VOICES

I found it hard that i couldn't go see family and my friends.

my cousin's house

My nana's house

My house

VOICES. Children and young people's
lives in and through Covid-19.
Words, drawings and actions.
Full report on findings. October 2022

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Children North East — Because growing up can be hard

Newcastle University

UKRI — Economic and Social Research Council

Acknowledgments

Contents

Introduction

VOICES addresses a serious knowledge gap in the understanding of the needs of children and young people aged 5-18 living in poverty in the context of Covid-19. It is co-produced by researchers from Children North East and Newcastle University.
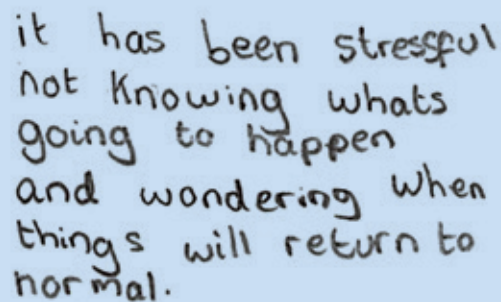
Children and young people have been demonstrably affected by the negative impacts of the pandemic, and this is particularly the case for those living in poverty. Society owes it to them to step up.

We spoke to almost 2,000 children who told us in detail how their lives had changed as a result of Covid-19. They talked to us about issues that included family life, school, friendship and transport. Their responses are funny, heart breaking, eye opening and essential reading.

Our main research took place whilst many restrictions on social contact were in place during the pandemic. The fact that by the time we finished most restrictions were lifting by no means lessens the validity of our recommendations. Covid-19 outbreaks have continued and are forecast to recur for the foreseeable future with a real possibility of such restrictions being imposed again. The experiences of children and young people as described in this report mean there can be no return to a pre-pandemic "normal".

We engaged with 1780 children and young people aged 5-18 coming from each local authority in North East England. This encompasses Darlington, Durham, Gateshead, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland, Redcar & Cleveland, South Tyneside, Stockton-on-Tees and Sunderland.

The majority came from some of the most deprived UK neighbourhoods[2] and from schools in which free school meals' eligibility varied from 35% to 65%, which is considerably above the national average (17.3% in 2020, 20.8% in 2021, 22.5% in 2022). We sought to reach children from diverse backgrounds. We spoke to some affluent groups, young people who were care experienced, those attending a pupil referral unit, young people from a religious school, a council youth cabinet, many youth groups run by local authorities or charities to cater for children with a range of needs and interests, a housing association group in which young people range from seven to 16 years' old, and those from Black and global majority backgrounds. All Images and quotes in this report are from children and young people in the project.

it has been stressful not knowing whats going to happen and wondering when things will return to normal.

[1] See project website for other reports, videos and comics: https://www.voicesproject.co.uk/

[2] The majority came from the 20% most deprived of neighbourhoods in England, referred to as the lower layer super output (LSOA) areas, calculated by combining data on income, employment, health, education, crime, housing and living environment.

Methods

Co-production. Co-production is working together with mutual respect for each other's contribution to design, create and deliver research or services. Children North East and Newcastle University co-produced this research from the start, designing the project together and discussing every research decision. We co-produced action cycles about transport, employment and health with children and young people and engaged them in decisions about some of the research methods. Our co-produced methods and findings provide exemplary insight for other regions across the UK and for co-produced research internationally.

Methods. We carried out focus groups and particularly invited creative expression in the form of drawings, writing, comics and short videos. As findings emerged, we carried out action cycles. To do so, we worked with children and young people to meet stakeholders in targeted areas in order to seek changes in practice and policy. Our fieldwork started in October 2020 and ended in July 2022. Some children took part in more than one activity. The quotations, drawings and comics in this report are from children and young people aged five to 18 who took part in this project.

Focus groups. Discussions took the form of semi-structured conversations, centred around a number of open questions and led, as far as possible, by the children and young people. The conversations were based around the following themes: health and wellbeing, social issues, culture and leisure, the digital world, home and housing, relationships, school, and transport. Groups could include up to 17 people. The smallest group consisted of only two people, and most were of six to eight. All groups had a teacher, teaching assistant or youth worker present. We returned to a small number of organisations for follow-up focus groups. Approximately a third of the focus groups took place online and two thirds in person. Most online groups involved speaking and a small number involved interaction by writing in the chat function of the online system.

Drawing, writing and comics. We sent out research packs to schools and youth organisations for children and young people. These included three prompts: to draw or write about something (a) they had found good about life recently, (b) they had found difficult about life recently, or (c) was important to them now. Three different comic artists produced comics from our findings and worked with children and young people in some of our focus groups to facilitate further responses to Covid-19 in comic and video form.

Who we engaged with. We received 2231 drawings and pieces of writing from 745 children from 15 organisations. Most children responded to each of our three prompts. We carried out online and face-to-face focus groups with 1177 children and young people from 71 organisations. The organisations included primary schools, secondary schools, colleges, youth groups, community organisations and regional groups run by local authorities. Comic artists worked in six of the focus group organisations with 70 children and young people from two primary schools, a secondary school, a college and two youth clubs, to produce comics and videos that expressed experiences and views in response to Covid-19.

Action cycles. VOICES provided practitioners and policy makers with information about the lived experiences of children and young people during Covid-19. We worked with more than 30 young people on the key themes from the research: employment, transport, health and digital activities to take actions to practitioners and policy makers. We first had conversations with young people in their schools, colleges and youth groups to agree priorities, and then some researchers and young people had a number of meetings with relevant stakeholders. Many organisations engaged with us and with the young people, including regional bus and Metro companies, the CBI, North East LEP, the National Citizens Service, the NE Chamber of Commerce, the TUC, Sunderland Software City and a number of local employers. Some of our project recommendations in these areas were therefore produced by the particular young people involved in the action cycles. On the other key themes of mental health, social interaction and education we held and attended webinars with stakeholders and academics.

Timing of VOICES. See timeline in Appendix 1. Our engagement with children and young people began with focus groups in October 2020 and ended in July 2022 with our final discussions with the TUC and CBI about employment. Through this period, the context of the pandemic was always changing. Our first phase of focus groups and drawings from October 2020 happened when schools had opened up after the first lockdown. Schools were open to all, but the restrictions were changing. Our second phase took place from January 2021 as the third lockdown happened, and schools were closed to all but those classed as vulnerable or from key worker families. Almost all our phase 2 focus groups took place online. Our third phase took place from April 2021 as many social restrictions were lifting, children returned to school and our focus groups took place in person. Phase 4 from September 2021 to July 2022 was characterised by the further easing of restrictions. In addition to some return focus groups, this was the time when comic artists worked with children and young people to produce further visual expressions of their experience of Covid-19. This included comics, word clouds, posters and TikTok videos.

Summary of findings

Covid-19 has had a reach into every aspect of the lives of children and young people. One of the most striking of our findings was the range of things children wanted to talk about. In their experience, Covid-19 had changed everything for them. We heard about extremes of experience, and it was most notable how different children's lives had been throughout the pandemic. There were many poignant conversations. A young person whom we spoke to in a youth club said: 'I miss memories'.

Relationships

Contact with friends and family was overwhelmingly what was most important to children and young people. Being reunited with friends and teachers was what was best about going back to school. Missing friends and family was what children and young people found most difficult about the times in lockdown. Seeing friends and family and seeing their teachers in person made life good again. Relationships were the subject of very many of the pictures drawn by children and young people.

Many commented positively on more time with close family, and often this was associated with having time at home and with activities they were now doing.

By contrast, for many the pandemic has strained family relationships, which has been very difficult for children and young people. Children in care had even more strains on their family ties. Some young people started dating or maintained close personal relationships with additional stress due to Covid-19.

Loss was a common theme. It was a very common experience to miss those members of their family whom they could not see, and a great number drew and wrote that they missed grandparents. They worried about close family members catching Covid-19. In one focus group, several children had family members in other countries affected by ill health and death from Covid-19.

The importance of relationships came up in all other themes in this project.

Education at home and at school

Consistently throughout all periods of lockdown children and young people missed school. Education throughout Covid-19 was reported as a confusing and interrupted experience.

Home learning. Children talked of the many challenges of engaging in schoolwork at home (missing teachers and friends, finding work boring or confusing, lacking technology or space, having no one to help, there being too many distractions).

A few enjoyed more relaxed learning or the chance to get up late.

Being in school as part of the small group of vulnerable children or those of key workers was a great experience for some but strange for most.

Return to school. What children and young people overwhelmingly valued when they returned to school in April 2021 was contact with their friends, the support of their teachers and the structure of the school day.

Although the response was largely positive, the social restrictions in place at schools and colleges, the continued changes in the rules they had to respond to, and the frequent requirement to socially isolate brought many stresses. The usual school day structure and rituals of school life, such as assemblies and end of school trips, were noticeable in the extent to which they were missed. Children found the transition from primary to secondary school very difficult and said that the whole year felt like a transition year because of Covid-19.

Children and young people view schools as more than just places to do school work. They valued the emotional support they found there, efforts teachers went to in order to help their return to school, out of school activities

Planning for future lives. There was great uncertainty about what the exam arrangements would be, great concern about the need to catch up, increased work and school tests, worry about not being able to complete practical or vocational aspects of courses and concern about whether they would manage the next level of education.
Covid-19 brought more insecurities about the future. Many were leaning towards taking safe options for their post-16 destinations and it seems likely that, for some, this would mean limiting their career aspirations.

When planning for their futures in vocational and academic courses, young people did not have access to the level of support they had been anticipating, such as visit days and careers education.

Work opportunities. Most young people have had difficulties finding part-time work necessary for their present and future lives. They had concerns about jobs being hard to get, employers wanting experience or – conversely – taking on people with dangerously little experience, their lack of experience because placements had been cancelled, and the consequent lack of disposable income.

Health and wellbeing

The pandemic has had a profound and often negative impact on physical and mental health. Many have taken steps to do what they can to reduce the impact. There was a predominant experience of boredom, anxiety about the future, and concern about when or whether things would change. Sleeping, eating and physical exercise have all been impacted. Some spoke of staying physically active, but many had been far less active than usual.

By contrast, for some it was a welcome time to slow down and learn to enjoy their own company. Many children were aware of the connection between different areas of health and other parts of their lives. They were finding ways to cope.

The importance of the support that schools and community organisations can offer children's health was apparent from children's responses.

Some felt a sense of wellbeing from having survived the pandemic. There was a sense both of challenge, of self-knowledge, of surviving and of what this told them about themselves that could be of use to them in the future.

Activities

Not being able to do preferred activities, including religious observances, brought boredom and some negative feelings. There was a sense of frustration at trying online versions of activities but finding that online dancing, drama or gymnastics lessons, for example, were not possible. They worried about whether they would be physically able to resume the same activities in the future and about the possible impact on future opportunities. Some children and young people, however, had not previously participated in activities that they might now miss.

In contrast, many children and young people reported taking up new enjoyable activities during lockdown and/or having more time for existing interests. These included: doing art and craft, learning to cook, walking more, running, going on bike rides, drawing, reading to

a sibling, being more into clothes and fashion, having new pets, doing DIY and gardening, playing computer games, playing football, reading, climbing, eating more pancakes and making videos.

All children and young people from one community group mentioned how important the activities organised within the community were in terms of culture and leisure.

Inequalities

Material circumstances had an impact on how children and young people experienced Covid-19.

There were problems in access to digital devices and space at home. The digital divide is still gaping, and it was left to schools to give out many resources from their own funds. Activities children and young people engaged in had financial costs that were a problem for some and not others. Some children were taken places by car to avoid being close to people on public transport. But this was not an option for others

Comments from many groups suggested material changes in household circumstances. There was mention of eating less and walking more because of reduced household income.

We heard from several groups in disadvantaged areas about the positive impact on them during Covid-19 of services, activities and resources that they and their families were able to access at times during the pandemic. This included play activities during the summer, help with food, and access to digital resources. They received this help from a variety of sources, including community centres, schools and youth organisations.

Digital lives

Throughout the pandemic and particularly during lockdowns, children and young people reported a large increase in their time spent using digital devices for leisure purposes and communication. They commonly enjoyed this increase. They used a variety of games, social platforms and ways of connecting with friends and family.

Some young people were aware of the safety aspects of online platforms, which included bullying, the risks in talking to people they did not know, seeing disturbing images or hearing swear words.

Some spoke of a lack of understanding from adults about what digital activities mean for young people.

Transport

Travelling on public transport was stressful and challenging. Public transport had previously been a source of enjoyment and of independence. In the early stages of the pandemic, children and young people were concerned about mixing with others on public transport. However, they were also concerned about too few people being permitted to take a bus, and whether, as a consequence, they would be made to wait for the next bus.

There was great concern about the cost of public transport for older young people who wanted reduced fares due to the impact these costs had on their access to education, work and independent lives more generally.

Covid-19 and the wider world

Children and young people's lives have become more politicised in the pandemic than ever before. By this, we mean that they have seen themselves (as a group) the subject of news broadcasts far more than before. And they have been aware of announcements and debates about Covid-19 rules. They have had questions and opinions.

They thought a lot about what they were hearing or reading about the efforts to stop the pandemic. They heard about what was being said about the wider societal impact of the pandemic.

They observed the actions of adults and other young people around them, who were either following or breaking the rules and they had views about this.

Hypocrisy of those in power was something that was mentioned frequently by children and young people, who felt that rules should apply to all. Legal changes to the rules about social interaction were taken extremely seriously by children and young people whom we spoke with.

Many young people felt that they were being unfairly blamed for the spread of the pandemic. Children and young people were also confused by the rules. Some had strong views on the actions the authorities should be taking.

The Black Lives Matter movement found new urgency in the pandemic and was mentioned by some groups, as was children's own experience of racism.

Varied views were expressed about the Covid-19 vaccine, and many were worried about it, but for very

different reasons, such as whether it would work, whether it was safe and how soon they could have it. Many had great uncertainties about the future and whether the pandemic would ever end.

Children and young people saw the positive impact on society of people's responses to the pandemic. They liked the mutual aid activity and other community supports, such as provided by local charities and community centres.

Taking stock

We spoke to a few groups in 2022 when things were easing a lot, life was starting again, and everything was opening up. There was such a variety of possibilities and concerns on their minds, from wanting to preserve the time they had found with families to taking their lives forward. They wanted everyone to have access to the vaccine and for lockdown to be a thing of the past. They thought about tackling racism and giving to people who have less.

Resilience

For many children and young people, the lockdowns had given them a different outlook. Covid-19 was a challenge they had overcome that proved they could adapt, cope and survive. Many had learnt much about themselves that was useful to them.

These are comics designed by children and young people with the comic artists Sara Qaed (top) and Lily Daniels (bottom) and the research team. The top comic came from a workshop with children in a primary school in Newcastle and the bottom from a secondary school in Northumberland.

Recommendations

Children and young people have been noticeably affected by the adverse impacts of the pandemic. Addressing the concerns raised in **VOICES** is the responsibility of everyone - the government, communities, educational institutions, local authorities, companies, unions, the voluntary and private sectors. There is no return to a pre-pandemic normal.

Our recommendations for investment in specific provisions, services and in research should be co-produced and co-designed with all stakeholders including children and young people. Our project and its findings has demonstrated the value of this way of working. Children and young people are well able to co-produce appropriate services and research as long as they are doing this with skilled practitioners.

Research

1. The long term impact of Covid-19 on all aspects of the lives of children and young people should be investigated through research over the coming months and years.

2. The online learning experience has intensified the move to digital education and working. Research is needed into what worked well in home learning, what are good online learning practices, and what to avoid doing.

3. Children and young people's use of digital devices for leisure, communication and learning since the start of Covid-19 should be investigated through research. This should include looking at what children do, enjoy and learn and ways they approach online safety.

Services for children and young people including schools and colleges

4. Staff in organisations working with children and young people should be mindful of the long term impact of Covid-19 on everyone. Staff should consult with children and young people to consider in what ways they need to 'catch-up' looking holistically at children's lives, not just curriculum and learning.

5. Children and young people need help with well-being including aspects of social and mental health. A range of different kinds of non-stigmatising support should be available to them including enabling access to good quality information.

6. A new digital curriculum for schools and colleges should be developed that builds on what children and young people enjoy about the digital world, develops skills, teaches enhanced digital safety and opens up the digital world further in terms of its potential in employment, wellbeing and leisure.

Policy and funding

7. It is clear that the pandemic has exacerbated longstanding inequalities for children and young people in the North East and further reduced opportunities for those with low and inadequate family incomes. This makes decisive action to end child poverty at all levels of government more pressing than ever.

8. Schools and colleges need adequate funding to address the varied, complex and multiple social, learning and attainment needs of children and young people. Cut-backs in school budgets should be fixed.

9. Inadequacies in the current government catch-up programme for lost learning should be remedied.

10. The central role that schools and colleges play in all aspects of children's lives should be recognised by providing transformative investment in comprehensive school-community initiatives such as children's communities and extended schools.

11. Activities, clubs and experiences need to be made accessible for all children, with a specific focus on targeting children without financial resource to currently access these opportunities.

12. National action including investment is needed to address the digital divide based on differential economic resources. All children and young people need free access to digital devices and WIFI/broadband.

13. An employment youth charter is needed. It should attract young employees by: giving them full on-the-job training; providing open communication about expectations; opening up the job market to young people who do not have appropriate devices/broadband and resources for home working; and treating young people with kindness in supporting them into the workplace.

14. Transport providers need to ensure fair access to public transport for all children and young people. Specific requirements are discounted tickets for young people across all transport providers and clear communication with them about ticketing.

VOICES: Full findings

Introduction

In March 2020 the UK started to undergo a series of legally imposed social restrictions in response to Covid-19 which included school closures and implications for the operation of schools when open. Soon after this, Liz Todd, Lydia Wysocki and Lucy Tiplady from Newcastle University started meeting online with Luke Bramhall and colleagues from Children North East involved in poverty proofing[1], and with Amanda Bailey from the North East Child Poverty Commission, to talk about how we could respond to the pandemic. Children North East had started delivering resource packs to families throughout the North East, containing drawing and writing materials and games. Newcastle University researchers were amongst those helping to locate resources for the packs. We then started to talk about how we could use our research skills to respond usefully to the situation that we were all subject to. We were joined by Cathryn Gathercole, Suzanne Butler and Gwen Dalziel. These conversations led eventually to VOICES.

As the pandemic unfolded, it became clear that organisations catering for and working with children and young people were trying to adapt very quickly to different ways of doing things. It was not easy for people working in those organisations to spend time listening to children as the same time as adapting their services. Children and young people have a right to be heard and consulted about decisions that affect their lives. We saw a role for ourselves to provide opportunities for children and young people to be heard. We wanted to support children to take their views and experiences directly to stakeholders and for this to make a difference to their lives.

The research team, three people from Newcastle University and four from Children North East, met together weekly, first thing on a Friday morning, throughout the pandemic to deliver this project. It was co-produced by our two organisations so we discussed everything we did in detail. We rotated the meeting chair. We tried to get to know each other on those Friday meetings and offer support during the pandemic. We worked together like this for almost a year before we met face to face.

Much of the conversation was about how to reach children in a particular area of the North East. The richest stories were about who Suzanne, Cathryn or Gwen had spoken to that week and what they had said, what Lydia had seen in a comics session or what Lucy and Liz had appreciated in young people talking to, for example, the bus companies in the action cycle.

We were all new to the use of online platforms for carrying out focus groups and meetings. About a third of our focus groups were carried out in this way and almost all in phase 2, when most children were not in school. The experience of carrying out the focus group online became almost as interesting as what the children said. Usually, the children, their teacher or the group worker and the researcher each had a screen and could hear each other speak. However, a few times the children were not visible and the whole conversation took place in the chat facility. We found this challenging and debated whether it gave children more or less of a voice. We go into detail about our methods in the technical report. In this report, we focus on findings, issues and recommendations.

It is essential when reading this report to understand that it represents the views of 1780 children and young people and our concern that those views were not being heard or acted upon. The quotes and images included in this report are solely from the children and young people and not from parents, teachers or other school or youth group staff.

Our methodology did not enable us to have demographic information of individual children and young people we engaged with. However, we did collect age or school year, gender and ethnicity information for each group including the name of the organisation and local authority within which the organisation was located. We did not seek permission to name schools or organisations since we wanted to preserve individual anonymity. Pressures from Covid-19 on all those we engaged with led to our decision not to collect individual demographic information.

