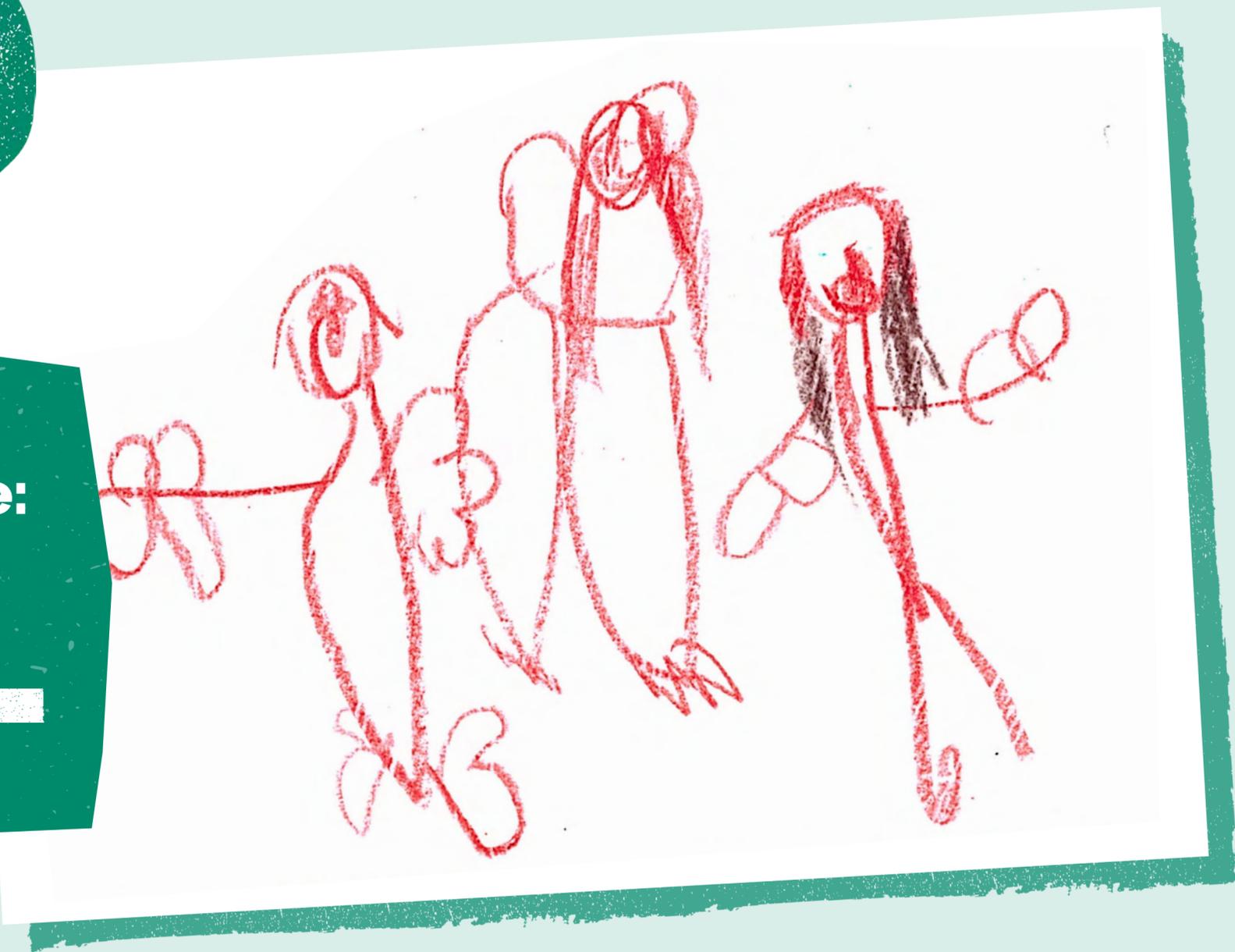


VOICES

SUMMARY VERSION — Covid disruption and the resource divide: interim evidence from children and young people in the North East

Full report and project details available at: www.voicesproject.co.uk



Introduction

VOICES is a joint research project by Children North East and Newcastle University. We use a co-production approach to find out what children and young people's lives are like now, to share this with policy leaders and practitioners in organisations across our region. We have a particular focus on 5-18 year olds living in poverty: understanding their needs has always been a serious knowledge gap for policymakers, and has been made worse by Covid19. This research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), as part of UK Research and Innovation's rapid response to Covid-19.

VOICES is distinct as a research project in three areas. Firstly we put children and young people at the centre both in terms of their views and also by involving young people in consulting on our methods. Secondly our work is co-produced by researchers from Children North East and Newcastle University working together on an equal basis, developing methods together, sharing decision-making and respecting what everyone brings to the team. Finally, VOICES emphasises the need for policymakers to listen to and act on children and young people's views. Much research time goes into working with organisations that provide services for and with young people so that changes in policy and practice can happen as a response to what children and young people are saying.

