it can be found highlighted in a standalone box. Direct quotes taken from one-to-one interviews should not be taken as a generalised experience of all Children in Care, Care Leavers, Foster Carers or Newham colleagues.

Screenshots of the anonymous feedback captures as part of workshops can be found in the Appendices at the end of this report.

Children in Care

'Children in Care' are children and young people between the ages of 0 and 17 who have the Local Authority as their Corporate Parent. This means they are living away from their biological parents and live in a residential home or in a foster home, sometimes with extended family or family friends where it is possible to do so. Please note that in Newham, we use the terminology 'Children in Care' as this is what our young people prefer, rather than Looked After Children (LAC) which has been historically used.

Care Leavers

The term 'Care Leavers' refers to a young person aged between 18-25 who has transitioned out of Children in Care services, but are still provided with support from the Leaving Care service in order for them to transition to independent living, where possible, and / or transition into Adult Social Care services.



12. CHILDREN'S RESIDENTIAL HOMES



Changes to Legislation

The relaxation of The Adoption and Children Regulations 2020 from 24 April – 25 September 2020 resulted in the following changes for Children's homes:

- Ofsted inspections of children's residential homes twice annually was no longer required by law.
- Children's homes were allowed to enforce 'the deprivation of liberty' of children if they are showing symptoms of COVID-19 in accordance with the Coronavirus Act, putting children's rights at risk.

These legal changes have since been deemed 'unlawful' by the Court of Appeals (Turner, 2022), however, during the time that they were in place, they did result in challenging experiences for Children in Care and Care Leavers living in residential settings.

Newham Care Leavers in residential settings shared that their independence was significantly restricted during the pandemic and they were not allowed to go out when they wanted to according to the residential home's COVID-19 restrictions.

Care Leavers also shared that they experienced significant confusion around COVID-19 guidance and expressed that they wish they had been better communicated with around changes to COVID-19 guidelines, rules and restrictions.

Those in residential settings received a letter once a month from Ofsted which explained what the current rules were and what that meant for them. However, children and young people living in residential settings that participated in interviews shared that these letters were found to be confusing and unclear. There would have been a preference for a Social Worker to sit down with them and read through the guidance with them to clarify any confusing language. In addition, there was confusion that friends in different residential homes reported having different rules.

Those in residential settings also shared that their lockdown experience lacked deep and meaningful conversations, with staff making small talk rather than taking the time to sit and chat with residents, resulting in feelings of isolation. As part of one-to-one interviews those in residential settings shared that they wanted someone chat to in their residential homes and felt that was currently a gap in support services.

As part of this research report, the impact of COVID-19 on those in residential settings has not been fully explored and it is recommended that additional research takes place into the experiences of Newham's Children in Care and Care Leavers in residential settings during in, and in the wake of, the pandemic.



13. IMPACT



Summary

In summary, Children in Care and Care Leavers experienced many of the same challenges brought by the pandemic as their peers who are not in or leaving care.

The UK's three lockdown periods disproportionately affected the mental health of Children in Care and Care Leavers as a result of the following factors:

- Children in Care and Care Leavers were unable to see their biological family and even sometimes siblings in person for significant periods of time. If they were able to have contact, it was over the phone or via video call.
- The youngest Children in Care who were too young to have a personal mobile phone, or access to social media accounts, struggled to keep in touch with friends during lockdown in a way that their older peers could.
- The transition to virtual support services to support and safeguard them, as well as the increased backlog of referrals for mental health support, made it extremely difficult for Children in Care and Care Leavers to access crucial support services face-to-face.
- Care Leavers who experienced issues with their accommodation saw increased delays organising housing repairs through their Housing Associations.
- Care Leavers often live independently from a far younger age than their peers. As a result, they were more likely to experience lockdown alone. This resulted in them having to navigate housing and financial difficulties, isolation and other challenges of lockdown

without an in-person support system.

- Residential homes were granted increased powers to restrict the liberty of residents which included when they were allowed to leave the premises. This led to increased isolation amongst some of our Children in Care.

In addition, lockdown also disproportionately impacted those who care for this Children in Care and Care Leavers, their Social Workers, Social Care staff and their Foster families, who reported struggling with their mental health, feelings of isolation, burn out and being overwhelmed.

These challenges are also reflected in children's support services, where many services are still firefighting the backlog of support requests from the pandemic – delays which are reflected in the wait times Children in Care and Care Leavers are still experiencing to accessing the support they need from many services.

Limitations of this research report include the small sample size of Children in Care, Care Leavers and Foster Carers who were interviewed as part of this process. As a result, it is recommended that an additional feedback opportunity is made available for Children in Care, Care Leavers and Foster Carers in order to gauge how widespread the challenges detailed above are amongst our service users.

The pandemic has had a significant effect on the rate of service improvement in Children's Social Care nationally. Children's Social Care demonstrated unprecedented resilience and adaptability by transitioning almost all traditionally in-person support services to virtual delivery almost overnight.