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[1] Poverty proofing is an audit process designed by Children North East with the child at the centre that looks at actions a school (and increasingly other organisations) can take to remove the stigmatising impact of their institution on those living in poverty https://children-ne.org.uk/poverty-proofing-the-school-day/

In the report, quotes and images are labelled with two identifiers, a proxy for the age phase and the local authority. The local authority name shows the physical location of the group. We decided to use the school phases primary, secondary and college as proxies for the age range of the author of the quote, writing, drawing or comic. Items came from individuals in a range of organisations including schools, youth groups, community organisations and local authority groups. The use of 'Primary' and 'Secondary' is only a proxy for age and does not denote the type of organisation that the child was part of when we spoke with them and will include charities, local authority groups and youth groups. Therefore, the proxy 'Primary' denotes that an item's author is aged within the primary school range, 5-11 years, and the proxy 'Secondary' shows that the author is aged within the secondary school range, 11-18 years. Items that came from the colleges we worked with are from young people aged 16-18 and are labelled 'College'. Youth groups that contained a mixed age range from 11-18 are labelled 'Secondary'.

We spoke to children from several schools and other organisations in the same local authority. This means that seeing, for example, 'Primary, Sunderland' for consecutive quotes will often refer to different organisations in the same local authority. In selecting the items for the report we were mindful of the varied proportions of children who engaged with us from the different local authorities. We have included in the report items from every local authority and from every age range where this was possible and where we had the data. We aimed to include a majority of items from children living in economically disadvantaged locations but to also reflect the diversity of those we engaged with. Images were selected to contribute to our representation of the main findings.

When we refer to the government in this report unless otherwise indicated this is to the UK government because the research took place in England and the UK government has responsibility for education and children's services in England.

The findings section is organised into ten main sections: relationships; education at home and school; health and wellbeing; activities; digital lives; inequalities; transport; Covid-19 and the wider world; taking stock; and resilience.

The aim of this report is to communicate as clearly and fully as we can the voices of the children and young people we engaged with. We had notes on focus groups with 1177 children and young people, 2231 drawings and pieces of writing, many comics, posters and a few TikTok videos made by young people. The themes generated were rich and varied. In our reporting of the themes, we have kept our text alongside the focus group quotations and the drawings and writing that informed them. Through this approach, we aim to keep children and young people at the centre of this research.

It was not possible to write these sections as completely distinct themes – there was much overlap. Whilst this would be expected, the extent of connection surprised us. This is something we return to in the discussion. We found that Covid-19 impacted on all aspects of children's lives in complex and interconnected ways.

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found difficult about life recently (for example, not seeing friends)…
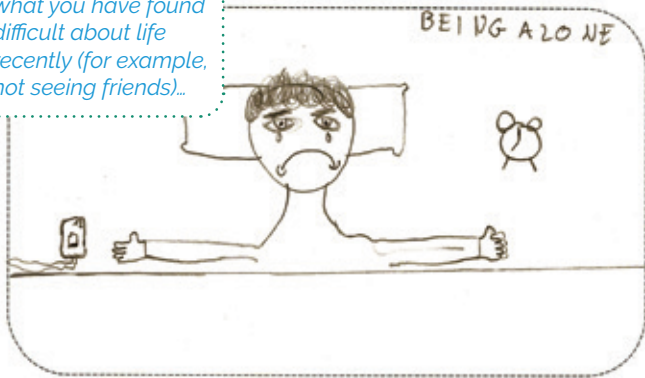
Relationships

Seeing family, friends and other important individuals was overwhelmingly what was most important to children and young people. Not seeing family and friends was what children and young people found most difficult about the times in lockdown. Real contact with friends and seeing their teachers in person was what was best about going back to school. Connecting with friends and family made life good again. By far the greatest number of drawings were on this topic, and we unapologetically show a large number of them over the next few pages.

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found difficult about life recently (for example, not seeing friends)…

BEING ALONE

Although we focus on relationships in this section, it is a thread that runs through all others and therefore some degree of repetition could not be avoided. Indeed, it demonstrates the interrelatedness of areas of young people's lives. What children said demonstrated clearly, for example, the link between their relationships and schooling, between relationships and their mental health, and the significance of digital mediation of many of their relationships. Therefore subsequent sections of this report will show further aspects of the importance of relationships to children and young people.

Please draw us a picture or write about what is important to you now (for example, going back to school)…

I think Joshua is important because I have to help my mam look after Joshua and Isaac.

Many commented positively on spending more time with close family, and often this was associated with having more time at home and with activities they were now doing:

'It's good because I've got to know them better.' (Primary, Sunderland)
'… learned to appreciate my family and what they do for me.' (Primary, Newcastle)
'… sister replaced the position that my friend usually took.' (Primary, Stockton)
'I understand family better.' (Primary, Newcastle)
'I got a lot closer to my mam.' (Secondary, Sunderland)
'(good now is) I feel like I'm getting closer to my family so I am quite happy about that.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)
'(important to me is) my family because I think I took them for granted.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found good about life recently (for example, spending time with family)…

Happy mothers day

On mothers day I made my mother a chocolate cake to show how much I love her and I made it all by myself.

The different activities that people found in the pandemic sometimes brought young people closer to their families:

'We started to go on long walks. … wouldn't have done this if Covid wasn't around, as I'd be doing sports instead.' (Primary, Hartlepool)
'… enjoyed tutoring my little sister. I designed worksheets for her.' (Secondary, Durham)
'… at home with my three siblings – there was time to get to know them more.' (Secondary, Newcastle)

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found good about life recently (for example, spending time with family)…

me   dad

spending dad
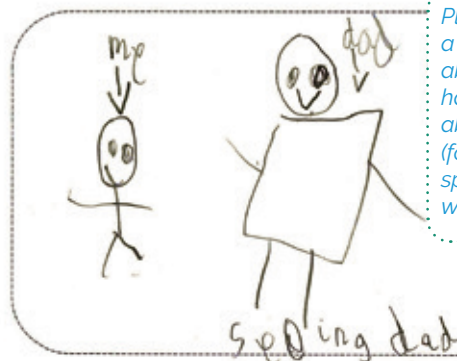
Some now have more understanding about the work their families do:

'Dad was homeworking – I could see what he does at work. It was great to see their jobs.' (Primary, Newcastle)

Many appreciated their families more:

'Finding out how hard it is for my mum to look after me so I am grateful.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)

For many, the positive relationships have not only been with humans; some mentioned the importance of pets or drew them:

'I turn the music on and dance with my cats.' (Primary, Sunderland)

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found good about life recently (for example, spending time with family)…

Important family events did not stop in the pandemic:

'Finding out my mam is pregnant and my baby brother was born. My mam also got a new boyfriend and he is really kind to us.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)

Some families found imaginative ways to mark important milestones such as the news of a future new sister or brother (see the drawing on playing hangman).

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found good about life recently (for example, spending time with family)…

There was a comment from one young person about their family 'flowing better'.

'… learned to understand myself and know my identity. Before I would ignore feeling overwhelmed. I got [a] better understanding of those around me – my mam and dad. We were forced to communicate. The family flows better now.' (Primary, Newcastle)

It was a very common experience missing the members of their family whom they could not see:

'I have found that not seeing my dad as often hard because my dad is really close to me but because he works for a shop that supplies building products so he is an essential worker so my mam and dad thinks its safer for him to stay away for a bit and to not come as often.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found difficult about life recently (for example, not seeing friends)…

A great number drew and wrote that they missed grandparents:

'You don't realise how much you miss doing things, like seeing family, going to the shops or baking with my grandpa.' (Secondary, Northumberland)
'Not seen grandparents for a year, only by FaceTime.' (Secondary, Middlesbrough)
'(Important to me is) spending time with my nana because in lockdown I haven't been able to see her a lot but now I see her everyday.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)

Dating in Covid-19 brought particular challenges that some young people managed. Two students in their second year of college (in Durham) said they had started new relationships in January 2020, which they had continued throughout, meeting up for walks when allowed. One said his girlfriend took lockdown really hard and started self-harming and drinking a lot. He was supporting her remotely. He also helped with childcare for his little brother as his parents were essential workers. He had clearly taken on a lot of caring responsibilities during this time. We talk more about mental health in a separate section in this report.

Children in care discussed specific concerns about contact with their families. These included the worsening of administrative issues:

'I wanted to go back and live with my parents, but it took forever to get sorted out, and my sister was just getting flung about.' (Secondary, Sunderland)
'My family is important to me because I only see them half an hour on Tuesday's and Wednesdays but cannot hug them because I'm in fostercare and splited apart from them.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)
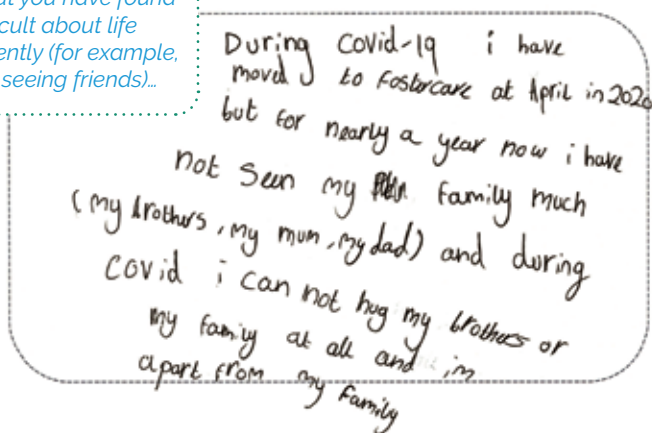
By contrast, for many the pandemic strained family relationships, which was very difficult for children and young people:

'… a lot more arguing in our house.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

Existing difficulties became worse:

'[My siblings] … don't get along [so it's difficult] for my mum who isn't in a great place anyway.' (Secondary, Northumberland)
'Dad doesn't live with us, so we struggle.' (Primary, Newcastle)

Relationships with families could be more strained than those with friends:

'… got closer to family, but it was very lonely.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

It was not easy seeing the same people every day:

'… literally ran out of things to talk about.'
'[What I found most enjoyable was] when in the house on my own in my bedroom – away from family.' (Secondary, Middlesbrough)
'Difficult – a lot of people in the house. My parents split up over it.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

Living arrangements had to be worked out where children's carers did not live in the same place:

'I have found good that I have been able to stay at my mams a lot more and being able to talk about living with her.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)
I have found it difficult living with my dad for 7 years and I still don't like living with him. ' (Secondary, North Tyneside)
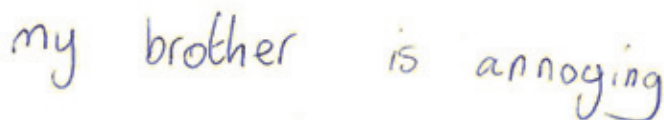
General concerns were about family members catching the virus, or about those who were at risk, or about the happiness of loved ones and making sure that they were OK. Young people used words like 'scared' and 'terrified' about passing on the virus to others (regional youth group, 15-17 years). They also said:

'It's worse now that things have started to reopen. My nana could end up going into hospital if she catches it and she is a really big part of my life.' (Secondary, Sunderland)
'People can go out now and its scary. I'm worried about my family if they go out.' (Secondary, Sunderland)
'I cried worrying about if people I love were going to die.' (Primary, Hartlepool)

This influenced the things they chose to do in lockdown and as regulations eased:

'I mean I want to see my friends, but I don't want to be in crowds and have people all around me.' (Secondary, Sunderland)
'I worry about myself because people in my family got the virus.' (Primary, Sunderland)

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found difficult about life recently (for example, not seeing friends)...


Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found good about life recently (for example, spending time with family)...

One young person was worried because their mother works for the NHS *'and is at high risk of catching it'. (Primary, Sunderland)*

Another young person was worried *'in case my dad gets it again or if anyone else gets it because I couldn't see him' (Primary, Sunderland)*

One girl said that she didn't leave the house, except to come to the youth group as she was too scared. One girl was worried about her mam working in a hospital (13-15 years). Young people also worried about the difficulties of getting medical treatment for themselves and those close to them.
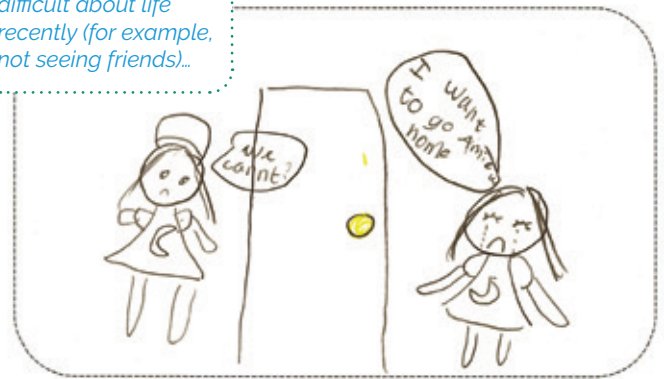
Friends had been lost as a result of not seeing them in lockdown, and children and young people now wondered how they would find new friends. Several wondered whether they still had the ability to engage with friends:

'It's been a year of instability without seeing people. I worry I've forgot how to talk to them. It's going to take some time getting used to it.' (Secondary, Sunderland)
'... lost a lot of friends – 90% don't bother.' (Durham, College)
'I feel it's damaged people, affected who they were. They're not the same. Friendships ended. I feel that emotional support hasn't been there.' (Middlesbrough, Secondary)

Some were glad of the opportunity to evaluate who they wanted to be friends with, finding that they could *'see who your true mates are in the darkest times.' (Durham, College)*

Others gave testimony to the lack of motivation to keep up with existing friends when the old ways of interacting were no longer available:

'It drains me now, having to text. I gave up at some point because it became a chore, and I can't be arsed.' (Hartlepool, College)

Several children had moved in the pandemic, and there were consequences for their relationships. One felt *'kind of alone'* in his new neighbourhood. Another felt loss:

'I can't see friends. I haven't seen my nan. I'm upset as I can't see my family in London. I can't go down and they can't come up. We're socially isolated. Sometimes you want to get away from it all. Been driven up the walls.' (Middlesbrough, Secondary)

It was not only the loss of human relationships that has been painful over these times:

'It's been hard. My dog died the past year.' (Secondary, Middlesbrough)

For some, Covid-19 brought separation of families that would not otherwise have happened, and consequent loss:

'… felt a bit lonely and sad. Mam and Dad are key workers, so I went to stay with Nana and Grandad.' (College, Sunderland)

The depth of feeling for children and young people in missing those that were important to them was reflected in the importance they gave to being able to see people again as restrictions started to lift.

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found difficult about life recently (for example, not seeing friends)…

I have found difficult that I am not allowed to see my friends and family.

Loss was a common theme in relationships, and many young people had to deal with the death of loved ones from Covid-19, including the additional pain of not being able to attend funerals. In one focus group, several children had family members in other countries affected by ill health and death from Covid-19. Covid-19 made family contact around different times of loss particularly difficult for everyone. One boy said he couldn't go to the cemetery where his little brother was buried. This had previously been a significant part of family life. He became upset when he was talking about it, putting his head on his arms on the desk. It was obviously a sensitive subject for him (age of child 5-10yrs).

Please draw us a picture or write about what is important to you now (for example, going back to school)…

I LOVE seeing my frends n

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found difficult about life recently (for example, not seeing friends)…

Something I have found hard this year would be losing my Grandpa. It really hurt me inside.

Something else would be not being able to see my friends… because of this I have become more distant from some of them.

Covid-19 made loss very difficult for children living in care. One care-experienced young person said:

'I wasn't able to stay in touch with my mam before she died.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

Education at home and school

Consistently throughout all periods of lockdown and easing of restrictions children and young people missed school. Education throughout Covid-19 was reported as a confusing and interrupted experience. In this section, we present evidence of children and young people's varied experiences during the constantly changing learning arrangements at home and at school. We explore the relationship between children and schooling as it was accessed from home and in person in school throughout the three periods of lockdown and the wide variations in provisions made for children's learning. First, we look at home learning, followed by schooling for vulnerable children and those of key workers, and then the return to school for all. What characterises all these phases is that almost all children and young people missed the ways their school had run before without the necessary Covid-19 rules. We then present reactions to exam arrangements during the pandemic and young people's concerns about their futures more generally and about employment specifically.

Home learning

Children talked of the many challenges of engaging in school work at home, and it was rare to find positive comments. Problems in accessing schooling from home during Covid-19 involved: unsatisfactory or non-existent access to technology; not having an appropriate space in which to learn; distractions in the home environment; an increase in caring responsibilities at the same time as trying to access education; work that was confusing, too much or boring; and lack of personal contact with the teacher and with peers. There were many ways of expressing this variety of responses:

'I've hated home learning.' (Secondary, Middlesbrough)
'Online lessons were horrible, the sound quality was terrible, and I didn't understand it.' Secondary, Sunderland)
'I fell really behind in college. When you're just staying at home, you have no motivation. In college you have motivation.' (College, Sunderland)
'... more stressful when working at home... couldn't get to sleep until 2 or 3am. Now it is a bit better.' (Primary, Newcastle)
'I'm usually very focused at school but not in the (home) environment. I'm not focused because I can do anything I want.' (Secondary, Northumberland)

Most found the practicalities confusing and difficult. Many did not have access to appropriate technology:

'... tried to go on Zoom but brother already on. It was horrible, annoying, difficult.' (Primary, Hartlepool)

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found difficult about life recently (for example, not seeing friends)...

At least two of the groups referred to free laptops, Wi-Fi and iPads either from a school or from a community group. One girl said that in her family five kids were using one laptop. Children did their best to work out how to use online platforms that were often new to them, as indeed they were to many of their teachers:

'Home learning was quite hard, but I got the hang of it.' (Primary, Stockton)
'Things like the ... 'Heritage Maths' online portal takes ages to get into it, but it's not our fault the internet is crap. This means we can't make school deadlines, and this is stressful, and then I can't be bothered doing the work.' (Secondary, Middlesbrough)

Other barriers to accessing online school from home included the range of distractions. It was sometimes hard to hear the teacher on video lessons:

'When there are people in the house you can't hear the teacher.' (Primary, Northumberland)

or to stay focused when faced with interruptions:

'I get distracted by my brother so I get told off.' (Primary, Northumberland)
'... hard because anything can distract and get on your nerves.' (Primary, Sunderland)

Specific distractions included: the noise of household appliances, being able to watch television, and other people in the household:

'People wander around the house, and there are distractions.' (Secondary, Northumberland)

Siblings were a major distraction:

'… sister makes me angry opening the door and distracts me by opening the door when I am in my room.' (Primary, Stockton)

The size of children's homes and what space they had available for school work varied:

'I have a big family – there is nowhere to have any peace.' (College, Durham)
'Difficult – little brother in Reception and a big brother – five people all trying to do work at home.' (Primary, Newcastle)

Some young people were trying to access learning from home at the same time as having increased childcare responsibilities for younger siblings. For example, a teenager whose parents are key workers was now responsible for taking her younger brother to school:

'I have to get up early to take him to school and I am worried about getting a call to say he is ill.' (College, Durham)

Some children found the work given for them to complete at home confusing, some found it boring and others found the volume too much. Especially in the early days of the pandemic, most school work was in the form of worksheets:

'I had eight to nine hours of school a day in the first lockdown.' (Secondary, Middlesbrough)

The amount of home learning work set by schools was repeatedly raised as a stressful issue. This was summarised by one group as attending a school that is *'preaching wellbeing and then sending out too much work' (Secondary, Northumberland).*

For a group in a primary school, not getting certificates was a problem since they really liked the recognition of being rewarded for having done well by the whole school. The issue of certificates indicates a wider issue around recognition and feedback during home schooling. When schools re-opened, they welcomed the demonstrated appreciation of their efforts and

achievement from their interaction with teachers and assemblies.