Our subsequent reports will focus on findings from our region-wide consultation, including longitudinal and creative work with targeted groups. Our aim is to reach over 1000 children and young people. We will provide a policy briefing to advance conversations with policymakers at organisational, regional, and national level, and equally will provide creative briefings that communicate our findings to children and young people. Our work with organisations will aim to encourage change in specific areas in response to our findings and in response to particular organisations' direct engagement with young people.

Methods

This pilot phase of VOICES presents primary research with a total of 180 children and young people in Durham, Newcastle, North Tyneside, and Sunderland. 147 children took part as a first cohort in our ongoing VOICES North East regionwide consultation, of whom 28 completed our drawing or writing challenge and 119 took part in our focus groups.



Infant School Pupil, Year 2

This report also includes primary research with a smaller cohort of 33 children through Children North East's Poverty Proofing Covid Response. VOICES participants were invited to complete phase 1 consultation packs to share their experiences by either drawing a picture or writing words in response to the following three questions: What has been a challenge recently? What has been good recently? What is important to children and young people now? School and community groups were invited to take part in phase 2 focus group discussions structured around themes identified from our review of recent literature: wellbeing, culture and leisure, home and housing, transport, school, digital world, and relationships. Focus groups were initially offered as a choice of either video calls or socially distanced conversations; during periods of lockdown this was only as video calls.

All data was collected between 1 June and 31 December 2020. Phase 1 consultation packs were delivered during school holidays after the first lockdown. Most of the phase 2 VOICES focus groups were carried out in December 2020. The Poverty Proofing Covid Response focus groups were carried during the first national lockdown.

The data from VOICES pilot phases 1 and 2 and from the Poverty Proofing Covid Response groups were put together for the purposes of analysis to identify what themes emerged. Within VOICES phases 1 and 2, approximately three quarters of children (112 of 147) were from organisations that we classified as providing core data and approximately one quarter (35 of 147) were from organisations providing comparator data. Core organisations were those where a high proportion of their intake were eligible for FSM and/or that served areas with high disadvantage indicators.

Findings

The following table summarises our key findings and suggests implications for policymakers. We emphasise that these are interim findings from the pilot cohort of our ongoing VOICES consultation, and as yet are based on a small number of participants across four of the twelve North East Local Authorities.

Our 3 priorities for action from these interim findings are:

- confidence in using transport
- support from employers about employment and futures
- a focus on social interaction (and play) in catch-up or in opportunities offered to children and young people

Summary of findings	Implications and recommendations for policymakers
<p>Children and young people were largely positive about the return to school, and were particularly pleased to see friends again. However, a few had liked not having to attend school.</p>	<p>The importance of children and young people having access to the social aspects of learning and the school community cannot be underestimated. Policy and decision makers should not just focus on 'catch-up' learning, but include social considerations in their planning for post-lockdown school and extra-curricular provision, for example by focusing on group and project work, forest schooling and out of school sport, cultural and play-based activities.</p>
<p>Children and young people were largely negative about the experience of online learning and it posed a number of challenges: access (due to lack of devices, data or internet connection); finding somewhere to work at home; the work set was either boring or revision; and the lack of timely help from a teacher was frustrating.</p>	<p>As schools continue to make use of online learning, policy and decision makers should pay particular attention to the quality of what is provided, and the ability of disadvantaged pupils to fully participate in this form of learning/education. This includes both strategic level decisions about the provision of devices and online learning platforms, and the need to engage with pupils remotely without highlighting social and economic disparities in their home lives.</p>

Summary of findings	Implications and recommendations for policymakers
<p>Children and young people largely accepted the measures taken to make schools more Covid-secure, but these caused stress as so much was different and familiar friends/teachers might not be in the same bubble. Children were also having to deal with continual change in Covid-19 measures, with many constantly moving from being in school to online learning from home.</p>	<p>The measures taken by schools in particular, but also by other organisations, need fuller explanations given to children and young people. Decisions about the implementation and lifting of Covid-19 measures should include conversations with children and young people, so that they are seen as active participants within this process, perhaps involving student representative structures.</p>
<p>Ritual and celebration milestones have been cancelled or changed and this has been difficult for children and young people. This includes primary/secondary transition, leaving a teacher at the end of the year and leaving school. Children living in poverty are likely to have missed out even more.</p>	<p>Schools and other organisations working with children and young people need to make sure that key points in time are celebrated and use more inclusive 'poverty proofed' approaches to doing this.</p>
<p>On the return to school, lunch options were often more restricted with some providers now not offering a hot meal.</p>	<p>Whilst lunchtime provision has now improved in many schools, the Department for Education, Local Authorities and schools should work together to overcome any remaining barriers to providing a full lunch offer, including hot meals (particularly as increasing numbers of families face financial difficulties and may rely on schools providing a hot, balanced meal for children).</p>
<p>Lockdown had provided children and young people with the opportunity to engage in online gaming and the use of social media platforms, including YouTube and TikTok, which they valued as a social space.</p>	<p>Organisations working with children and young people need to acknowledge that young people's time online (particularly social media and gaming) includes new forms of meaningful social interaction, as well as opportunities for learning new skills.</p>
<p>There was an overwhelming wish to see friends and family face to face.</p>	<p>All organisations working with children and young people should work to facilitate as many opportunities as possible for face-to-face engagement and activities – particularly with other children and young people – including outside of school.</p>
<p>Children and young people were largely negative about the impact of lockdown on their physical health and eating habits, but a minority of children's exercise, health and opportunities to eat healthily had improved. There was overwhelming concern about Covid-19, getting ill or those close to them becoming ill.</p>	<p>All organisations working with children and young people, including schools and local authorities, should ensure there are a variety of opportunities to access affordable exercise and leisure facilities, with additional funding provided by central government to support this. This should include making the 2021 Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme as inclusive and far-reaching as possible.</p>