HOW HAS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AFFECTED CHILDREN IN CARE AND CARE LEAVERS?

It is crucial Children's Social Care do not lose momentum when it comes to service improvement. Looking forwards, a significant cultural shift is required in order for services to continue to evolve and adapt to new and upcoming technologies.

Looking forwards, a significant cultural shift is required in order:

- For all colleagues in Newham Council to recognise and understand their Corporate Parenting responsibility;
- For services to continue to evolve and adapt to new and upcoming technologies;
- To refine practice and ways of working to promote efficiency savings;
- To 'flatten' the hierarchy of Children's Social Care settings to encourage open, transparent, honest, two-way conversations around service improvement from those starting their careers in social care all the way to senior leaders;
- For all colleagues across Children and Young People's services to understand that service improvement is everyone's responsibility. Newham's journey to excellence will only be possible if every colleague pursues excellence within their own role, team and service.

All colleagues that provide services for Children in Care, Care Leavers and Foster Families must acknowledge their duty to promote and actively seek out service improvement opportunities if we want to continue to improve service efficiency and efficacy at the rate that was achieved during the pandemic. It is crucial that the improved collaborative and partnership working fostered by the transition to remote working is harnessed and focused into service improvement and transformation so that we can achieve curiosity, innovation, creativity and practice excellence across services that support our Children in Care and Care Leavers.

Although the restrictions brought on by the pandemic are now, in March 2022, almost entirely removed, it is still unclear what the long term impacts of the pandemic will be on Children in Care and Care Leavers and what further restrictions may be implemented to control the spread of future waves of the pandemic. We are also unsure what the long-term effects of the pandemic will be for these cohorts as many of the long-term impacts may be still to be realised.

As a result of this research report, it is recommended that the following additional lines of enquiry be explored further:

- The impact of the pandemic on the experiences of unaccompanied asylum seekers settling in Newham, as well as on the Children's Social Care services supporting them;
 - This will be of particular importance due to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine which is likely to result in increased demand on Children's Social Care services over the coming year. Newham has the largest population of Ukrainian residents in the UK and this will likely result in a great number of Ukrainian immigrants settling within Newham as part of the Ukraine Family Scheme launched in March 2022.
- The long-term impact of newly qualified social workers experiencing their placement year during a global pandemic and whether this has impacted on the quality of practice demonstrated by these social workers and on the service and service users in the years to come;
- The impact of the relaxation of statutory adoption laws on the adoption process and the emotional wellbeing of young children being adopted;
- The physical health impacts of the pandemic that are yet to be fully realised, e.g. the backlog of dentistry and opticians appointments for NHS patients, the potential for increased obesity rates as a result of periods of lockdown, etc.
- A more in-depth study into the experiences of Children in Care and Care Leavers in residential homes, especially with respect to the changes in statutory Social Care laws affecting residential settings.
- The additional potential longer-term impacts of the pandemic that are yet to be fully realised.

14. YOU SAID, WE RECOMMEND

Below, a series of recommendations have been proposed in response to challenges shared by Children in Care, Care Leavers and Foster Carers in the wake of the pandemic.

Some of these recommendations are directly in response to suggestions from service users as part of the one-to-one feedback sessions and are not related to COVID-19, but rather to general service improvement.

The recommendations have been split into the priority areas laid out in the **Corporate Parenting Strategy** (Newham's Corporate Parenting Strategy 2022-2023, 2022) and form a subsection of the Corporate Parenting Strategy Action Plan that will present a highlight report detailing progress on the actions below to the Corporate Parenting Board every quarter. Please note that we do not have recommendations for all of the below priority areas as a result of this research.

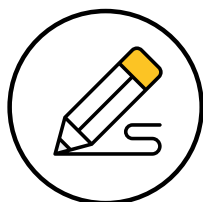
Corporate Parenting Strategy Priorities

For us to be good parents to you while you are in our care, we aim to achieve the following eight priorities fed back to us by yourselves and the trusted adults in your lives.



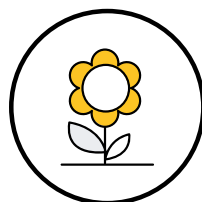
1. TRUSTED AND SAFE RELATIONSHIPS:

You feel loved, connected and safe.



2. EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING:

Hold high aspirations for you and give you the same opportunities to achieve at school, college and university as your peers where possible. Increase the number of care leavers in education, training and employment.



3. OPPORTUNITIES GROWING UP:

Being in care should be a positive experience that equips you for a successful life.



4. IDENTITY:

You have a strong sense of identity and an understanding of your care story.



5. CO-PRODUCTION:

Your life experiences are at the heart of how we design services, how we work with you and how we check if they are working well.



6. HOME & HOUSING

You will live somewhere where you feel safe and loved.



7. HEALTH AND SUPPORT:

Improve health and well-being by ensuring high quality health services and information are provided to you and your carers.



8. CARING FOR THOSE WHO CARE:

You have the opportunity to thrive through the support their carers and workers give you. Those who support you have all the resources they need to care for you to the best of their ability, know that we appreciate them and feel supported by Newham Council.