Children and young people trying to access schooling from home found that they needed the immediate and regular contact with their teachers in order to learn:

'If you get stuck, you can't do anything and you can lose focus.' (Secondary, Northumberland)
'… quite depressing not to be able to see teachers.' (Primary, Newcastle)
'You can't do as much learning as in college. Your parents don't know so you don't get the support.' (College, Sunderland)
'when we were doing it we had to message the teacher but they didn't answer back' (Primary/ Secondary, Hartlepool)
'Some questions were very, very complicated.' (Primary, Darlington)

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found difficult about life recently (for example, not seeing friends)…
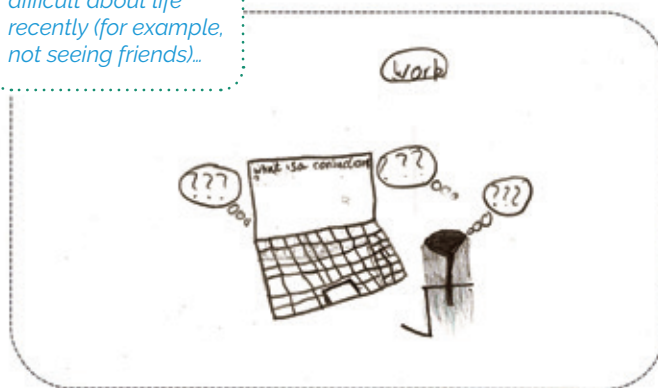
Even though children and young people had been given online work they did not see this as schooling and felt they had really missed out:

'I feel that going to school is important. We have missed almost one year of school.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)

For many children and young people, it was the lack of personal contact that made online learning difficult. One young person explained how important it was to her to be with other people:

'The vibe keeps you going. For example, at school something like maths is boring, but the vibe keeps you going. It wasn't the same doing maths without the vibe.' (Secondary, Newcastle)

Those who had help from their parents were in a minority. The reasons that this help was not available included their parents and carers being spread thinly, helping multiple children, or their adults not having the necessary knowledge:

'It was really stressful. I didn't know what to do, and my parents didn't know.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

Where parents and carers' input was discussed, children and young people were aware of the pressures that these adults were facing and were glad that, for example, mum 'kind of helped' (Primary, Darlington). One child was surprised to find that their parents could not help:

'Weird... My parents didn't know about the learning.' (Primary, Darlington)

Some liked not having to go to school. Many valued time with their families and playing digital games. For others, there were unexpected positive side effects such as enjoying getting up late, being able to have snacks or go to the toilet when they liked, and finding it more relaxed.

A minority had positive comments about learning at home at the start of the first lockdown.

'it was fun coz we could use different colours for our drawing' (Primary, Stockton)
'home school was better they were on mute so it was quieter' (Primary, Hartlepool)
'Prefer online learning as you can type rather than write.' (Secondary, Northumberland)
'I liked home learning cos I liked learning independently.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)
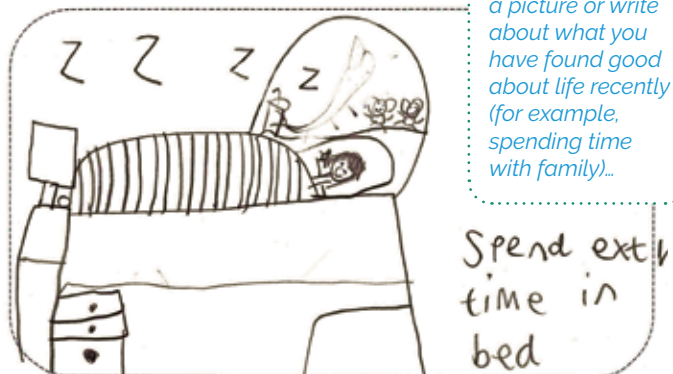
One young person in a primary school had difficulty finding out how to do the work but, when they did, found they liked it as they had plenty of free time, and another valued the flexibility. Hearing other positive comments about schooling in the pandemic depended on the timing of our focus group. For example, one young person was happy not to do exams:

'I got passed through without exams.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

But, as we hear later (see section on preparing for exams), this was not the universally held view.

The provision of online learning tasks to be completed remotely in a location that was not the school – at home – gave control to children and young people to choose the time of day they would work and the time that tasks would take. In one primary school, a child spoke of their experience in doing the assignments when the teacher put them up at 7am. The child's teacher did not think that the child should be working at this time so started putting them up at 8.30am. Other children in the same group talked about submitting work after midnight and receiving comments from the teachers about why they were doing it at that time. This led to a discussion about what the children thought about this and whether they agreed with the teacher. There were mixed feelings, and one child said:

'It isn't up to the teacher what goes on at home.' (Primary, Newcastle)

There were further discussions about work and expectations.

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found good about life recently (for example, spending time with family)...

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found good about life recently (for example, spending time with family)...

Spend extr time in bed

I get to decide which type of work
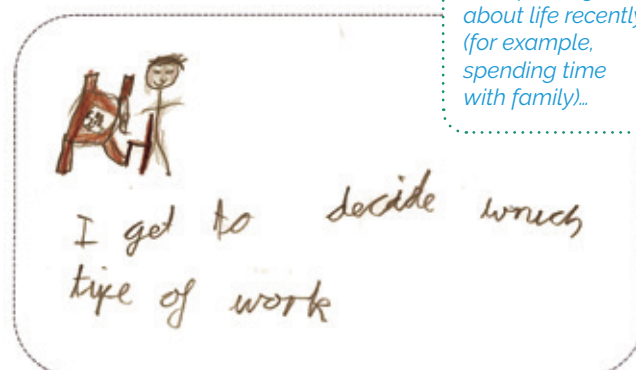
Being at school in lockdown for vulnerable children and those of key workers

Some children and young people were in school throughout the pandemic, including during the first lockdown. Being in school as part of the small group of vulnerable children or those of key workers was a great experience for some but strange for most:

'… wasn't the same.' (Primary, Sunderland)
'… strange, hard and different, bad and happy at the same time.' (Primary, Sunderland)

Exactly who was in school during lockdowns fluctuated as the definitions of 'key worker' and 'vulnerable' varied, and there were alternative interpretations by different schools. Many Primary school children did not have their usual class teacher. When we spoke to these children in phase 2 of the project, most of them had had little experience of having to access schooling from home and were therefore comparing their experience of being in school in small groups and with many restrictions with their pre-pandemic experience of schooling. Most children in these small groups were happy to be in school, but it was not universally a positive experience even for those who liked it.

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found difficult about life recently (for example, not seeing friends)…

Children's comments to us demonstrated how changes in the arrangements for the school day influenced their friendships. The nature of social relationships available to them at school was able to influence their overall experience of schooling:

'[School feels] really weird now.' (Primary, Gateshead)

Some children were positive about the opportunity to get to know people outside their class:

'… cool to make new friends.' (Primary, Darlington)
'… fun seeing new faces.' (Primary, Darlington)

Children valued the positive impact on the learning environment of small groups and fewer attending. One commented that it was '… nice because there are some rough people in the class' (Primary, Darlington), so without them it was quieter and easier to concentrate. But many were sad:

'… strange because everyone used to be here.' (Primary, Gateshead)
'… not many people in school.' (5-11yrs) (Primary, Northumberland)
'… don't have everyone you like to be outside with – rather be with friends.' (Primary, Stockton)
'You are all in one conversation or game – you feel like you should do what everyone else is doing.' (Primary, Stockton)

Making and maintaining friendships was also made harder by confusing rules at school. Pupils remembered that they *'used to sit next to each other' (Primary, Gateshead)*, but now *'we don't play games we normally could like tag' (Primary, Gateshead)*. One boy expressed sadness because he *'can't touch people when they are sad… stay in one classroom all day and not mix with others' (Primary, Gateshead)*, but it was 'kind of OK' (Primary/Secondary, Newcastle).

For some children who were attending school as part of small groups during lockdown, the routine of the school day offered more choice in manageable ways. Compared to pre-lockdown schooling, some pupils said it was good to have more chances to choose what in-class activity to do next. This did, however, vary across individuals and across schools, and some pupils found that attending school was now *'boring and harder' (Primary/Secondary, regionwide group)*, as they were easily distracted and less able to concentrate. There were also comments that reflected a lack of access to the learning support on which these children had previously relied. In-school work was harder now with no schedule and *'… teachers are not there to help' (Primary, Gateshead and College, Durham)* with similar comments from many groups across ages and areas. It was hard to get used to having one teacher for all subjects, particularly when children were taught a different method from the one their previous teacher had used. One young person resented having to go to lockdown school due to *'being at school when everyone was at home' (Secondary, North Tyneside)*.
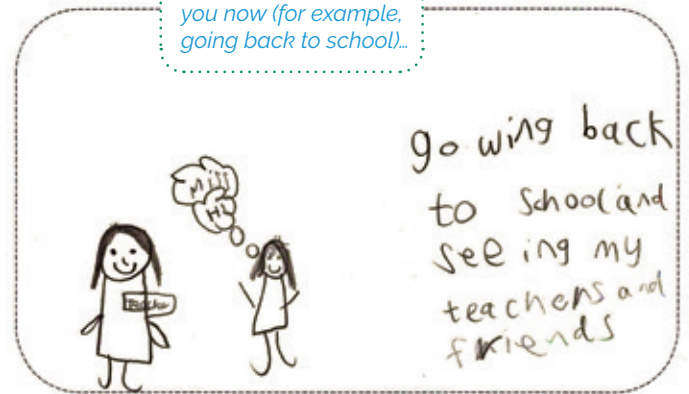
Children found the hygiene arrangements difficult which impacted on their learning experiences: having to clean books if someone touched theirs and remembering only to touch their own things. Some children were doing everything on computers when they were in school, so they did not have to use books. For some, the arrangements meant that they all had their own pencil case, rather than sharing resources, and they liked this. For all, there were worries about catching the virus. One boy said that he couldn't *'remember what it was like before' (Primary, Gateshead)*. Children's response to being in school in these early pandemic days showed how much their experience of school is influenced by the materiality of school and the way learning resources are used and distributed.

Return to school for all

What children and young people overwhelmingly valued when they returned to school in April 2021 was contact with their friends, the support of their teachers and the structure of the school day:

'It's much better now being back at school and … you're in an environment where you can learn.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

'It's better being back at school where you can see people, and I'm glad I'm back at school as I can see my friends.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

In a primary school, Year 6 talked enthusiastically about when they came back to school and the teachers had arranged a week of different activities such as colouring, games and talking, which was *'really good' (Primary, Newcastle)*. It got them back into the swing of school and socialising. There were many drawings about being happy to return to school.

Although the response was largely positive, the social restrictions in place, the continued changes in the rules they had to respond to, and frequent requirements to socially isolate brought many stresses. Given what we heard from children in the phase 1 and 2 focus groups about how difficult they found accessing schooling, whether at home or in vulnerable children/key worker groups in school, we wondered whether we would find a majority of positive comments when we spoke to them in phase 3 after the general return to school in April 2021.

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However, the stress children and young people reported about returning to school underlines the social and emotional impact on them of growing up in a pandemic. This finding overlaps with our section on mental health:

'I'm not used to being around people. I was really motivated at first but now I don't care.' (College, Hartlepool)
'I came back and I didn't have a clue about anything as I was so used to the lockdown routine. I feel like I'm too tired to learn.' (Secondary, Sunderland)
'I found it hard to get up on a morning and get ready for school. I was nervous going back to school as I didn't know what to expect coming back.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

Another described how difficult it was to focus:

'You feel embarrassed because you can't remember things because you have had a lot of other things going on.' (Primary, Newcastle)

The continuing restrictions in schools, including use of 'bubbles', was very difficult for many, because of the impact both on their relationships and on their learning:

'Because we weren't able to mix, I found it quite tough. I felt lonely and depressed because I couldn't see friends from my old class.' (Secondary, Northumberland)
'At school, I loved music lessons, but now with the restrictions they're not as fun. There's less [sic] people in class due to Covid tests and not as many instruments or people allowed to use them.' (Secondary, Middlesbrough)

Children's motivation to play was negatively impacted:

'When we went out to play, no one wanted to play. We weren't able to touch, and all we were able to do was sit on the same bench.' (Secondary, Northumberland)
'I miss the warm feeling I use to get in the school yard. It's not the same with staggered lunches and late lunches.' (Secondary, Middlesbrough)

Children and young people at all school stages were confused about the new Covid-19 restrictions in school and found the rules stressful to follow. They longed for the ways in which they had been able to play before, such as the bulldog playground game in the drawing. One young person felt *'caged at breaktime' (Secondary, Newcastle).* Use of bubbles in school impacted options for learning: one Year 7 child who had been learning German was now learning Spanish. There were some changes they liked, such as being able to bring water bottles into school, but

most changes were not liked: having to observe social distancing, not seeing friends, tables and chairs moved, and different routines:

'[We] used to put our heads on the tables to calm down. We don't do that now.' (Primary, Newcastle)

The understandable concern that teachers had about lost learning put pressures on children and young people. One group said it was:

'... daunting now having to go back into school – there is no time to breathe – just lots of tests.' (Secondary, Newcastle)

When we probed, they meant academic tests, which they were having to do in lessons. From our experience of other focus groups, such testing seemed to be across the board, at all schools and for all ages. When we spoke to one primary group at the end of May 2021, a child said they had *'had a year off school' (Primary, Newcastle)* – indicating that they did not think they had learned much.

There were wide disparities in experience. Some children were stressed by trying to engage with lessons, having suffered a large amount of learning loss, and some were extremely bored and felt that their learning was not progressing due to revision of material they already knew.

The stress on schools continued long after the easing of legal restrictions, as Covid-19 continued to have a major impact on teacher and student health and wellbeing.

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found good about life recently (for example, spending time with family)...
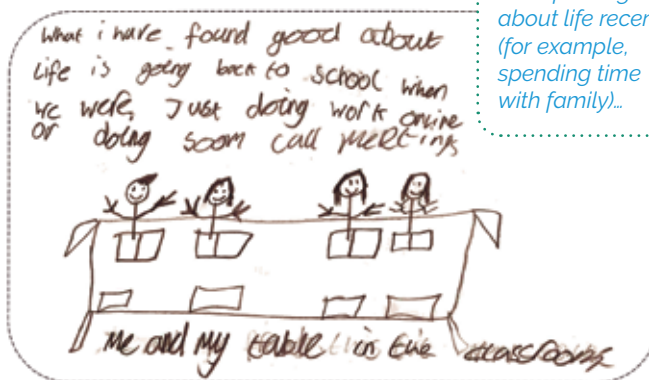
Missed celebrations and milestones

There was universal sadness about missed celebrations, activities, rituals and education milestones that had been looked forward to: saying goodbye to classmates and teachers at the end of a school year, the Year 6 leavers' assembly, going to prom, residential school trips. Many school traditions were cancelled or delayed. Without birthday parties, some children and young people felt that growing up was not a celebration:

'Now it's just like you're one year older.' (Primary, Sunderland)
'Last year I had a lockdown birthday and which is difficult now is that this year I have to do the same.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found difficult about life recently (for example, not seeing friends)…

Not having the traditions other year 6 has had in the Past.

The importance of rituals of school life, such as assemblies and end of school trips, were noticeable in the extent to which they were missed:

… 'missing the social aspects of school.' (Primary, Newcastle)
'All the joy is gone out of favourite lessons and breaktimes.' (Primary, Newcastle)

Children found the transition from primary to secondary school very difficult and said that the whole year felt like a transition year because of Covid-19. Traditionally, Year 6 at one school would go on a residential trip to Kielder Reservoir, visit Beamish Museum and have a year group cycle ride – all of which had been cancelled:

'I was really excited to go on the trips.' (Primary, Newcastle)
'… makes you really sad when you realise.' (Primary, Newcastle)
'You don't get experiences.' (Primary, Newcastle)

Please draw us a picture or write about what is important to you now (for example, going back to school)…

Getting ready for highscool

Starting at a new school was weird and unfamiliar, to the extent that pupils would rather have repeated Year 6:

'I would rather restart Year 6 if we could go back.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

Parents, as well as pupils, found transition stressful:

'It was really stressful. I didn't know what to do, and my parents didn't know.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

Children were not prepared for the changes in digital platforms between schools:

'It was really hard because primary school didn't do Teams.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

Students starting a college in Durham said that the college's induction week had helped them to get used to their new cohort and that college was better than school. Collaborative tasks set by the college had helped new groups of students to bond.

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found good about life recently (for example, spending time with family)…

Getting back to a bit of normality like going to school again

Children and young people's responses to returning to school have varied with their phase or type of schooling and according to where they were in the pandemic timeline. Young people now attending college preferred it to school, and these may well have been their views irrespective of Covid-19. What they valued about college was the support of their teachers. But there was still a lot in the learning arrangements that they had to deal with in the third lockdown that they found difficult to manage. There was concern about missed learning amongst children of all ages, but particularly for older young people.

Our findings brought a reminder that multiple disruptions to education are the norm for some children even without the pandemic. This was made clear to us when we heard from secondary children attending a pupil referral unit. The children seemed to accept the changes brought about by the pandemic as part of life. They continued to behave more or less as before, although with more hand washing and weekly testing, and one explained the testing process in detail.

Preparing for exams

Most young people in exam years were very stressed by the additional pressures on them. There was great uncertainty about what the exam arrangements would be, a lot of concern about the need to catch up, increased work, many school tests, worry about not being able to complete practical or vocational aspects of courses, and concern whether they would manage the next level of education. One young person's reaction expressed what was felt by many:

'To be fair, not doing GCSEs is a blessing and a curse.' (College, Sunderland)

There was concern about how much they had missed, about the fairness of the grading system and about subject choice:

'... failed at maths when I should have passed, so I've had to choose different subjects and repeat subjects.' (College, Sunderland)
'It depended on whether the teacher liked you what grade you got.' (College, Sunderland)
'We've not sat proper exams since Year 6 SATS.' (College, Durham)
'The GSCEs are delayed and now we are doing extra work. We can probably catch up if we work like hell.' (Secondary, Northumberland)

There was more work to do for children who found that teachers were assigning additional work needed as evidence for teacher-assessed grades:

'... struggling to get it done, and it's all important.' (Primary/Secondary, regionwide group)

Young people worried that they would never catch up:

'... side effects don't go away. Even though you are back in a learning environment, some people are still behind on work.' (College, Sunderland)

One Secondary aged young person was stressed because they had forgotten the skills involved in doing a test.
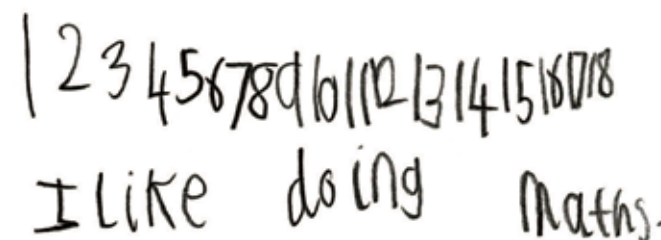
In most cases, the practical lessons that supported the theory in practical subjects (e.g. drama, music) were not able to happen, and this made young people question whether they would be up to the challenge of continuing these subjects in the future:

'We're all in one corridor, in the science corridor. It's not possible to do practicals like science and childcare.' (Secondary, Northumberland)

Students taking vocational qualifications were struggling to access the placements they were expected to complete as part of their courses:

'How on earth are you meant to do a practical course without the resources!' (Secondary, Redcar and Cleveland)

Older young people were concerned about the quality of their education in general and whether it would equip them for the next stage of education. They might want to go on and be a scientist and do a GCSE in science but *'We're not learning all the right things. We're just doing surface level' (Sunderland, Sunderland).*

A minority did not think that this would impact beyond their immediate futures:

'Not really. When you do tests, you just learn for the tests and you don't remember it.' (Sunderland, Sunderland)

Although those in exam classes were worried about the provision they had missed, they recognised that they were in need of a summer break and had no appetite for catch-up provision over the summer. We think this was probably said in response to news items at the time about catch-up schooling that was going on just before the schools re-opened:

'It's hard because we've missed so much. It's stressful having to catch up, and we've lost a lot of learning time.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

Young people suffered a lot due to the great uncertainty in each of the two years of Covid-19 about what arrangements there were going to be for exams, for example whether they were going to be doing exams or just sit mocks. Students preparing for next year's GCSEs were unsure whether the change to teacher-assessed grades for this year's exams would also be in effect for their own exams the following year.

'Our year group is in a weird position because we don't know what's happening with our GCSEs and we haven't started yet. A lot of the information is being given to the Year 11s who are doing it this year, but no one knows what will happen with us. The teachers have warned us we might get predicted grades, but we don't know.' (Secondary, Northumberland)

Young people felt that the way they were perceived by teachers would affect the teacher-assessed grades (known as 'TAGs'), and this was expressed as being very stressful.