Summary of findings	Implications and recommendations for policymakers
<p>Although children and young people’s opportunities to do things they would usually enjoy were very much curtailed, many had enjoyed learning new things at home (riding a bike, cooking) but there was also a frustration that this was limited to the home.</p>	<p>There needs to be greater recognition in policy of the resource divide, not just the digital divide. Policymakers must constantly ask ‘Where are the opportunities for families that don’t have the resources?’.</p>
<p>Children and young people were highly aware of many of the government’s Covid-19 rules, and followed them - but were also aware of and frustrated by inconsistencies, such as being able to sit next to a friend at school but not being able to see them at home.</p>	<p>Policymakers, the media, and organisations working with children and young people should recognise and celebrate how they have contributed to the fight against Covid-19 by following the rules.</p>
<p>There was universal anxiety about the safety of public transport due to difficulties in following social distancing rules and passengers not wearing masks.</p>	<p>Public transport providers – particularly bus operators – should take action on specific issues and undertake targeted engagement with young people so that they can feel safe and confident again about using public transport. We have begun working with some public transport providers on this issue.</p>
<p>Older children and young people had concerns about access to future employment opportunities, as well as about their parents’ employment.</p>	<p>Regional employers’ organisations and strategic public bodies (e.g. LEPs and Combined Authorities) should undertake targeted engagement with children and young people, to build confidence that they have employment opportunities and a positive future in our region.</p>
<p>The main themes as above were found in the responses of all children and young people whether from core or comparator organisations.</p> <p>However, children and young people’s access to material resources played a key role in the potential to limit or alleviate many of their concerns and frustrations. This included space at home and digital devices for learning, the provision of alternative ways to get to school to avoid public transport etc.</p>	<p>There is a resource divide that can affect all aspects of children and young people’s social development, learning and ability to fully participate in society. This resource divide existed before Covid-19, and has been both highlighted and exacerbated by the pandemic. Organisations must be aware of the immediate and longer-term impacts that poverty has on children and young people’s lives – and the particular impact that Covid-19 has had on the most disadvantaged children and young people – with place-based policy approaches focussed on addressing this.</p> <p>Organisations must also work to ensure that their staff develop awareness of how poverty impacts their work with children, young people and families.</p>

What happens next?

This first interim VOICES report aims to ensure that children and young peoples' experiences are shared with policymakers. It is particularly clear that children and young people living in poverty – whether before Covid19, or due to changes in household circumstances – are having a rough time, and for social and economic reasons are excluded from many of the positive points their classmates are enjoying during an unprecedented period of change. Though our interim findings and recommendations include some clear calls to action, we ask policymakers to equally take note of the more long term, complex, and emergent issues we have highlighted.

This is the first interim report from VOICES as a project that began in November 2020 and is funded until May 2022. This report sets the scene about the lives of children and young people across the North East, drawing together a baseline for our ongoing research and starting to indicate the long-term issues and decisions that affect the present and future of young lives. Our subsequent reports will focus on findings from our regionwide consultation, including longitudinal work with targeted groups. We will provide a policy briefing to advance conversations with policymakers at organisational, regional, and national level, and equally will provide creative briefings that communicate our findings to children and young people. We have already started working with a wider advisory group on a strategy for enabling action as a response to the voices of children and young people.

Our approach is to select a small number of key actions and work with targeted groups of policy makers and practitioners, putting them directly in touch with some of the young people we have spoken to. Our aim is to encourage those who work with or provide services for children to listen, engage in dialogue, and respond.

We thank all the participants in VOICES. Our reach includes Northumberland, Newcastle, North Tyneside, South Tyneside, Gateshead, Sunderland, Durham, Hartlepool, Darlington, Stockton-on-Tees, Middlesbrough, and Redcar & Cleveland. This first interim report shared pilot findings across multiple Local Authorities at a point when VOICES is still building capacity across the region. Our work with children and young people is delivered with partner organisations including: schools, colleges, sports teams, training providers, local authorities, play schemes, and youth groups. For a current list of project partner organisations please see our website: www.voicesproject.co.uk.