You Said, We Recommend

1. TRUSTED AND SAFE RELATIONSHIPS:



You said:



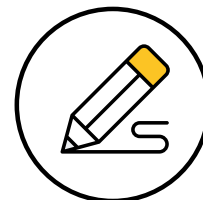
Some service users responded better to virtual support services.

I am not kept in the loop with things my Social Worker promised they would do. They don't follow up on actions or let me know if there are delays in getting back to me.

We recommend:

1. Newham offers service users the option to have a hybrid approach to support services where possible and appropriate. Service users will be able to receive a mixture of in-person and remote interventions and services that meet their needs and do not result in any additional safeguarding risk for the child or young person.
2. The creation of a template for Social Workers and Personal Advisers to use to send service users after every visit that details a summary of discussion, list of actions and timescales.

2. EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND TRAINING:



You said:



The Virtual School Bulletin doesn't look very engaging so I don't look at it very often.

I would like to find voluntary experience, but don't know how to organise this.

I would like help applying for jobs, writing my CV and with interview skills.

The training you do when you leave care isn't very detailed and could cover more relevant topics, e.g. information on loans, your credit score, etc.

We recommend:

1. Rebranding the Virtual School Bulletin to make it more engaging, dynamic and age appropriate for Care Leavers.
2. For Care Leavers in Higher Education, where we can offer them appropriate work experience for their chosen career path, we should aim to do so.
3. Promote and raise awareness with service users about the Virtual School's workshops that support with employability skills and raise awareness with Personal Advisers on how to refer young people onto this training.
4. Review the training and awareness-raising Children in Care receive during their transition to Leaving Care to refine the content according to what young people wish they had known before they left care.

5. CO-PRODUCTION:

You said:



When people ask us for feedback, they don't tell us what they do with our feedback and what the results were.

We recommend:

1. The development of guidance for co-production with Children in Care and Care Leavers in partnership with Youth Empowerment colleagues. This document will detail the service's expectations of colleagues who consult service users, including outlining our expectations that colleagues report back to participants on how their feedback has been used and what changes have been made as a result of their participation in feedback sessions.

6. HOME & HOUSING

You said:



My friends and I get notices to say my rent is overdue, but Leaving Care is supposed to pay my rent.

When I have problems with my flat, it's impossible to get a hold of the housing association for them to fix it.

We recommend:

1. Newham reviews the process through which Leaving Care accommodation is paid to avoid Care Leavers receiving notices regarding overdue bills to their property which may lead to unnecessary stress and anxiety.
2. Reviewing the escalation process for Care Leavers who experience difficulties organising housing repairs and challenges with their housing association.
3. Conducting an additional feedback opportunity for Children in Care, Care Leavers and Foster Carers to gauge how widespread the challenges detailed in this report are amongst our service users.

7. HEALTH AND SUPPORT:



You said:



I have been trying to organise my free gym membership my Personal Adviser doesn't know how to organise this for me.

I would like more support for my mental health.

We recommend:

1. Creating a clear and concise pdf pack of health benefits you are entitled to as a Child in Care, Care Leaver or Foster Carer.
2. Make sure that all Care Leavers and Personal Advisers are aware of the Emotional Health and Wellbeing Specialist Nurse role that has been introduced for Care Leavers and how to refer to them for mental health support.
3. Reviewing the escalation process for Children in Care and Care Leavers who experience delays obtaining mental health support.

8. CARING FOR THOSE WHO CARE:



You said:

We don't often consider the biological families of Foster Carers who also sacrifice a lot to welcome a foster child into their home.

Foster Carer appreciation events have stopped. The Foster Carer Support Group organises all the fun events for the young people and their families themselves.

It would have been helpful to hear about updates in COVID-19 guidance from Newham so we knew what news to believe.

We have to do 4 compulsory trainings a year and they aren't always relevant, e.g. how to set up your work station when working from home. I would like training specific to my child's needs.

Newham gave us a deadline to complete our compulsory training and threatened to cut our allowance if we didn't do it, even though we were in a pandemic and life was already extremely stressful.

We seldom hear from management that they acknowledge how difficult the pandemic was for us Foster Carers.

We recommend:

1. Re-introducing appreciation events for Foster Carers and their biological families.
2. Working with the Foster Carers' Support Group to put on a series of fun excursions and appreciation activities.
3. Creating a safe and non-judgemental space for the biological families to vent and share any frustrations around their family life.
4. Offering Foster Carers the chance to join Public Health's distribution list for reliable and accurate COVID-19 updates.
5. Obtaining feedback from Foster Carers on what training they would like to receive and aim to offer different training according to need.

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For any queries regarding support for Children in Care and Care Leavers, please visit our Local Offer site at <https://families.newham.gov.uk/kb5/newham/directory/advice.page?familychannel=9&id=WaKyz0vmK0M> or email our monitored mailbox at PersonalAdvisers@newham.gov.uk