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found difficult about life recently (for example, not seeing friends)…
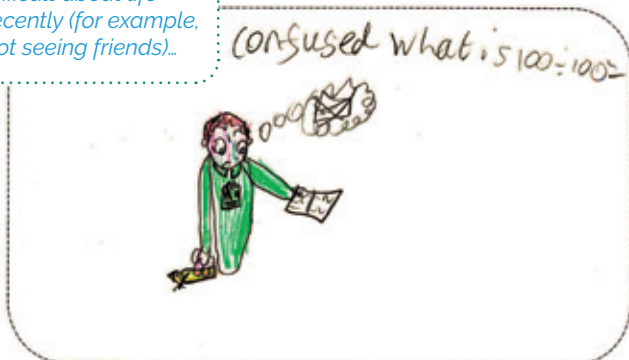
Planning for future lives

Covid-19 has made young people uncertain about the future and stressed about their next steps:

'I've got less interest in going to uni' now.' (College, Hartlepool)
'… feeling as though my future is very undetermined. I want to be a doctor but is it worth going to uni'?' (Secondary, Northumberland)

Many were leaning towards taking safe options about their post-16 destinations, and it seems possible that this meant limiting their career aspirations. For some students, a gap year was now an increasingly appealing option but still uncertain:

'Even deferring college for a year might not make a difference.' (Secondary, Northumberland)

Some students said they wanted to learn life skills, not only maths and English:

'I'm nervous about university. I couldn't go to visit so that's been hard. I've only seen one and put that down as a choice. Another I put down because my cousin went there.' (College, Durham)
'I would have liked to go to university abroad. but with Covid I felt it wasn't a choice. I didn't want to get stuck there in another lockdown.' (College, Durham)
'I will be living in halls but I haven't been able to see that.' (College, Durham)

Much younger children had also had conversations about their futures. Thinking about the longer-term impact, one had discussed it with her mum:

'If I stay in school longer up to 6th form, then there won't be as much of an impact.' (Primary, Newcastle)

Please draw us a picture or write about what is important to you now (for example, going back to school)…
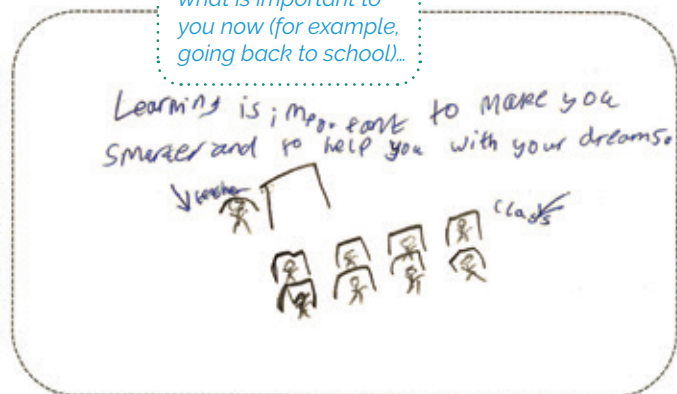
For young people in public care, there were additional worries about the future. One we spoke to was soon to turn 18, when she would be classed as an adult, and was concerned about what her living arrangements would be then. She did not feel ready for independent living, but nothing had been decided. The uncertainty was very unsettling, and she had not had any communication from decision makers:

'Nobody is telling me anything.' (Secondary, Redcar and Cleveland)

When planning for their futures and vocational and academic courses, young people had not had access to the level of support they had been anticipating, such as visit days and careers education. This meant that young people felt that they had a limited awareness of the post-16 opportunities open to them, and most had to choose subjects without speaking to anyone about it:

'Me and my friends have just had to work it out [by looking at the online syllabus].' (Secondary, Northumberland)

Work opportunities

Most young people had difficulties finding part-time work necessary for their present and future lives. They had concerns about jobs being hard to get, employers wanting experience or – conversely – taking on people with dangerously little experience, their lack of experience since placements had been cancelled, and the lack of disposable income. One young person (Secondary, Regionwide) had been training as a sports instructor in order to pay for university but could not now complete this qualification and was facing an uncertain future. Some were worried that the lack of work experience would affect the grades for their current qualifications as well as their prospects for getting their first jobs.

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found difficult about life recently (for example, not seeing friends)…
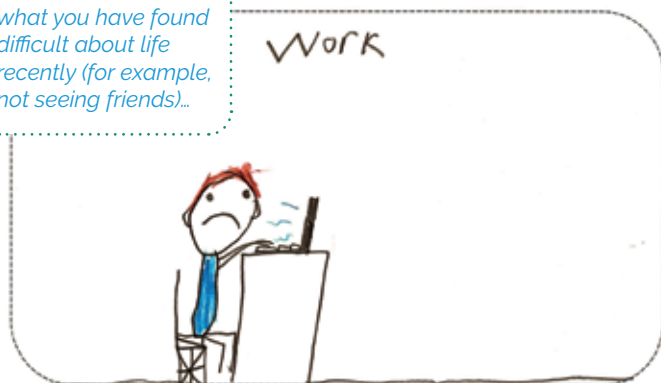
Delays in driving test were impacting on young people's plans:

'You end up putting in for [a] test whether or not you're ready because you don't want to end up on a massive wait.' (College, Durham)

Students also talked about difficulties finding part-time work in hospitality and retail:

'I've complained about not getting enough shifts. I'm only in once a week. People that have been there longer get more. And I think the older ones get more – them that's got families.' (College, Durham)

An exception to this was a young person who found learning at home had not affected their future:

'It won't affect me. It's actually helped me because I want to be a musician,' (Secondary, Sunderland). and they talked about how they had been able to spend more time practising for this.

However, there were other concerns for the few who managed to find jobs. One young person was already a key worker and felt that people were not being sensible in following Covid-safe guidance at her place of work. She felt at risk. Another that they had missed out on experiences to enable them to get a job:

'We don't have the experience to get a job, but we need experience.' (College, Durham)

Young people were concerned that, even if they found jobs, they would not be properly equipped, and the training for work was not forthcoming:

'Hospitals are taking on lots of people and in caring and stuff. They were going to take me on with no training and that's not right, not in caring for old people.' (College, Sunderland)

Overall, the call we heard was *'Make more jobs available for younger people.' (College, Durham)*

Health and wellbeing

The pandemic has had a profound and often negative impact on children and young people's relationships and on their physical and mental health. Many have taken steps to do what they can to reduce the impact.

We present our findings in this area in four sections, which look at what children and young people told us about their overall mental health, being physically active, and eating.

Please draw us a picture or write about what is important to you now (for example, going back to school)…

I have realized how much we as humans depend upon society, and that without it on our mental health plummets.

Please draw us a picture or write about what is important to you now (for example, going back to school)…

For all of my friends to be here.

Mental health

Many children and young people felt that their mental health had been adversely impacted by the pandemic and were able to articulate this in the focus groups and through their drawings and their writing. Children of all ages expressed a range of experiences: *'lonely', 'depressed', 'worried', 'weird', 'sad',*

'… losing confidence and feeling scared all the time. I don't know how to feel or how to deal with it.' (Primary, Sunderland)
'… all of these different changes. It's all muddled up.' (Primary, Gateshead)
'Lots of life was wasted during lockdown.' (Primary, Newcastle)
'Just staying in my bedroom made me scared of tight spaces.' (Secondary, Middlesbrough)
'… doesn't feel like a life.' (Secondary, Middlesbrough)
'… worrying, overwhelming but good sometimes.' (College, Durham)
'I can't remember what it used to be like – it was a year ago.' (College, Durham)
'When I grow up, I want a happy faces mask.' (Primary, Newcastle)
'Mental health worse, falling out with parents.' (Secondary, Durham)

Some experiences were particularly difficult to cope with:

'All of these things are important, but mostly my mental health. I've cried at times through feeling self-doubt. Recently I've been diagnosed with anxiety.' (Secondary, Middlesbrough)
'It's drastically different. I had anxiety before lockdown, but then it got really deep and was messing with my head. I couldn't go anywhere or stay active.' (Secondary, Sunderland)
'In last lockdown before going into it, had panic attacks going into it.' (Secondary, Durham)
'It's been boring not seeing your friends like 9 months combined. Not doing stuff I loved really put me down it was like living in a deep hole' (Secondary, North Tyneside)

The actions and feelings reported by some demonstrate the severe impact of the pandemic on young people:

'I know that a couple of months ago I was going through a bad time in my life and wanted to end it, but now I feel good.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

One young person talked about feeling mentally drained because *'of keeping track of days and having no routine' (Secondary, Sunderland)*. Another said that they *'don't know'* how their mental health is. Sometimes they feel *'really sad'* and sometimes they feel *'scarily happy' (Secondary, South Tyneside)*. One child said it had made them lazier:

'… brain is like mush [through] stress and confusion.' (Secondary, South Tyneside)

The challenges of having autism spectrum disorder (using their words) mean that one young person needs time to recharge from social interaction. Being in the house with family members was stressful. In addition, the sudden change in routine at the start of lockdown was difficult *(College, Durham)*.

One Year 6 boy *'got weird with germs', (Primary, Durham)* which meant he washed his hands compulsively and caused them to be sore and dry. Throughout the conversation, he kept mentioning that he couldn't use his hands anymore, and this had had an impact on lots of areas of his life.

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found difficult about life recently (for example, not seeing friends)...

realy bored realy bord realy realy realy bord and I am just sitting in the house all day

There was a predominant experience of boredom, being trapped, anxiety about the future, and concern about when or whether things would change. Most of the following comments were repeated by many different groups in all locations:

'Life is pathetic.' (College, Durham)
'... stuck in a rut. What's the point?' (Secondary, Northumberland)
'[It is] hard to be happy over things. There's not much to be happy about... [Everything is] repetitive.' (Secondary, South Tyneside)
'Confusing. I felt trapped being stuck indoors all the time.' (Secondary, Sunderland)
'I felt like I was trapped in the house.' (Primary, Gateshead)
'trapped in a room for hours on end' (Secondary, Newcastle)
'You have more time to be in your head and overthink things.' (College, Sunderland) overthinking
'It's impossible to predict what the impact will be. Expect the unexpected in the worst way.' (College, Sunderland)
'I haven't been able to see anything positive.' (College, Hartlepool)
'It made me feel weaker.' (Primary, Hartlepool)
'There's not much to be happy about [and everything is] 'repetitive.' (Secondary, South Tyneside)
'It just feels like we are trapped.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)

I like not having to rush around as much as usual. This allows me to spend more time on important things or spend more time on my self!

There were a few that had not found the pandemic a challenge:

'I haven't really found anything difficult.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)

Also, by contrast, for some it was a welcome time to slow down and learn to enjoy their own company:

'It changed my personality. It helped me see who I am.' (Secondary, Sunderland)
'I've been forced to mature over lockdown.' (Secondary, Northumberland)
'[It was a time of relief for those] not having to forcibly socialise.' (Secondary, Sunderland)
'Really good time – I enjoy my own company.' (Secondary, Newcastle)
'I like being at home – less pressure for socialising.' (Secondary, Newcastle)
'... nice – peaceful and relaxing at home.' (College, Durham)

Some spoke of very important aspects of their personal development during the time of the pandemic, such as coming to terms with their gender and sexuality. And for one young person their physical growth was relished:

'(What is good is) I've got tall.'(Secondary, North Tyneside)

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found good about life recently (for example, spending time with family)...

I've spent more time online, meaning I can reconnect with my online friends, come to terms with my gender identity and sexuality.

Many children were aware of the connection between different areas of health and other parts of their lives, for example trying to eat more healthily to combat the lack of motivation. One child mentioned wanting to be healthier so they 'can't catch the virus' or suffer from it as badly (Primary, Sunderland). Another young person had started exercising to try to address insomnia. Varied actions to make things better included:

'Doing runs and home workouts is helping.' (College, Durham)
'Learned how to take care of myself now. Feel better than before, time allowed.' (Secondary, Durham)
'Started smoking to help with stress.' (College, Durham)
'I used to go to the gym before first lockdown. My mental health [is] better now as I can go back.' (Secondary, Durham)

Others had ideas about ways to help people around them feel better:

'I think to make people feel better is to take five minutes a day and breath and feel calm. I also think that we should also be kinder to people so that they don't always feel bad.' (Primary, Newcastle)
'(Important to me now) going on walks to clear my head and checking in on everyone.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)

I have found good about life is Spending times with friends to get my mind off things and to tell them stuff to get it off my mind so I dont need to worry about things. Laile

The connection between schooling and mental health in the context of the pandemic was clear:

'their grades, education and connection when they should be making memories.' (Secondary, Sunderland)
'I get really mad at the littlest things – I cry a lot and some days felt ill and didn't want to go to school.' (Primary, Newcastle)

Without the routine of the school day, many found that their time was spent either sleeping or online. Many were staying up later 'sometimes all night' (Secondary, Durham) and falling asleep in the day out of boredom. There were also comments about finding it hard to wake up in time for scheduled online lessons or falling asleep in video call lessons.

'I am up all night. ... not sleep at all or only two hours then back up.' (Primary/Secondary, Hartlepool)
'It took energy out of me but being in the house has made it harder to sleep.' (Secondary, Durham)
'I found being trapped in the house with nothing to do challenging. I found that on multiple days I didn't leave bed until 3-4pm whereas I would normally wake up around 5-6am.' (Secondary, Northumberland)

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found difficult about life recently (for example, not seeing friends)...

it is hard to get to sleep.

We spoke about loss in the earlier section on relationships and this too is a theme that children and young people returned to repeatedly and is therefore a theme in all sections. This applies of course to grief when people died, to the loss of relationships when not permitted to see people but also to activities (both inside and outside school and college) that they used to be able to do before the pandemic. The next image and words are from a reception child (aged 5years).

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found difficult about life recently (for example, not seeing friends)...

"I don't like that people are dying."
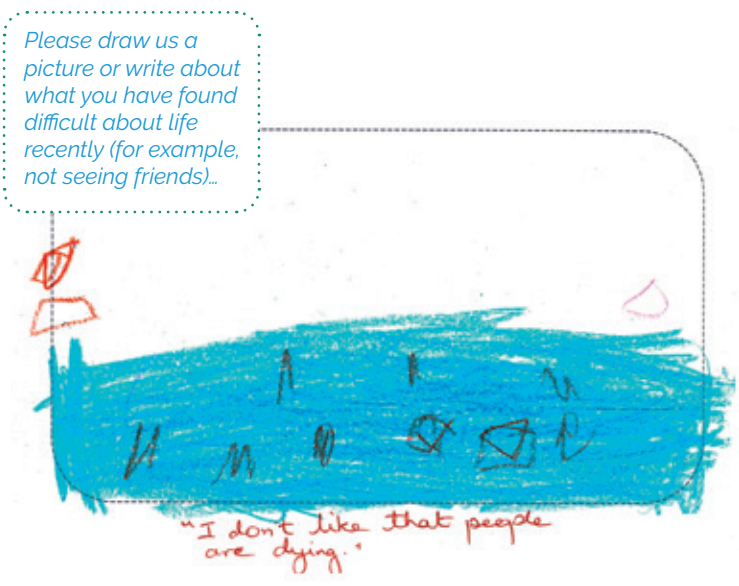
Children and young people thought and acted both positively and negatively. One young person said they had been buying *'a lot of random stuff online' (Secondary, South Tyneside)* but had also bought cookbooks so that they could cook. Two children said that *'having a cuddle with the dog' (Primary, Darlington)* was what they did when they felt sad and wanted to feel better including *'... hav(ing) time by myself and go to sleep until I feel better' (Primary, Darlington)*.

For others it was difficult to do the things they would usually enjoy doing:

'No one sees you, so you don't care about appearances.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

Young people did not always know what to do. Many blamed themselves for not making healthier choices. Many could not use their usual ways of coping especially if that would involve socialising and other activities that were now closed to them:

'It makes it really hard when you're alone with your thoughts and can't do the normal coping exercises.' (College, Durham)
'(difficult recently) I didn't like not seeing my friends and I really missed them and I liked being able to go out, it's also made me less socially confident and more lazy.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found difficult about life recently (for example, not seeing friends)...

Things got better as restrictions eased:

'... getting easier now because you can go out now. I feel more free in a way.' (Secondary, Northumberland)
'I felt angry but now I'm happy to see family again. I'm more happy than last year.' (Secondary, Northumberland)

Most children and young people had a reply to the question of who they would go to if they had worries: a friend, mam, dad, family support worker, teacher, youth worker, *'people who I trust' (College, Durham)*. The girls in a detached youth group aged 13-15 said that they would chat to each other if they were not feeling good, including during the night. One said that she used humour to improve the situation. One girl said that she tried not to talk to adults, whilst another said that she had no one to talk to. One of the girls used to talk to a therapist, but the sessions had finished. One girl talked to her parents and another to her mum. One of the girls said that she gets told off when she tries to talk to her parents. The girls said that they would talk to the people from the club, including the workers and *'it's like a family' (Girls' youth group, 13-15 years)*. Some felt talking about their problems would place a burden on those close to them:

'... worrying about people worrying about me because of my mental health.' (College, Durham)

Another group, of care-experienced young people, were dismissive of the services available for youth mental health and the support available. One young person said of her experience of such services:

'They just ask, "How does that make you feel?" and suggest, "Make a cup of tea."' (Secondary, Redcar and Cleveland)

By contrast, several young people spoke of (and drew pictures about) the support they got for mental health at school:

'(Good is) going back to school with support and getting help calming down.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)

Being physically active

Children and young people talked about trying to stay physically active. We look at their comments and images in this section particularly where there was a specific connection with health, but it is returned to again in the later section on 'Activities'. Many had been far less active than usual:

'Mental health amazing, physical health not.' (Secondary, Durham)
'I went on my bike and it made me tired - I have lost muscle strength.' (Primary, Newcastle)
'[He used to be a really good footballer, but when he returned to school] his legs hurt so he couldn't play football. He just sat on a chair. I felt sorry for him.' (Primary, Newcastle)

'... tiny garden – I couldn't go outside for three weeks. Mam and Dad couldn't trust me to go out.' (Secondary, Newcastle)
'I've started exercising but get joint pain now so stopped.' (College, Durham)
'I've put on three stone during lockdown. I've found it hard to lose it and I'm trying but feel trapped in the house.' (Secondary, Middlesbrough)
'I started eating healthier since I gained a lot of weight during lockdown, and I managed to lose half a stone in just over a week somehow. I've got a bike, skipping ropes and a weighted hula hoop. I think I showed [tutor] how bad my bruise was from it.' (College, Durham)

Where children were active, this involved doing more walking, running, going on bike rides, walking dogs, and doing online gym and dance classes – including Joe Wicks. There were many instances of young people trying to do more exercise:

'I've started to do more exercise, going on long walks with my brothers... We used to do shorter walks.' (College, Durham)
'I've started to go on runs and bike rides. It is good to go outside.' (College, Durham)
'I have been able to return to almost all my sports which I find distracts me from stress and helps me get closer to what I want to do' (Secondary, Sunderland)

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found good about life recently (for example, spending time with family)...
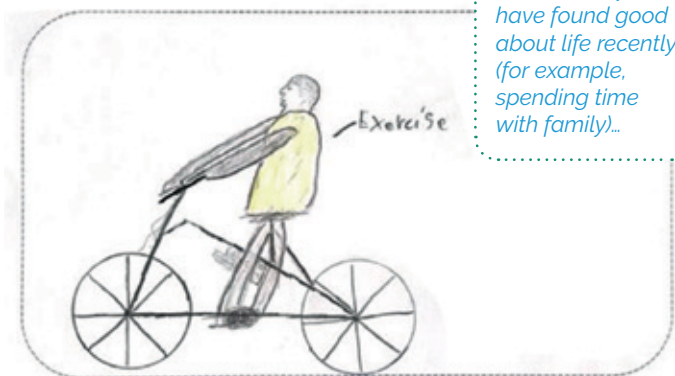
One school promoted cycling, with bikes available at school and a cycle track in the grounds. Children from this school had mentioned cycling throughout their focus group in leisure and again in health (Primary, Newcastle). One young person mentioned staying healthy by *'running around the house all the time, which I would not normally do because I would be outside running' (Secondary, Sunderland)*. Another

young person mentioned using weights. One young person said he used his mum's exercise equipment and now had muscles (Primary, Newcastle). Another young person mentioned doing more trampoline, *'but other than that nothing major has changed' (Secondary, Sunderland)*. One girl was doing 'The couch to 5K' in order to try to keep more physically fit (Secondary, South Tyneside). The importance of activities run by schools and youth organisations has been emphasised during Covid-19. All those who attended one primary school we spoke to during the first lockdown had played a lot of rounders (Primary, Durham).

Physical activities organised by clubs such as football, gym, dancing and kickboxing ceased during most lockdown periods. Those who had done lots of organised sport found it difficult to replace that activity. Several children of all ages said that doing online classes was not the same as face to face:

'It gets on my nerves because the dance teacher can't correct what you do.' (Primary, Durham)

Young people from a college said it was unusual to hear of anyone doing regular physical activity. One said:

'The extent of my exercise has been dropping my little brother off at school and picking him up again.' (College, Durham)

This was a big change from previously, especially as they had been doing animal management, which was a physical course that included cleaning out pens and walking cows. One girl did buck the trend by saying she had improved her tennis, badminton and football. Another started exercising:

'Mind was feeling a bit dull – not normal.... feel happier and healthier now. I've started dancing and trampolining.' (Primary, Stockton)

The weather had, of course, made a difference to children's level of physical activity between lockdowns, since it was cold weather and often snowing when many of the focus groups were conducted. Children of all ages said it was easier to stay healthy in the first lockdown as the weather was better.

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found good about life recently (for example, spending time with family)…

Out in woods

Things changed for many as the pandemic eased:

'… more freedom to do exercise.' (Secondary, Durham)

When schools re-opened to all children, one group we spoke to (Primary, Newcastle) mentioned a daily mile, which the school had introduced as a way to counter the effects of Covid-19 and get the children active again. Different teachers took different stances, but one group was running a mile every day and really felt the benefit.

Eating

Children and young people reported changes in both the amount they were eating (some more, some less), and the types of food. Most children spoke of the facility in lockdown for eating unhealthy snacks at home but for some this was an opportunity to eat more healthily. The increase in eating and in eating junk foods was often in response to boredom and to the disruption of pre-lockdown routines. Some in the first lockdown said they were eating salads but now all they ate was pasta and pizza. It was easy to snack *'because you have more time in the house and it's just there' (Primary, Sunderland)*, particularly when you were bored:

'You can eat all the time.' (Secondary, Northumberland)
'After being bored, you just sit and eat with your phone.' (Secondary, Sunderland)
'… because you're just in the house and it's just there.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

Children and young people also talked about stress-eating (whether eating more, or eating less), linking this to anxieties and sadness about Covid-19 and commenting that their parents were buying more snack foods and treats. Older teenagers (College, Durham) were now drinking far more coffee and energy drinks to stay awake.

One young person said that they had learned to bake and had baked more in the first lockdown – the young person talked about having a 'bake-off' with each other (Secondary, South Tyneside). Another used the ending of lockdown to take action:

'After lockdown I wanted to get strong. I ate more fruit and vegetables.' (Primary, Hartlepool)

When parents were spending more time at home, this was sometimes an opportunity to try new recipes. Cooking was a favourite new activity for many children and young people. Most often, they reported that *'we've done a lot of baking' (Secondary, Northumberland)*, but also *'eating more green stuff' than pre-lockdown (Primary, Stockton)*.

Multiple groups' comments about eating less food suggested material changes in household circumstances and we return to this in the later section on 'Inequalities'. For some, eating less was about tired families eating more takeaways:

'If your parents have had a long day at work, at home they just get you a takeaway.' (Primary, Sunderland) And another's eating habits changed *'because I was on my own during the first lockdown when my mam was at work' (Secondary, Sunderland)*.

Please draw us a picture or write about what is important to you now (for example, going back to school)…

super noodles
bff
Family
maddison
The snowman and I built kicked over.
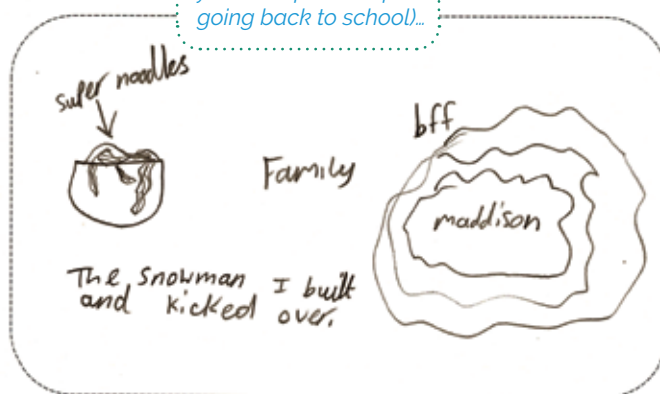
Eating more was not always a sign of being less healthy:

'I am eating more because I started running.' (College, Durham)

The importance of the support that schools and community organisations can offer children's health was apparent from responses. In one school, a number said they had tried to eat more healthily, trying new fruit and vegetables, specifically mentioning watermelon, peppers, broccoli, apricots, leeks and peas (Darlington, Primary). A mixed-age group of young people supported by a community organisation said they had eaten more fruit and vegetables such as carrots, broccoli, apple, banana during the pandemic (Primary/Secondary, Newcastle).

Schools, however, were not universally the source of help for children's nutrition. For children and young people attending school in lockdown (January to March 2021), many schools only offered cold food options:

'Now it is always cold dinner. I like hot dinner.' (Primary, Stockton)

One group reported that their school meals had been moved into outdoor marquees during this winter period, and it was an unpleasantly cold dinner hall experience. These points are particularly crucial for poorer older children and pupils eligible for free school meals, for whom school lunches might be their main or only meal of the day. For some young people, lunches at school were more unhealthy than eating at home, for example pizza, garlic bread, toasties, muffins and Lucozade. Similarly, one older youth group (16 years) said that they were eating more healthily due to not going into school since people bring in chocolate to share at school.

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found good about life recently (for example, spending time with family)...

Activities

A very common experience was not being able to do the things children and young people valued doing (see also the sections on relationships and being physically active). They missed outings like going to the beach, having dancing lessons, going to water parks, brownies, cubs, karate, gymnastics, breakfast club and sleepovers, and they missed being able to play with Christmas toys because of lockdown:

'Before lockdown, I liked to do football. I did it in school but now there's no football club so I can't do this anymore.' (Primary, Northumberland)
'I like to be outside, and I miss being able to choose.' (Secondary, Northumberland)
'(difficult is) not being able to go to my friend's house and not being able to travel to see my family. Not being able to go to the pool and the gym.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)

One young person mentioned enjoying dancing and competitions, *'but I can't do that now. I can't do what I like doing.' (Primary, Sunderland).*

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found difficult about life recently (for example, not seeing friends)…

That I Want to go Somehere where I Want to go but I can't.

Most of the activities that children and young people missed tended to be regular interests and activities that took place within a short distance of home: sports lessons and teams, ice skating, soft play, going to the park. There was a sense of frustration at trying online versions of activities but finding that online dancing, drama or gymnastics lessons, for example, were not possible:

'… but it's harder because you don't have much space in the house.' (Secondary, Regionwide)

Interrupted activities also meant interruptions to non-school friendship groups:

'… can't see skate friends.' (Primary, Darlington)

'… where I got to see my friends and it's hard not to see them. It's not the same on Zoom.' (Primary, Sunderland)

Some children disengaged from activities due to dislike of and frustration with the online version.

Not being able to do preferred activities brought boredom and some negative feelings:
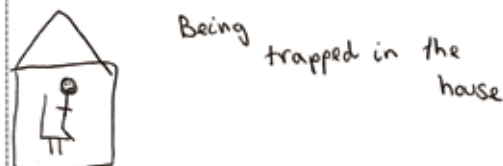
'… sleeping, eat and sleep and go on [a] device. There's nothing else you can do.' (College, Sunderland)
'… playing on my iPad, sleeping and drawing. I go into my mam's room and I enjoy doing things but sometimes I get bored.' (Primary, Sunderland)
'It was weird. We couldn't go on holiday. I felt trapped.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found difficult about life recently (for example, not seeing friends)…

Being trapped in the house

There were comments about age-related activities: growing out of activities you used to enjoy but not now being able to explore new interests. A younger child had just become old enough to be allowed to join older siblings in *'playing out with friends' (Primary/ Secondary, Regionwide)* but was now not able to do so.

The lack of access to preferred activities meant, for some, worries about whether they would be physically able to resume the same activities in future and the possible impact on future opportunities (see also the section in education on future lives):

'I was nearly at academy level. I couldn't do football in the house. I might be a bit rusty now. It's going to take a while to get back into it.' (Secondary, Sunderland)
'I'm a bit nervous. What if I don't have the energy to swim anymore?' (Secondary, Northumberland)

Some activities, such as football matches, were possible, but they kept away from them in order to keep safe:

'I wouldn't feel safe to go out to crowded places.' (Secondary, Northumberland)
'... feeling much less safe now going out where there might be massive crowds.' (Secondary, Northumberland)

Sadness about missing activities also offered insights into how heavily scheduled some children and young people's pre-lockdown lives were:

'Before lockdown I had interests, but they've all been cancelled, so I spend a lot of time not doing anything.' (Secondary, Northumberland)

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found difficult about life recently (for example, not seeing friends)...

I can't have a sleepover

Some religious activities that were important to children and young people had become both easier and different, as was agreed by one group (Secondary, Middlesbrough):

'It is nice to pray together with lots of people and it had been hard not to go to the mosque during lockdown.'
'We missed celebrating during Ramadan.'
'Fasting was easier, when you could just lie in bed during the day.'

They were looking forward to going out to eat together again and going to the cinema.

Some children and young people had, however, not had prior activities that they would now miss. Focus group discussions about hobbies and travel, particularly in the context of government and media attention to travel restrictions for holidaymakers, highlighted the fact that not all families are able to afford holidays:

'I want to go on holiday. I never went on holiday.' (Primary, Durham)

This suggested a sense of missing things they had never had, as well as missing activities that had been interrupted.

Two young people attending a secondary Pupil Referral Unit said that before the lockdowns they mainly socialised with friends outside, drinking and smoking. They both also said during the lockdowns they had stopped drinking so much now they were not socialising. One had also stopped smoking because could not be bothered to go to the shops. Fear of being found out and fined if Facebook posts showed that they had broken the rules by meeting up with people, exceeding the rule of 6, was a factor in not going out. One said he had started exercising with weights.

Many of the activities that children and young people enjoyed and missed were activities that can be done outdoors in good weather. Whilst the weather curtailed activities, sometimes it also brought new pursuits such as playing in the snow. The winter timescale of some of our focus groups is worth remembering here and not everyone wanted to be outside:

'[It] was easier in the first lockdown because it [was] warm. This time it's too cold to sit outside.' (Secondary, Middlesbrough)

Please draw us a picture or write about what is important to you now (for example, going back to school)...

Playing in the snow.

By contrast, many children and young people also reported taking up new enjoyable activities during lockdown and/or having more time for existing interests. Examples of new activities included: doing art and craft, learning to cook, running, going on bike rides, drawing, reading to a sibling, being more into clothes and fashion, having new pets, doing DIY and gardening, playing computer games, playing football, reading, climbing, eating more pancakes and making videos. Several young people mentioned going for a walk every day with their families. Cooking was another common activity at home. We had many and varied comments about activities enjoyed:

'knitting a scarf with Mam' (Primary, Gateshead)
'building things and decorating with my mam' (Secondary, Regionwide)
'doing arts and crafts' (Primary, Northumberland)
'making a book' (Primary, Stockton)
'drawing at home' (Primary, Stockton)
'I found out I like abstract art during the first lockdown' (Primary, Stockton)
'cooking with mum....she teaches me how to make cookies' (Primary, Stockton)
'I slept out ten time.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)
'(Important now) Finding out how good I can paint and draw. My paintings are important to me.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found good about life recently (for example, spending time with family)...
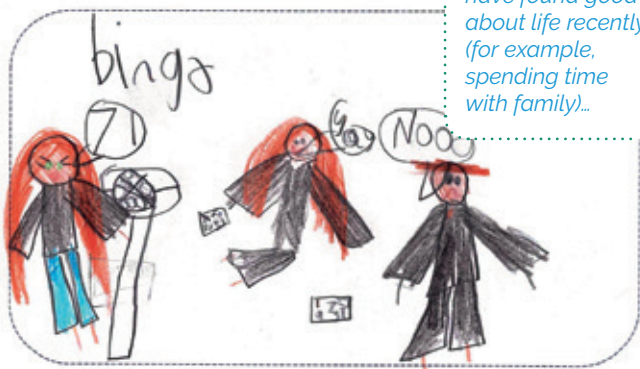
Many new interests relied on families being able to buy or otherwise provide toys and materials for activities at home, and some children and young people commented on the costs incurred by new interests. There were examples of playing with new Christmas toys, as well as shopping for or being given new toys (ranging from small treats to new bikes and iPads) not linked to special occasions, and buying *'a lot of random stuff online' (Secondary, South Tyneside)*.

It was a common response for children and young people to like the opportunity to be online for more time for entertainment, activities and socialising. This is a topic we return to in the next section.

We heard about some new activities that had physical health and safety implications although this was not a major topic of discussion, for example watching Bear Grylls survival videos and then making survival equipment and lighting fires or learning to hunt rabbits.

The importance of activities provided free by schools and the VCSE sector was underlined. We spoke in the previous section on 'Being Physically Active' about the provision of bikes by one school. All children and young people from a community group mentioned how important the activities organised within the community were in terms of culture and leisure:

'The Community Centre means a lot to us.' (Primary/ Secondary, Newcastle)

The programme of events in 2019 and 2020 over the summer holidays, 'Best Summer Ever', run by a particular community group was mentioned specifically as being a highlight for leisure activities, with opportunities to do rock climbing, cycling, rangoli and dancing. The continuation of youth groups as online and socially distanced provision was commented on as a positive thing:

'It's like a family.' (Secondary, South Tyneside)

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found good about life recently (for example, spending time with family)...

Inequalities

Material circumstances had an impact on how children and young people experienced Covid-19. Many did not have access to appropriate technology, to learning support that they depended upon, to the counselling support that schools and charities provide, and to the activities they needed to do. We draw attention here to inequalities in access to activities, services, resources and to the necessities of life. However these issues are found in all sections of this report.

The digital divide is still gaping and it was left to schools and community organisations to give out many resources from their own funds. Many children did not know how to use them and one charity gave regular telephone support for families, paid for by a local authority, to help in using computers for online lessons.

Activities that children engaged in had financial costs that were a problem for many. Some children were taken by car to avoid being in close contact with people on public transport. But this was not an option for others:

'We used to go to school on the bus before lockdown, but Mam doesn't have as much money now so we walk to school.' (Primary, Durham)

Some children were missing holidays and activities that had an associated cost. However many children had never experienced some of these.

Multiple groups' comments about food suggested material changes in household circumstances. There was mention of eating less because of reduced household income. One girl said that she was eating less because there was less money, as her parents had stopped working. One girl said:

'Mam's job only covers bills and Dad is self-employed.' (Secondary, South Tyneside)

Another girl's parents had been furloughed (Secondary, South Tyneside). Many were aware of the impact of Covid-19 on them and their families financially:

'I buy shopping for my mam if she's short.' (College, Durham)
'Things are definitely loads harder for us 'cos of Covid. My Dad was off for ages with Covid. My dad's not going to work now 'cos he's not happy about some stuff. Him being on the sick affects how much money we've got, [with] just my mam going to work.' (College, Durham)

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found difficult about life recently (for example, not seeing friends)...
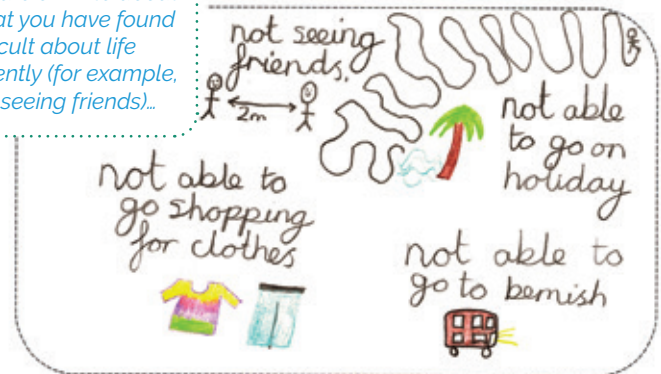
Digital lives

Children and young people were asked about their access to digital devices, the time they spent, the role these played in their lives and how they felt about engaging with others online for leisure, education and social purposes. The impact of digital devices is in every area of children's lives, so we have already reported some findings in earlier sections. In a later chapter of this report on 'Action Cycles' we have a case study of young people's participation in the development of a digital curriculum for schools.

Throughout the pandemic and particularly during lockdowns, children and young people reported a large increase in their time spent using digital devices for leisure purposes. They commonly enjoyed this increase:

'… enjoyed it as I have more free time to play on the computer.' (Secondary, Newcastle)

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found good about life recently (for example, spending time with family)…

Many, by contrast, felt that the time online was too long. Children and young people largely have not enjoyed online learning at home, and this is reported in detail in the section on education. Their enjoyment has been in a variety of games, social platforms and ways of connecting with friends and family. One primary-aged focus group played on games often with other people, used TikTok, watched YouTube and took photos. Older young people mentioned designing, using PowerPoint, Fortnite, writing essays and playing digital games.

In general, most young people we spoke to had access to devices, but we did not ask in detail about the kind of devices they used or preferred to use. However there were many drawings of children using their various digital devices including phones, computers and consoles. We did not want to focus on the financial circumstances of young people's families, but at least two of the groups referred to free laptops, Wi-Fi and

iPads either from a school of from a community group. One girl said that in her family five children were using one laptop and there were similar comments about resources from others:

'My mum's a teacher and had to give our computer to a pupil. At school, we didn't receive computers. The government should have carried through.' (Secondary, Durham)

'… very hard – there was nothing to do. Five of us in the house trying to get online all sitting round the table. It was noisy.' (Primary, Newcastle)

One young person expressed how difficult it was during lockdown due to the high demand around the home and the high demand for the internet around the country:

'Sometimes we had to do live chats and Google meets at school, and it often didn't work.' (Primary, Northumberland)

Many hours were generally being spent on digital activity. All groups we spoke to said they used devices and went online far more than they used to. Time online increased as a result of the multiple personal benefits to children and young people, the lack of other activities and (for many) not going to school. Many were online for large parts of the day and indeed night:

'I spend 18+ hours a day online.' (College, Sunderland)

In one school group, eight out of the 12 from Year 5 said that they spent between five and ten hours a day online. In a Year 6 group, one student spent more than six hours online daily, three spent between four and six hours, and four spent up to four hours online. The Year 3 children were far more modest in terms of time: one spent 20 minutes, three spent 30 minutes, two spent one to two hours, one spent two and a half hours, and one spent eight hours. Young people in a secondary group in Sunderland referred to *'hours more than before', 'almost every day', '15 hours a day', eight plus hours a day', 'a big increase in screentime'.* One child we spoke to had been online until 4am watching YouTube (Primary, Northumberland). Another child expressed feeling as if they were looking at a screen 24/7 (Primary, Gateshead), and many of them referred to all day and evening.

It seemed to be too much effort, or at least not worth the effort. He said that he had discovered new music and it had broadened his music tastes. One child from a different Newcastle group considered the impact on their future self:

'If you go on too much, when you're older what are you gonna teach your kids? You'd be a bad parent.' (Primary, Newcastle)

A return to school for all meant a cut-back in online activities: one young person mentioned spending less time online now since the first lockdown because they had to go to school.

By contrast, many children and young people spoke of the importance of digital activities and the benefits to their lives:

'Adults don't understand how much we rely on it (Wi-Fi/ Internet). They don't understand why we need it so much but we do.' (Secondary, Middlesbrough)
'… the phone, how you contact people is really important. I had my phone taken off me during lockdown.' (Secondary, Middlesbrough)

There were mixed opinions about whether their time on digital activities was too much, and about the benefits and what was unhelpful for their lives. When we asked how much time they had been spending online, some of the children and young people expressed that it was far too much. Some reacted with surprise to what they heard from others about the large amount of time using devices. Others said they had taken steps to reduce digital time and described what they had done. For example, multiple groups reported spending 30-40 hours online per week, and were horrified at examples of peers spending 100 hours online per week.

Children and young people spoke of a negative impact on them. Common comments included that gaming:

'… made me a bad person.' (Primary, Newcastle)
'An evil version of you pops up.' (Primary, Newcastle)
'It affected me – I got addicted to it…. now become part of my life.' (Primary, Newcastle)
'I talked to my parents and got quite upset, but I tried to fight the urge to play.' (Primary, Newcastle)

One primary group from Newcastle reported being happy to break the online habit in favour of more interesting things. A couple said that going online hurt their eyes so they had cut down. One had set a timer for 20 minutes. Another said she was spending up to six hours online, but had made a conscious effort to spend more time outside and be more active, so had reduced it to zero. The nature of digital activity for each child and young person was varied and could change over time. One young person from a secondary aged group in North Tyneside used his phone extensively (nine hours the previous day) mainly for listening to music and watching YouTube. In other words, it was mainly for entertainment, and mainly on his own. Although he did use it to text and communicate with friends, he found he was doing it less and less.

For many, online activity was seen as the norm. For example, one young person said she spent 15-18 hours a day on her phone, including tracking the progress of online deliveries for entertainment. When we asked if this was excessive, others said they spent similar amounts of time online.

Some young people recognised the skills and benefits to them of using digital devices and online platforms:

'The best thing I've ever had is lockdown. I get to make videos all day.' (Primary, Sunderland)
'(Good about life recently is) Starting to become a pro at a game called Call of Duty.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)

Children in two different Newcastle Primary schools were using apps. to learn new dances.

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found good about life recently (for example, spending time with family)...

One (we think) atypical example of online activity from a Newcastle primary school boy was that, during the second lockdown, he decided to *'make the most of'* not being at school by gaming all day. He did not do any school work until his teacher rang his dad to ask what was going on. When the boy turned his computer on, he had 70 assignments to do, which he did in one five-hour block.

Young people presented a mixed picture in terms of the benefits and negative issues of the digital world providing them with a social space. Many spoke of technology making it easier to stay in touch with friends. When one young person told us they were online *'all day'* and *'as much as possible' (College, Durham)*, they highlighted that this was the only way to keep in touch with people. Children in a Gateshead primary school said they spent more time calling friends because they got bored. For some, this was not the preferred way of socialising.

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found difficult about life recently (for example, not seeing friends)...

'I haven't been out a lot but I have been talking on the phone to my friends so I haven't missed friends.' (Primary, Northumberland)
'... would have gone shopping or ... out to eat but now spending time online.' (College, Durham)
'I found playing with friends online helped me recently during lockdown and holidays but face-to-face meetings are now much more enjoyable.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

One young person used Zoom and FaceTime to have a party with friends. Others used the internet to think of their friends. One young person said:

'I have been buying gifts online for friends and am looking forward to giving them to them in real life.' (College, Durham)

New technology could make personal contact more interesting:

'When I see people on Zoom, it feels special seeing them on Zoom. Don't see them as often.' (Primary, Newcastle)
'... good thing about video chatting with friends.' (Primary, Newcastle)
'... celebrated birthday on Zoom. Really fun.' (Primary, Newcastle)

Technology was especially important in staying in touch with extended family:

'I used to go and see my grandma in a care home every fortnight. Now my dad speaks to her on the phone and passes information on.' (Primary, Stockton)

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found good about life recently (for example, spending time with family)...
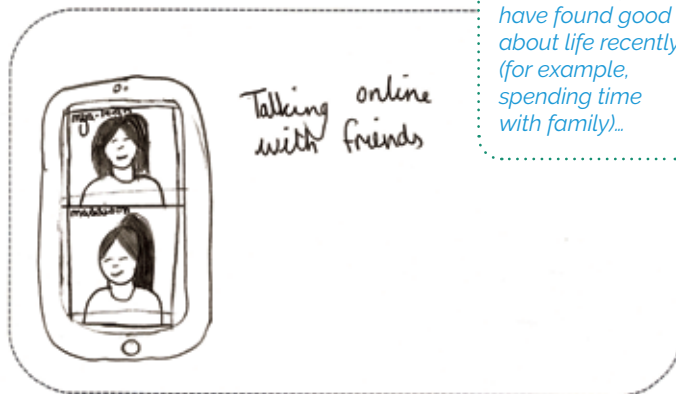
We also had many comments about the negative aspects of digital activity on friendships. One young person said it was *'harder to stay connected' (Secondary, Sunderland)* when asked about maintaining friendships online. Others felt it had not made much difference:

'I'm mostly online with friends anyway so it's not that different.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

There were examples of how they had been turned off going online:

'I used to use technology for socialising but I don't really want to socialise now. It isn't the same.' (College, Durham)

Several mentioned that it was harder to keep up the momentum of friendships:

'Lots of people don't bother as much. You have to make more of an effort.' (College, Durham)
''Cos of lockdown you don't really have anything to say.' (College, Durham)
'… played games online. I used to play with friends, now not so much. I prefer to play alone.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

Sometimes the technology got in the way:

'When we talked to some people on Teams it wasn't as good. … kinda hard doing it. Teams was crashing, … couldn't hear people, kinda like a nightmare.' (Primary, Newcastle)

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found difficult about life recently (for example, not seeing friends)…

Understanding What they're Saying on the Phone
write a letter.
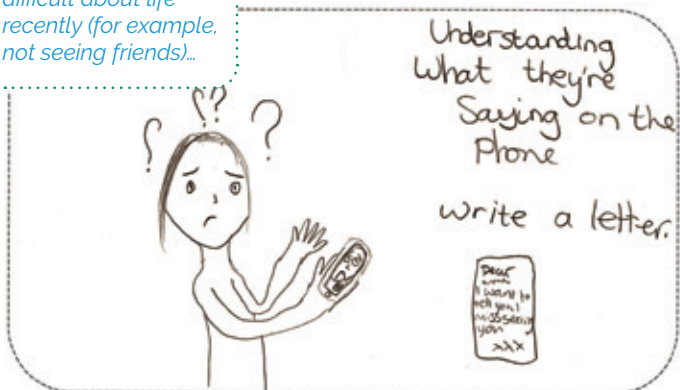
Sometimes one use of the digital interacted unhelpfully with another (i.e. school and social). One College group highlighted how the digital can be distracting while learning if someone texts you and you feel the need to reply. For some this was to

do with a lack in expertise. One young person said they didn't know how to use their device to stay in touch with people so hadn't used it for this purpose. For some younger primary-aged children, *'seeing friends online is too much typing' (Primary, Gateshead)*, and for older teenagers socialising online was not as good as in-person interactions.

While some young people found it hard to stay connected with friends, some said that they had always spent most social time online with friends, so socialising under lockdown was *'not that different' (Secondary, Sunderland)*.

'I've made friends during lockdown and I've lost a lot of friends during lockdown. It's easier now we can see each other, and you can have a one-to-one conversation. It's hard when all you can see is a face on a screen.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

Another was bored with playing games and chatting online:

'I felt alone. I can't see their faces, just [hear their] voices. I was getting bored with just voices so I stopped.' (Primary, Newcastle)

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found good about life recently (for example, spending time with family)…

Playing wideo games

Some young people were aware of the risks of online platforms, which included bullying, talking online to people they did not know, seeing disturbing images or hearing swear words. One group from a Northumberland Primary school spoke a lot about their awareness of online bullying, which had happened to a few of them. They expressed concerns that they were not able to stick up for themselves online like they would in person and that people bully each other based on *'how much money you have'*. One child said that it has *'changed the way people bully'* as people have more time to do it now and can hack into each other's accounts. Another from a different school said:

'I speak to people I don't know.' (Primary, Newcastle)

One child said that it was possible just to block people online, but another said that a bully had set up another account and continued to bully. Many children said that they would speak to their parents if they were worried or had experiences of bullying. One young person talked about some of the graphic and disturbing things they had seen online:

'You see some disturbing stuff.' (College, Sunderland)
'I had nightmares about it.' (College, Sunderland)

Several children spoke of limits being placed on their digital activities by their carers and parents:

'Got Wi-Fi taken off me… relying on it.' (Secondary, Middlesbrough)

One child said that his dad told him he couldn't watch or play anything that included swear words. If a swear word was used, he had to switch it off. One young person in care said that their foster parents did not allow them to use social media, and another child said their parents would not allow them to be friends with people online without meeting them in person. As a research team, we had a robust process for reporting and addressing safeguarding issues.

During lockdown I have been able to talk to and make friends with lots of new people from all around the world via the internet. I have made friends with people from Mexico, Germany, Philipea and many more. Also, I have tried new things, such as live streaming, and moderating twitch streamers.

I want corona to go away so everyone can have a happy life.
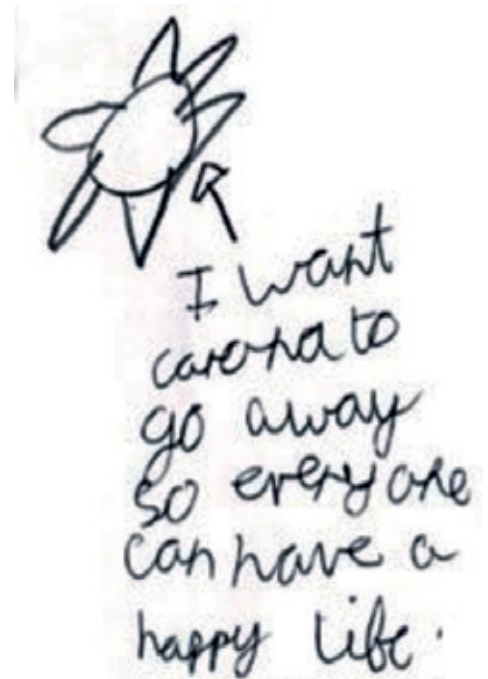
Transport

Children and young people found travelling on public transport stressful and challenging. Public transport had previously been a source of enjoyment. It had provided good-quality time with family and friends:

'For me, the bus was [the] best part of the day. [You could] chat to other year groups.' (Secondary, Durham)

It was an opportunity to socialise, and had helped them grow up and *'be independent' (College, Durham)*. A Primary aged boy from Stockton who had a brother in the same class, talked about trips he used to go on with his dad by bus and train to watch football. They are Newcastle United fans, so used to go to watch them play in Newcastle and other venues. He valued the one-to-one time with his dad, and the journeys on public transport were a part of that experience. Not only was he missing the football, but he was also missing time with his dad.

However, in the first two phases of the project (coinciding with the second and third lockdowns), we found reduced use of transport. This was partly due to reduced activities, but we also found widely expressed concerns:

'... scared to use [the] bus, worried about catching coronavirus.' (Primary, Newcastle)
'It's stopped me going on the bus. My mam won't let me because of Covid-19.' (Primary, Northumberland)

Children and young people were concerned about mixing with others on public transport:

'Well, I get the bus. I have to wear a mask to get on and you're with other years on the bus. They keep you separate at school.' (Primary, Durham)
'[if] the bus is fuller than it should be, you're weighing up in your mind, do I want to get home or catch the virus?' (College, Durham)

Particularly in the early stages of the pandemic, they were alarmed about touching high-contact areas such as the button to stop the bus:

'Not sure if the bus is clean [sic] properly.' (College, Durham)

Children and young people were anxious about the behaviour on buses of other users in relation to Covid-19:

'People are on with no masks and disobey the social distancing with where they sit.' (College, Durham)
'One man didn't wear a mask. [I] had a weird shock feeling and didn't feel safe.' (Primary, Newcastle)

In terms of bus capacity, they were worried about too many people being let on the bus, having to sit or stand too closely to others:

'The drivers don't care. They fit far too many people on the bus.' (College, Sunderland)
'I don't like buses anymore. Loads of people on. A person coughed on a bus. I didn't feel safe.' (Primary, Newcastle)

However, they were also concerned about too few people being permitted to take a bus, and whether, as a consequence, they would be made to wait for the next bus:

'If there's not enough space, you get taken off the bus. You can't stand up.' (Primary, Durham)
'Sometimes I can't get on the bus. They refuse because it's too full, and I know I'm going to be later.' (College, Durham)
'... horrible. You're not allowed to go on the bus if its full.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

Many young people spoke about anxiety in relation to not being able to get onto buses and being late for school or not knowing how long it would take them to get home.

Forgetting a mask has also caused a lot of worries:

'If you forget your mask, there's no way you're getting to school. It's like your ticket to get home too. You can't drop it or lose it during the day.' (College, Durham)

There was great concern about the cost of public transport for older young people. The young people that were involved in our transport action cycle, that had been in a focus group, wanted reduced bus and Metro fares for older young people.

Children and young people reported throughout the project greater use of lifts in cars. Young people worried about the impact of this on their health in other ways:

'In lockdown, I walked every day, but now I go to school in the car. I think I'm less active.' (Primary, Hartlepool)

In the next chapter in this report on 'Action Cycles' we refer to young people's involvement in a major piece of work as part of this project in which young people and the researchers engaged in dialogue, during the pandemic, with transport providers in order to ask for change. This work is reported in detail separately and is available from the project website.

Covid and the wider world

Children and young people thought a lot about what they were hearing or reading about efforts to stop the pandemic. They heard about what was being said about the wider societal impact of the pandemic. They observed the actions of adults and other young people around them who were either following or breaking the rules, and they had views about this. Several groups wanted to tell us about what they were thinking. These conversations were very much led by children and young people and were not amongst the topics we used to start the focus groups. There was amongst a number of the groups we spoke to a high level of awareness of news and information and views on the politics of the pandemic. Most of this awareness was that of older young people, but children of all ages had things to say to us about the wider context.

Many young people felt that they were being unfairly blamed for the spread of the pandemic:

'I hate Covid. We're being blamed for it and we're not being treated fairly. Most of us are following the rules. Feel ignored.' (Secondary, Middlesbrough)

Young people had noticed that they were often in the media, in terms of questions about their education in the context of Covid-19, their wearing of masks, or whether they should be vaccinated. Children and young people generally perceived this press attention as negative:

'[It] makes us feel guilty for having an education, in the media.' (Secondary, Durham)

One group (Secondary, Northumberland) was especially animated by the way the pandemic had been handled, from the messaging to the contradictions in the rules. They had a lot to say:

'They call us the Covid generation, and this has negative effects on your thoughts and that the government is saying we will be limited with the things we can do. We're being put in a box.'
'All the government cares about is cases going down not the damage they are doing to teens. A crucial part of teens is see friends and see family. I haven't seen my dad personally in 3 years. The government doesn't care about mental health. They need to care more about it. Yes we need the cases down but we are the next generation and we are ruining and breaking us down. At this rate we are not going to have a next generation.'

Others did not have confidence that various authorities would take action to help young people:

'I feel like we're going to have to hit rock bottom before anyone will take this seriously.' (College, Hartlepool)

This research indeed aims to encourage professionals in a range of organisations to take the views of children seriously and take action. One young person was very interested in how the research was going to be used and who else was involved. At the end of the session, she asked:

'What is happening to others? What questions are you asking them? How do the five-year olds answer? What will happen to these answers? Where does this go next?' (College, Durham)
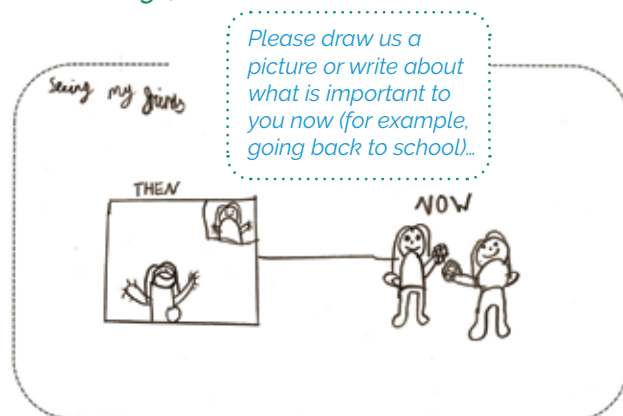
The Black Lives Matter movement found new urgency in the pandemic and was mentioned by some groups as was children's own experience of racism. Children's experiences of racism were also talked about in the groups. Referring to Black Lives Matter protests, one primary aged child said that there were violent protests and people could get hurt. Another in the same year group said the government should get rid of the reason for the protests, and it wasn't right that someone had been killed for just walking down the street. It was unclear whether those children who wanted to stop protests were against the protest itself or the reason for the protest, which they said

was racism. Two young people of Black/Black British backgrounds related a racist incident that they had experienced before Covid-19, when they had been abused in a shop and told to 'go back to Africa'. It had been reported to the police, but nothing had been done about it. One described experiencing racist bullying at school from other pupils, as well as a recent incident of sexual harassment. She said:

'This affected my life in both how I see and am seen.' (Secondary, Newcastle)

As a result, she restricted herself in terms of where she would go. In the case of the experience of racism meant they had 'taken up politics' and got involved in different movements such as Black Lives Matter, but including responses to Sarah Everard's murder and Global Warming. There had been, she said: 'lots of time to educate yourself'.

Another young person of global majority background described how her family had been harassed locally, with car tyres being slashed and things left outside the house:

'All lives matter. You shouldn't judge by the colour of someone's skin.' (Secondary, Newcastle)

A comment from one child told us how unfriendly our pre-Covid-19 lives can be to people's religions, in their observation that:

'Fasting was easier (during Ramadan). ... can just lie in bed in the day.' (Secondary, Middlesbrough)

Please draw us a picture or write about what is important to you now (for example, going back to school)…

I think the most important thing now is to try and Stay in School and not going into another lockdown. Remembering hands, face, Space.

Legal changes to the rules of social interaction were taken extremely seriously by children and young people we spoke with. In our early focus groups, the rules scared children:

'You couldn't go near anyone. It was like the apocalypse.' (Primary/Secondary, Regionwide)
'Some people play out, but I don't want to catch something.' (Primary, Gateshead)

Like adults, children and young people took time to understand the seriousness of Covid-19:

'At first, I didn't think it was a real thing. Now I realise it is.' (Primary, Newcastle)

Please draw us a picture or write about what is important to you now (for example, going back to school)…

Wash hands every day

Soap

Soap

We found that children and young people gave thoughtful and considered answers to their situation that demonstrated they were internalising safety requirements such as social distancing. This showed that they had really thought about how to deal with a difficult situation and that they wanted to do the right thing to keep people safe. In the pictures that children sent us, the main aspect of the restrictions that they drew was the two metre social distancing between people. There were one or two drawings depicting being tested for Covid-19 but these were exceptions. When children did have socially distanced visits to relatives, this included waving through a window or from outside the garden, and was bittersweet:

'It was nice to see them but sad.' (Primary, Durham)
'I felt like my cousins were in a cage and I couldn't see them.' (Primary, Durham)
In one Primary aged group, all had worn masks, but there was a general dislike of them. Another young person said they 'had to self-isolate twice' (Secondary, Regionwide).

In one young group (Primary, Durham) repeated by many others there was agreed dislike of the Covid-19 test:

'I cry when I get it up my nose. It feels too weird – tests.'
'I run away from my mam when she wants to do the test.'

By the time the rules had been relaxed, we saw attitudes changing:

'I've had Covid twice and wasn't that sick, so I'm not worried. I know it doesn't change you.' (Primary, Durham)

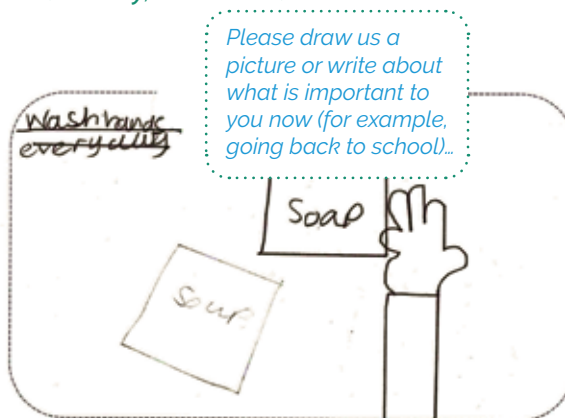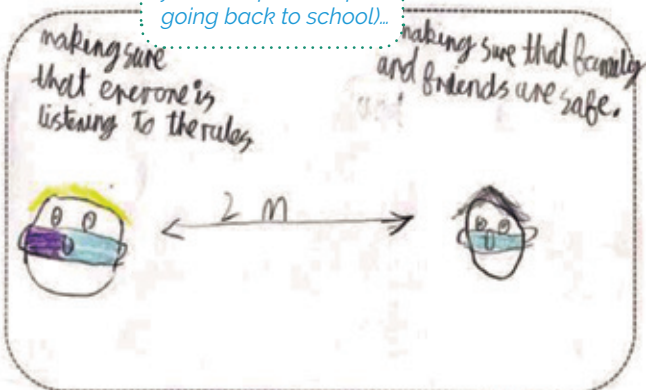*Please draw us a picture or write about what is important to you now (for example, going back to school)...*

going shopping wering face masks

Many young people were *'angry'* and found it *'annoying'* that the virus could continue to spread and that they wouldn't be able to see their families because of other people not following the rules. They talked about being worried about catching the virus at school and taking it home because some people at school were not following the rules (Youth service, 13-18 years). Children worried about the thousands of people who were dying and, at the same time when they were out and about, they were seeing so many people not wearing masks. Some spoke about young people not wearing masks and thought that the age should be lowered for young children to wear masks so they couldn't pass it on. Those of all ages talked about how, during the later lockdowns, people were not following the rules like they did in the first lockdown, and this worried them.

Please draw us a picture or write about what is important to you now (for example, going back to school)...

making sure that everone is listening to the rules

making sure that family and friends are safe.

2 M

Children and young people were also confused by the rules and were aware of the stressful impact of the pandemic on their lives. Some had strong views on the actions the authorities should be taking:

'The government has the right to have a lockdown – but they also need to think about mental health.

'The government haven't learned from the first lockdown, and things are just going in circles.' (Secondary, Northumberland)

Some were just confused by the contradictions in sitting next to someone at school but not being permitted to see them socially after school:

'It's made me a bit confused. I don't get why you have to stick to the rules.' (Primary, Gateshead)

Young people were aware of the stressful impact on them of the Covid-19 rules, especially those in schools, and wanted the authorities to have more awareness of this impact. Their frustrations were often directed not at school staff but at more distant levels of government. One boy explained:

'In the summer, I wrote a letter to Boris Johnson, talking about how coronavirus has affected (my) life.' (He didn't get an answer.) (Primary, Gateshead)

Another asked:

'Will Boris see this? Tell him, "You're a fat knack and your haircut is shit. Stop caring about it so much and get us out of lockdown."' (Secondary, North Tyneside) '(messaging from Boris inconsistent) Keep you off school and then back.... Setting a date and then extending it.... Doesn't have a clue'. (Primary/Secondary, Hartlepool)

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found difficult about life recently (for example, not seeing friends)...

Not being able to travel to see relitives.

Some thought the government should be taking more action, including imposing tighter rules:

'Changing the regulations when you have close contact with someone who has had Covid. Tighten the rules for isolation.' (Secondary, Middlesbrough)

Another group (College, Durham) had contradictory views on how to deal with people who broke the rules:

'People should be fined straight away for going out.'
'So many people are getting fined – too many people.'
'I don't trust what is being said.' This latter comment was echoed by others in the group.
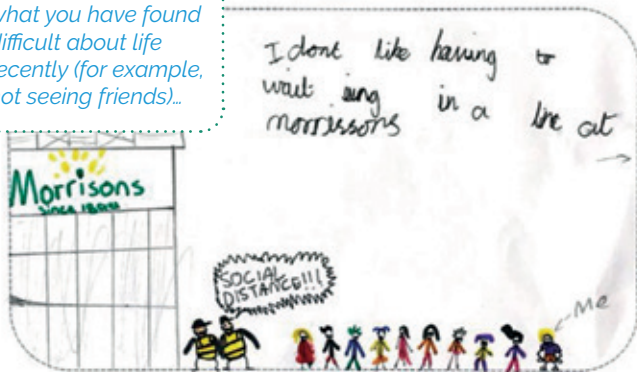
One group of older young people (Secondary, Northumberland) worried about anti-maskers and vulnerable people. They said that there should be stricter rules in place, for example border health controls. They seemed generally frustrated with some of the strategies from government and said that *'Eat out to help out'* was the *'worst idea'*. They also expressed concern about people being *'paid £500 for getting Covid'*. Another group of young people (College, Durham) had a strong distrust of official communications, backed up by their analysis: for example the link between 'Eat out to help out' and an increase in cases, and members of households being in different bubbles at school and work and travelling on buses. There was real anger from another group about the government handling of the pandemic:

'They try to make us feel bad by that "look them in the eyes" advert – but they caused it. They opened up shops and had "Eat out to help out"… The infections increased… We had a few weeks out of lockdown, then back in, then they go back to opening up.'

We found it interesting – and surprising - how often the 'Eat out to help out' policy was spoken about negatively by a number of different groups.

Varied views were expressed about the vaccine from a number of different groups of varied ages. Many worried, but for very different reasons:

'I'm worried that the vaccine isn't going to work.'
(Secondary, Sunderland)

'I'm worried that the vaccine might be dangerous.'
(Secondary, Sunderland)
'My dad thought the vaccine was fake. I just listened.'
(Primary, Newcastle)

A group wanted to talk a lot about the vaccine. One from the group (Secondary, South Tyneside) talked about the pressure they felt to get vaccinated and talked about examples of people who had had bad experiences of vaccinations, and they were worried that 'they are not helping people'. They felt the vaccines had 'been rushed' without proper testing or trials, and they talked about information that was being recorded of people dying of Covid-19 who had actually died of other things. One young person said that they didn't feel that young people were being taken into account or that they were getting enough information about the vaccine. The majority of young people we spoke to from other groups were keen to have the vaccine and saw it as a positive thing. Many looked forward to being an eligible age group so they could access the vaccine, and they saw this as an entitlement to look forward to:

'For me it's mixed feelings. The news says not until 12 years old but, when I get it, it'll help because when vaccinated people mix they pass it on less. My mam and dad are triple vaccinated. I'd like that too.'
(Primary, Durham)
'… fair that kids get it last because kids are affected less than grownups.' (Primary, Durham)
'My dad's done so we'll be able to go on holiday.'
(Primary, Durham)

Another child wanted vaccines to be available to other countries:

'Scientists should make a vaccine for everyone, even kids or people who can't afford it.' (Primary, Newcastle)

Young people had views on the more general impact of Covid-19 on society:

'... more continuation of political movements, issues, people speaking out.' (Secondary, Durham)

Sometimes this led to discussion of more general concerns about the future:

'... feel we're going to get lower salaries, everyday living harder. Crime rate has gone up, and more anti-social behaviour.' (Secondary, Middlesbrough)

There was a strong sense of the North-South divide:

'I feel we've been overlooked in the North East.' (Secondary, Durham)
'We didn't get any respect. Government took action when it [Covid-19] affected the South.' (Secondary, Durham)

Children talked about watching the news and seeing reports of more crimes because they think there are fewer people about, so there is more chance for criminals to commit crimes (8-10yrs).

Many had great uncertainties about the future and whether the pandemic would ever end. Some worried about this and some were accepting. A secondary-aged young person in one of the groups said:

'I'm worried that the virus isn't going to stop.' (Secondary, Sunderland)

They talked about general concerns like worrying that things will change because of the virus. One young person at college worried about the world that babies were about to be born into, thinking of her sister having a baby soon. Other young people talked about worrying about *'what is going to happen and if it's going to get worse.' (Secondary, Sunderland)*

One primary aged group we spoke to (Primary, Newcastle) had a greater awareness of the global impact of Covid-19 than found in any other group. Many said they had had concerns and worries, mostly related to family members and the wider community catching Covid-19. This might have been due to the situation in India, which had been covered extensively in the news in the previous week, and the spreading of the India variant. Many talked about relatives in different countries who were ill or had died:

'... worried about grandma's sister who is ill in India and has nobody to care for her.'
'Grandma [in Libya] got really sick. Dad would call and ask how she was.'
'... worried about family. Mum is sick and doesn't tell us. Mum's friend died in childbirth in Afghanistan.'
'... cousins have virus. Hope it doesn't get worse again.'

Two other groups in the same school (Primary, Newcastle) in Years 3 and 4 spoke of the death of family members, including several in different countries:

'... sad for all the people who died including ten relatives – five in Newcastle, five in Bangladesh.'
'... bit sad. Thousands of people died. My uncle died.'
'... sad. Dad's brother died in Pakistan.'
'I felt sad and worried about what is happening in India and Pakistan. My grandma in India passed away.'

Taking Stock

We spoke to a few groups in 2022 when things were easing a lot. Life was starting up again. There was a variety of possibilities and concerns on their minds from wanting to preserve the time they had found with their families to taking their lives forward. They wanted everyone to have access to the vaccine and for lockdown to be a thing of the past. They spoke, as they had earlier in the pandemic, of tackling racism and giving to people who have less.

Many looked forward to the lifting of restrictions:

'(What is good recently) It is hard to choose anything good… But I think looking at the future is definitely a good thing. With the government plan and everything. Planning by June 21st to be out of lockdown with no restrictions.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)

As restrictions lifted even further, children and young people reflected on international events, the continued impact of the pandemic, and on government actions. Whilst some hated the restrictions of the pandemic they were not sure it was wise to lift them:

'It's like the lockdowns went to waste because we['re] back to square one.' (College, Durham)

They could see the continuing impact of Covid-19, which did not always make sense:

'We're still told to isolate at the Nursery if we test positive, even though it's not [a] legal [requirement].' (College, Durham)

However, one group (College, Durham) was very concerned about the impact on the very young children they looked after in their nursery placement. Early years college students noticed the impact on other children:

'… can tell they've not been to Nursery.'
'… not independent.'
'… coming into school has been a shock for them.'
'You can tell they are not socialised.'
'They haven't done this as much as other kids would normally at their age because they went through lock-down.'

They were amazed to hear about another emergency:

'Covid isn't on the news anymore. No, they don't mention it anymore. It's all about this war.' (College, Durham)
'We've just lived through a pandemic and now we've got possible World War 3.' (College, Durham)

But, for some, life was starting up again:

'… started a new placement and they offered me a job within two weeks, so now I just come into college one a day week. I love it. I've got my uniform now and my fob to get in too.' (College, Durham)
'(Important now is) My tournament going ahead and my sport restarting.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)
'I can go camping now and ride my motorbike and go fishing. I can go see my family and friends. I can even go to Appleby horse fair.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)

The best thing about lockdown was spending more time with our animals.

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found good about life recently (for example, spending time with family)…
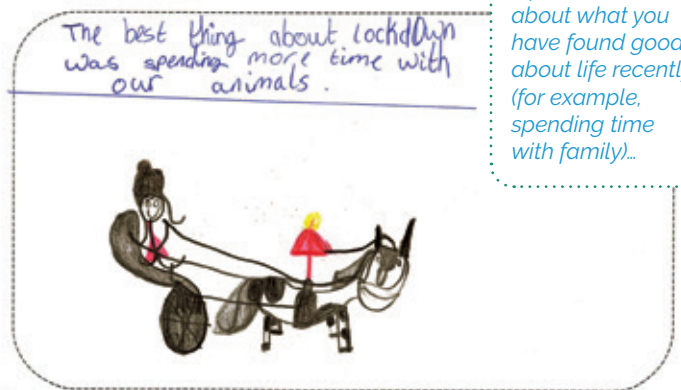
The news that the government had broken Covid-19 rules was commented on by several:

'He threw a party in lockdown.' (Primary, Durham)
'He made the rules then broke them.' (Primary, Durham)
'My mam says he's making people think that the rules aren't important. People will think why should I.' (Primary, Durham)
'They have to stick to the rules.' (Primary, Durham)
'They should be demoted.' (Primary, Durham)

Children and young people saw the positive impact on society of people's responses to the pandemic. They liked the mutual aid activity and other community supports, such as provided by local charities and community centres. Children wanted such social responses to continue:
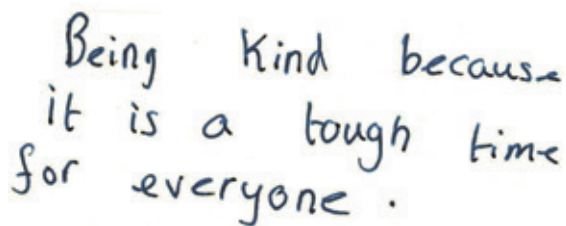
'… people pulling together and helping each other, like neighbours were all helping each other in the beginning, but people aren't doing that now.' (College, Sunderland)

'In life I have found that we are all given an equal shot a life, even though some people get it hard, they are the ones who try hard and work to get it right, they are the ones who stand up for others, even though they can barely stand themselves. The ones who have it right don't know how the others feel. They are given everything to them, come from good families, sent to schools. But at the end of the day we are all humans. Ever since lockdown it's been harder for those.'
(Secondary, Sunderland)

Other young people were taking their own social action as a response to the pandemic. One young person from a college in Durham was inspired to go into counselling as a career after seeing the impact on mental health and recognising the strain that there has been on the NHS. We found many children and young people were active in the living of their lives, within the

restrictions, and open to the opportunities available to them and their personal and relational resources. This is apparent from all the previous sections, which show the steps many took, from eating healthily (to ward off the virus) to keeping in touch with family and friends, to being resilient during the varying degrees of lockdowns.

Being Kind because it is a tough time for everyone.

Resilience

As well as the negative impact of the pandemic, children and young people also spoke of what they had learned about themselves. There was a sense of challenge, of surviving and of what this told them about themselves that could be of use to them in the future. One young person talked about things like getting to know themselves better:

'It's good that some of these things have been brought up now because I would have only had to have dealt with them in the future. Now I have, it's out of the way.' (Secondary, Northumberland)

Another young person said:

'Good that you're getting to know yourself better. (Secondary, Northumberland)

Please draw us a picture or write about what you have found good about life recently (for example, spending time with family)...

Spending time with my dog

Lockdown had given many children and young people a different outlook:

'Lockdown was a challenge, and with every challenge there comes an opportunity. It's an opportunity to do things you've never done before.' (Secondary, Northumberland)
'I've been screaming because of how I felt, but now it's over and I survived a global pandemic.' (Secondary, Northumberland)
'It proves that you will be able to adapt. Through the pandemic everything changed. There were lots of changes in a short time, and it shows you can cope with all of it.' (College, Durham)
'Something that I now don't take for granted is now that things are returning to a sort of normal is seeing people and always do what makes you happy while you can' (Secondary, Sunderland)
'I used to think that it was important to go out but now I think that grades family and holiday is important.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)
'(Important to me now is) my education and my life but I have to get used to it.' (Secondary, North Tyneside)

Action cycles: Young people and researchers taking action

Young people were interested in knowing about the ever-changing national situation of the pandemic and thought about the many challenges and obstacles they faced. Our findings have shown this many times over. Young people were vocal about the things that they found hard, aspects they welcomed or came to appreciate, and the things that they have disagreed with but nevertheless had to withstand. They told us about specific concerns that were impacting their lives, for example using public transport and entering new stages of education, training and employment, and some groups expressed the desire to engage with others to bring about change that would support young people as they move forward.

The aim of this project was to address a serious gap in understanding the needs of children and young people aged five to 18 living in poverty in the context of Covid-19. We wanted to support children and young people to take their views and experiences directly to stakeholders and for this to make a difference to their lives. Therefore, early in the project, as soon as findings started to emerge from phase 1, we decided to go directly to stakeholders. The first theme, which surfaced as the only area in which there was more or less universal concern (even more so than learning online at home), was travelling by public transport. In Spring 2021, young people met online with managing directors and senior representatives from Stagecoach, Go North East, Nexus and Arriva. This meeting was preceded by a meeting with us to help them prepare their requests. At the meeting, young people were able to share their concerns, ask questions and make requests. The public transport providers responded directly to the young people, provided further information and agreed to look into key action points, such as increased signage to remind the public to wear masks and keep windows open, and take them back to their companies. We have produced a separate written case study of the action on transport available from the project website https://www.voicesproject.co.uk/.

We carried out a similar action initiative on employment with a different group of young people in an area that emerged from phase 2 focus groups as causing great concern. This was about young people's future and access to jobs. How on earth, they asked, were they going to find jobs when they had not been able to gain any work experience during this crucial time? This and other concerns were taken to officials in the North of Tyne Authority, the North East Confederation of British Industry, the National Citizens Service, the NE Chamber of Commerce, the TUC, Sunderland Software City and a number of local employers, including Newcastle United Foundation, Accenture, UNISUS, Soil Machine Dynamic Ltd and Bowmer and Kirkland. We have written a separate

case study of this work reported on the **VOICES** website. In our case study reports on both Transport and Employment we give the first and last words to young people. We started with their concerns and ended with asking them how this was for them and what they got out of this.

One decision made by the young people was to see whether it was possible to have a 'Youth employment charter for the North East' accepted by the business community. They wanted the charter to challenge employers to meet young people's needs, and to do this it would include the following demands:

- To advertise jobs that require no experience and provide full on-the-job training

- To have more open communication from employers about their expectations of young people when advertising jobs

- To work more actively with schools and colleges in recruiting young people

- To reassure young people by clearly stating Covid-19 health and safety measures on job advertisements

- To provide an alternative to online home working to open up the jobs market to young people who do not have appropriate devices and resources

- To treat young people with kindness in supporting them into the workplace.

The case study tells the full story. However, we asked children in one of our follow-on focus groups (College, Durham) what they thought of the idea of the employers' charter that has been co-produced with young people as part of VOICES. They were asked for their opinion and whether they would raise the charter with their employer. The young people replied:

'My employer would just ignore it.'
'I think you could show them, but if there's nothing to say they have to act on it what's the point?'
'I think I do get treated different at work, so I like the idea of it.'

We think their responses may well sadly be wise and realistic. However, this work is ongoing and, with further actions by young people, success is always possible!

The boxes contain two other case studies of the action cycles on digital use and on health.

DIGITAL USE CASE STUDY

Building on the conversations we had across the focus groups about digital use, there was almost universal agreement that the amount of time young people had spent online had increased. Many talked about wanting to cut down the time they spent online, and it was not really seen as positive by either young people or adults. At the same time, many children and young people very much enjoyed having the opportunity to increase their time gaming and doing other digital activities. However, they had generally disliked online schooling. We were interested in the seeming contradiction – that young people said they used devices too much and yet liked having more time using them during lockdowns.

Sunderland Software City is an organisation that works with the North East regional tech sector and the government to enhance technology in businesses and improve skills in technology. A manager from the organisation was a member of the **VOICES** project advisory group and was interested in finding out more about the views of young people and developing learning resources around this. In particular she wanted to build on the idea that the skills the young people had developed would be relevant to their future careers. A session was set up as a workshop, led by Sunderland Software City, with some Year 8 students from a Sunderland Secondary school, some of whom had been involved in previous focus groups.

In planning this work and the workshop with the young people the following were identified as desired outcomes:

Secondary school staff: to have some learning material that could be used in other lessons to link technology and careers.

Sunderland Software City staff: to understand the perspectives of young people with regard to technology, and to have material that could be incorporated into their programme both with young people, and potentially also their teachers.

Voices Research Team: to show how the views of young people are shaping and influencing external organisations.

The workshop

In the workshop, we found out that children used: Online friends, Xbox, Adopt me, Phones, PlayStation, Watch, Switch, Laptop, iPad and PC.

When asked, 'How does technology make you feel?', the young people responded:

'Feel good – reminds me of all the things I can do.'
'Free – I can chill and do whatever I want to do. Mum is not nagging me about tidying my room.'
'Entertained.'
'Relaxing.'
'Just sit back and relax.'

And when asked 'What do your parents think?' the young people responded:

'… worst thing that has ever happened to me.'
'… want me to use it less.'
'As long as it is not on all the time, it is OK.'

When asked what skills they were learning when using technology, the responses were: IT skills, communication, brain muscles/muscle memory, problem solving, researching, reading skills, time management, stop motion, changing wallpaper on phone, apps, editing/drawing, doing mood boards, formatting, how to learn online and not just in school, self-discipline, and Teams.

They didn't know what 'the tech sector' was. Jobs they aspired to were: artist, actor, dancer, ecologist, animal conservationist, air traffic controller, architect, graphic designer, investment/finance, paediatrician.

Outcome

Sunderland Software City designed part of a digital-use curriculum informed by their experience on our advisory group and the workshop with the young people. They piloted this in the school the young people attended with a view to rolling it out to other schools. At time of publishing this report the curriculum was being piloted.

HEALTH ACTION CASE STUDY

'You can't have health without politics,' said a group of 11 year old children (Primary, Durham).

Six children from Years 3 and 6 in a rural primary school in county Durham met three times in February 2022 to consider the health messages they wanted to put out to the world from their experience of the pandemic. These meetings took place at the time of the easing of many restrictions. Children were very aware of the impact of Covid-19 on their lives and had much to say.

An increase in physical exercise, particularly walking, had remained.

'Even in the snow we can walk.'
'I just got into football 'cos of lockdown.'

They were very happy that activities had opened up.

'The reason I left cubs is 'cos it was online.'
'We go to netball club at the leisure centre. I was sad when I couldn't go.'
'I'm so more grateful for my sports club.'

Talking about lockdown made them remember how they did not like home school. They said that they are a lot more aware of things that before they would have taken for granted. This includes worry about health in crowded spaces, gratitude for now being able to do what used to be taken for granted, like weekly activities:

'My normal basis has changed due to lockdown. You have to worry about things you didn't before.'
'… just to be with everyone again. You had the pain of missing people. You have to learn how you manage when you worry about things.'

Without any prompting by the researcher, the political awareness we had noticed in our earlier focus groups was still present in this group. An activity making posters for other children had them wanting to issue advice for different agencies including schools, hospitals and the government.

Children were cautious about relaxing restrictions, taking a view that rules were needed to stop Covid-19 returning. They saw a disparity between the consequences of rule breach and attitudes to rule following between the public and the government:

'They have to stick to the rules.'
'They should be demoted.'
'Boris Johnson is a silly man going on about cake.'

They felt strongly that removal of restrictions would have consequences but were uncertain as to the best restrictions for the future:

'They should keep social distancing like tapes on [the] seat.'
'If we'd closed our borders and took a proper decision, we might not have had the lockdowns.'

The children unanimously articulated the desire to avoid further lockdowns. Children designed posters of their messages.

Comics

We returned to some of our focus groups to carry out more extended conversations and activities with 70 children and young people about how they were experiencing life at the time. This work was carried out in two primary schools, a secondary school, a college and two youth organisations. The geographical area this work covered included Durham, Middlesbrough, Newcastle, Northumberland, and Redcar and Cleveland. This was a time that went quickly from a feeling that Covid-19 was easing to another rise in infections and consequences for the ways that schools and youth organisations were able to operate and further pressures on children, young people and their families. Three comic artists, Lily Daniels, Faye Stacey and Sara Qaed were first given some of the focus group data and some of the drawings to use to produce their own comic. They used this as a starting point to work with children and young people to produce their responses. Here and on page 8 we reproduce the artists' comics plus a selection of the comics and posters designed with children and young people with the researcher team.

Faye Stacey and a researcher worked with young people from a Durham College to produce the first comic below. The theme was what they went through, transport as transition. The second comic is Faye Stacey's own response to children's quotes about public transport during the pandemic.
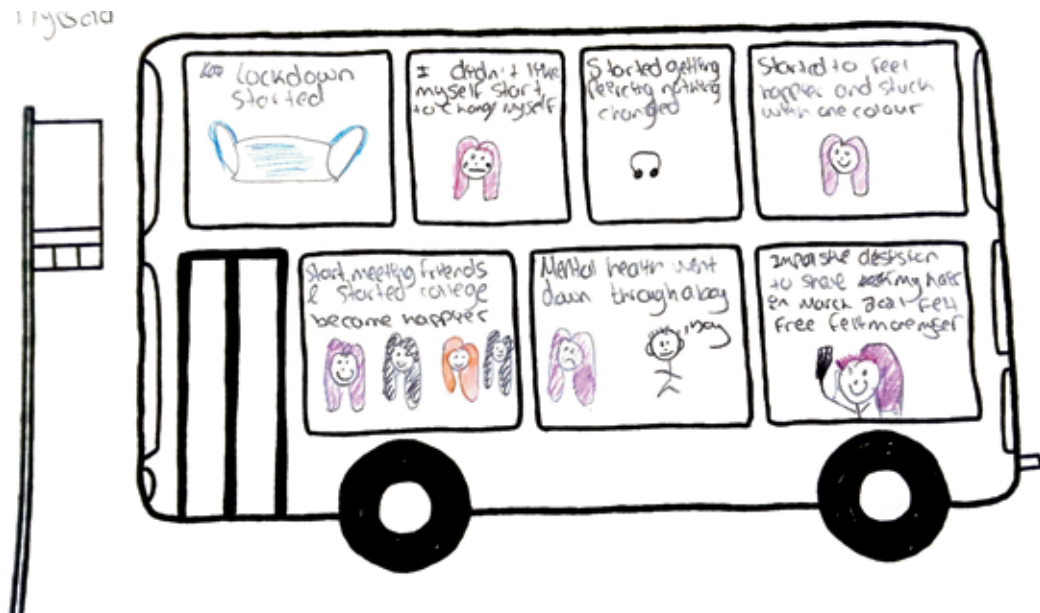
VOICES ON FOOD DURING LOCKDOWN

My family started a new routine where we all meet together at 9pm for a cup of tea

We eat more junk food and takeaways

We eat more fruit and vegetables such as carrots, broccoli, apple, banana

I eat less because there is less money. My mam's job only covers bills and dad is self employed

It was easier to stay healthy in the first lockdown as the weather was better but it has been harder during the winter

You have more time in the house and food is just there.....you can go downstairs and get some sweets

These comics are respectively the work of artists Lily Daniels (left hand) and Sara Qaed (right) in response to the children's focus group quotes.

Discussion of Findings

Whilst children have apparently been less susceptible to catching Covid-19 than adults, it is clear from our findings and many other studies (see Voices Technical Report https://www.voicesproject.co.uk/) that Covid-19 has had a significant impact on all aspects of children's lives. This 18-month co-produced study of the experience of 1780 children and young people living throughout the North East is a raw retelling of the detail of experiences during this time. It is important too to note that the majority of those we engaged with are living in circumstances in which their communities are dealing with a decade or more of structural poverty. Here we reflect on some of the main issues arising from our findings that lead to our recommendations. Recommendations are found in the executive summary at the start of this report. Our Technical Report contains literature that relates to some of the themes in this discussion.

Covid-19 has had a reach into every aspect of the lives of children and young people. One of the most striking aspects of our findings was the range of things children wanted to talk about. This suggests the impact of Covid-19 into many or indeed all aspects of their lives. This range of findings is not explained by the list of potential topics we asked children about, since we structured our conversations in such a way as to take the lead from them in the areas that interested them. Whilst this report is organised in themes (relationships, education at home and at school, health and wellbeing, activities, inequalities, digital lives, transport, Covid-19 and the wider world, taking stock and resilience), life is not so clearly structured. These themes overlap and are interconnected in children's lives. In children's experience of life, Covid-19 has changed everything for them. Some told us they will now be worried about crowded spaces, and many are concerned about visiting loved ones and unwittingly passing on ill health. This might or might not change over time, but even if it fades it seems likely to remain a lingering concern.

The long-term impact of Covid-19 on children and young people is unknown. In phase 4 of the project, we returned to some groups to talk to them again a few months after our first visit and to others to carry out a few repeat visits for a more in-depth conversation. We gained a sense that some things had returned to what they were like before the pandemic but that many issues continued. There is a need for more longitudinal research. It seems very important to know, for example, how problems experienced by children and young people have influenced the ways in which they are able to live their lives going forward. Many experienced problems in areas such as sleep, eating, exercise and mental health. We do not know whether these were short-term problems or still continue. It is possible that, for some, the narrower horizons experienced will shape how they see their future and will alter their life course, and, for others, the sense of having survived something of great magnitude could enhance resilience in relation to future challenges they experience. However, without further research we will not know the long-term impact of Covid-19. There is arguably an ethical imperative to continue this research.

The implications for the quality of learning and attainment levels are likely to be long lasting. There will be gaps and misconceptions. A 15-year old exam year student told one of the research team that it was the Year 2 children who have never yet had a full proper year in school that was concerning him. We heard from every age group about the varied concerns children and young people have, such as about subject learning, practical experiences, placements that they have missed, treasured activities they have missed and might not now be capable of doing, and more. Opportunities to consolidate learning will be needed at every stage. For most, this may be achieved though high-quality teaching in schools. For others, this could perhaps be in the form of catch-up clinics. The government has made some provision for additional tutoring support, although this has not been without problems (Fazackerley, 2022). It should also be recognised that some children have not returned to school and therefore may not benefit from school catch-up actions.

Children and young people are likely to need 'catch up' not just in academic learning but in the chance to develop relationships, in their social and emotional learning, in skill development, and in a range of opportunities that they have missed. There is a need for further research into what it is that has been missed, what has been caught up with and where the continuing needs and gaps are. Our research suggests that this analysis needs to be carried out carefully and systematically. One of the main areas that children have missed out on has been developing and maintaining relationships, with some children finding that their friendships have changed or completely disappeared during lockdown, leaving them unsure how to develop new friendships. What is needed now, therefore, is a new form of listening in the organisations that children and young people engage with or use to work with them about what their varied needs will be going forward.

It is likely that the educational catch-up needs of each age group will need separate and careful consideration. Taking the situation of young people in exam years, those we spoke to were very concerned. A few months after all Covid-19 rules were removed in the UK, schools continued to be under pressure from the impact of Covid-19 (Weale, 2022). Teachers were unable to teach the full curriculum, and yet exams were due to return just a few months later. Young people were concerned about missed teaching and practical classes, exam readiness, and how prepared they would be for further studies or work. Many were also concerned about whether exam arrangements would again change the ways in which they would be administered or results would be calculated. The impact on young people's exams from 16+ years and on their futures is another area that needs future consultation with young people (and parents and those working with young people) and research.

A striking finding from this research is **how important schooling is to children and young people of all ages**. The importance of educational attainment to children's futures is rehearsed frequently in the media and in academic literature, both directly and indirectly. However, it is not often that the message is clearly made about how much children and young people of all ages feel that they need schools. The messages more often communicated about schools are about attainment, not about children and young people's lives and their views about education. But what is perhaps even more relevant, and was another striking finding from our research, is what it is about schooling that is so important. Curricular learning in school was of course of importance and much missed when schools were closed for the majority of children. However, what is crucial is that the importance of schools to children was about far more than teaching and learning.

We learned that children and young people miss multiple aspects of schooling, particularly the way schools provide them with relational communities through the people in schools and through the ways they are structured. The unusual circumstances of the pandemic have enabled us to learn about what schooling means to children in a unique way. They missed their friends and they missed their teachers. They wanted the day-to-day interaction and relationships. We found out that there are multiple impacts on children. Not having the structure of school impacted negatively on children and young people's sleep, eating, and physical and mental health more generally. When schools had to restrict children's contact with others, this had an impact on how children felt, and on their relationships, and not just on how they learned. Schools are relational

organisations, and when this is changed in a way that deprives people of those they want to relate to, this is not easy for them. Children have lost out on the social side of school. This is true in terms of developing friendships and independence, and especially for those who transitioned at any stage during the pandemic. While those key points have been missed, schools and other youth and education establishments should look at how they might introduce opportunities to develop social skills in the coming years. Maybe this means extra rewards or recognition or particular kinds of events.

Ways in which the materiality of schooling, the tools of learning and school resources, and the structure of the school day are key parts of the relational culture of schools became very apparent during the pandemic. These are aspects of schooling that are not usually recognised. Restrictions on physically handling things that had recently been touched by someone else, using shared pencils or one's own, altered the way in which teaching was arranged and experienced. The rules about sharing school equipment or keeping one's own were changed during Covid-19. Lunch arrangements were altered. Children missed many aspects of the school structure, including practices, such as rituals and milestones of the school day, week and year. More listening to children and young people is needed, to find out about what they have missed and why. There is a need to consider whether there are still actions that can be taken by the school in response to these omissions.

The centrality of schools to communities has never been so visible as during the pandemic. Multiple ways schools were missed and what was valued in the return to school demonstrate the importance of schools to communities. We have seen through words and drawings powerful ways in which schools support children, young people and their families. This was emphasised in the way that so many schools in the pandemic provided crucial services, including counselling, activities, the loan of digital devices, child protection, family support and the distribution of food and other resources for families. Our project, indeed, grew from such activity. It arose from the partnerships between our organisations and schools in delivering activity resource packs to families across the North East. We heard during our focus groups that a teacher gave her computer to a pupil since resources promised by the government had not arrived. Many children and young people spoke to us of the wider things they appreciated about their schools other than lessons. We need to reposition schools as essential for communities, not just as exam factories. Now is the time to rethink schools as

organisations that are centres for the entire community. There are proven effective models such as extended schools, children's zones and children's communities that deserve investment.

There is an opportunity now for a discussion of the value of school and education, and of the kind of education that society wants to have. Ofsted might take this as an opportunity to recalibrate how 'quality' is defined and measured, including the relational, support and community aspects of the roles of schools. Education policy continues to be focused on academies. The 2022 education white paper (Department for Education, 2022) included little that suggested learning from the pandemic, apart from funding for catch-up tutoring and opportunities for local authorities in managing academies.

Children and young people's health and in particular mental health for very many has been compromised during the pandemic. We heard reports from so many children and young people of all ages and backgrounds about the adverse effects. What we do not know is how long lasting these negative experiences of their health will be. However, the increase in mental health concerns for children and their families is likely to have a legacy.

Life over the last two years living through Covid-19 has been very miserable, lonely, difficult and boring for many children and young people. The pandemic has had a profound and often negative impact on their relationships, their physical health and their mental health. This has been confirmed by other research (see VOICES Technical Report). Many have exercised less and have found themselves adopting unhealthy habits in eating and sleeping. The pandemic has strained family relationships and led to much loss in terms of deaths of people close to children, not being able to see those they are close to due to the Covid-19 rules, and friendships that have ended. Some blamed themselves for their problems, and others did not want to burden those close to them with their problems.

Loss has been an important theme for children's lives in Covid-19, from activities stopping, the lack of direct contact with family and friends and the death of people close to them. Whilst loss is part of everyday life, the reason for those absences, Covid-19, is unusual.

We do not know how much children have matured during Covid-19 and how much they still need to process what has happened or what experiences they need for further development. What stands out from many of the identified themes is how much the different aspects of children's lives are interrelated and how much they were aware of this.

During Covid-19 children and young people took actions they could to keep healthy, but many found this difficult. They varied in the actions that are available to them to try to put things right, which was dependent on their home circumstances and on the resources they could access, including the degree of helpful information. They did not always have access to the information they needed to address problems, for example in sleeping and eating.

There are also children and young people who have found personal benefits from the experience of the pandemic. Some have welcomed the chance to slow down, enjoy home or their own company. Some have also taken the opportunity to re-evaluate what is important to them and what they do and don't want (such as certain friendships). We also know that some children and young people feel that what they have been through in the pandemic will strengthen them for future challenges. Despite this, we think it likely that most children and young people, like adults, will need time to process their experiences, feelings and views during and as a response to Covid-19.

The nature of our findings does not allow us to say whether children and young people as a result of Covid-19 have experienced an increase in the kind of mental health problems that need professional support. Children and young people did need increasing access to professional help in the years leading up to Covid-19.

Whilst there are debates about what form support from schools and other organisations and services should take our data leads to some recommendations. Perhaps one benefit of the pandemic is that it has helped young people to see mental health as part of their health and wellbeing and encouraged more open discussion of mental health issues. There is an opportunity here for those running PSHE classes in schools to bring out into the open conversations about how children are feeling and ways of supporting themselves and each other. There is a need that was clear from our findings for children and young people to have access to more information from schools and other organisations and services to help them to stay healthy.

Children and young people's understanding from our findings of the link between mental health and all other parts of life is a reminder that action on mental health does not have to be direct to be effective. Actions in other areas such as relationships, activities, employment and education also impact on mental health.

As for further recommendations we suggest the involvement of children and young people in the co-production of appropriate services. Mental health is a topic that lends itself well to an action cycle with children and young people but carrying this out was alas beyond our project capacity. Children and young people are well able to co-produce ideas about possible provisions as long as they are doing this with practitioners who are skilled in such work. Investing in Children[2] is a Durham County-based youth participation organisation that with young people has been developing a range of services in school to support mental health needs.

Children and young people greatly increased their time using digital activities for leisure and social purposes and for schooling. They were using a very varied range of games platforms and pursuing other digital interests. Some children were online during the pandemic for many hours per day and per week. We heard from children and young people how much they had liked in lockdown being able to be online for longer for games and other social media uses. Some thought that long periods online were excessive; indeed, some were shocked, and many tried to cut down. However, some thought this was normal.

Accessing school learning via digital platforms was almost universally disliked. Children missed the structure of the school day, the direct support of teachers and the day-to-day interaction with friends and other young people. Online experiences could not replace their face-to-face activities and it was not always good for keeping up with friends and family. However, the online learning experience has intensified the move to digital learning, and all educators are now more practised in using technology. This has implications for future resourcing the need for equal access to digital devices. Although emergency home learning was largely a negative experience for children and young people it is clear that the quality of it varied. Now is an ideal time to look at the best of online learning practice and develop case studies of good practice.

Many of the shortcomings of online activity are recognised by children and young people. One aspect of digital use that some children referred to was safety, whether in terms of bullying or the unwelcome images they could see. Children and young people need age-appropriate ways to explore digital safety, know who to go to for help and build the skills and vocabulary for managing their digital lives.

From what we heard from children and young people, the digital world is a topic that raises hot debate and strong views amongst them. Our findings show that they very much value many digital activities even if they did not like learning digitally from home and even if some online dangers are recognised. Given the concerns about excessive use and safety, it could be easy for us to conclude solely that there is a need to educate children and young people about the dangers and have the aim of reducing time on devices. However, our understanding of what children and young people were saying suggests that both they and adults have more to learn than this.

Our conversations demonstrated much of what children and young people value about their digital activities, including the ways they feel good as a result of being online, and we consider this is something adults need to pay more attention to. The same young people were very aware of the negative views that many adults hold of young people's use of phones, tablets and games. They said that that their parents wanted them to use their devices far less often.

We thought it likely that such awareness may have influenced some in our focus groups to tell us what they thought we wanted to hear when they told us that digital use in children should be cut back. It seemed to us that adults may need to hear more about what is valuable to children in their digital activities.

Our findings seem to point towards the need for a more open discussion between adults and children and young people about the feelings surrounding technology, about the time that is spent, and about where technology is helpful in terms of skill development, relationships, enjoyment and other purposes, and where it is not.

It is not only adults who need to learn. The skills benefits of using technology was commented on by a few young people. The nature of the skills children and young people are learning in using technology was something some young people were aware of but not others. There is a need to recognise and build upon the skills young people are developing in their widespread use of technology at the same time as increasing discussion of different feelings and views

[2] https://www.investinginchildren.net/

on the benefits and disadvantages of so much digital activity, including increasing education and debate on possible harms and safety implications. This was explored more fully in the work of VOICES with the secondary school and Sunderland Software City and is the subject of a video output (see Voices website https://www.voicesproject.co.uk/).

The digital world is now integral to our lives in all areas and essential to the ways in which we address any societal issue. Today's digitally engaged children and young people may have at their disposal untapped possibilities for the use of the digital in society, but it may be that we need to find ways to keep open a debate about this that may not be happening at the present time.

Covid-19 has brought threats to the children and young people's futures and their perspectives of their futures in many different ways. This has included their access to activities, to skill learning outside school, to practical classes, so they worry that they are not prepared for the next level of education. There has been a lack of work experience, so there are concerns about their ability to prove that they are able to apply for jobs. Covid-19 has impact on their identity and outlook, including fearfulness about the future, that has made some want to make safer decisions such as college and university options closer to home. Young people who worked with us in the action cycles on employment came up with the need for a youth employment charter. There is one already in existence The Good Youth Employment Charter - Youth Employment UK which needs updating to reflect the challenges facing young people as a direct consequence of Covid-19. Our recommendations in this area were co-produced with young people as part of the action cycles and reported in a separate case study (https://www.voicesproject.co.uk/).

Transport is an area in which children and young people had strong and virtually unanimous views at the start of the project in the second lockdown but their requests have changed over time. We have seen how important transport and in particular public transport, is to the lives of children and young people in enabling access to a range of educational, vocational, employment, cultural and leisure opportunities, all of which are crucial for young people's development and wellbeing.

It was interesting to see how some of those interviewed commented on bus drivers being strict and not allowing buses to be overcrowded, but others commented on buses having a lot of people on board and not everyone following mask or distancing guidelines. There is perhaps a difference between buses used solely for the school run and buses for the community, but these may be decisions made by the driver.

Covid-19 will have put a lot of people off wanting to use public transport and, at a time when protecting our environment is more important than ever before, it's going to be necessary to rebuild that trust in order to have fewer vehicles on the road.

Our recommendations in this area were like those in employment co-produced with young people as part of the action cycles and reported in a separate case study (https://www.voicesproject.co.uk/). Many young people wanted lower-cost or free travel, and we note that Scotland has introduced free bus travel for under 22s – Homepage - YPTS (freebus.scot). Our meetings of young people with transport providers in the North East have been very positive. We must ensure that we continue to listen to young people and respond, and to keep putting pressure on transport providers to ensure fair access for all.

We were interested in whether there was a difference in the experience of Covid-19 for children in more disadvantaged areas in comparison with those in more advantaged areas. A majority of the children and young people we engaged with in this research came from some of the most deprived UK neighbourhoods. Characteristics of the children and young people with whom we engaged were also varied, reflecting national and regional levels of diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

What we found was that all children and young people in all areas found life during Covid-19 extremely difficult in all the ways we have outlined. And at the same time there were children in both advantaged and disadvantaged groups who described finding new activities and aspects of life that they liked, such as spending more time with their family. We expected that there might be a difference in comments on home learning. However, comments from both were of almost universally about not liking having to access emergency schooling from home.

There were differences in some comments on access to digital devices and space at home. The digital divide is still gaping, and it was left to schools to give out many resources from their own funds. We had fewer comments from those in advantaged areas on the problems of space and access to devices for learning, but it was not the case that in advantaged areas all children had easy access to working devices and space to work. However, we did find comments from the children in advantaged areas about the purchase of additional digital devises that we did not find in disadvantaged areas.

We found comments about learning new skills and trying new activities from children from all areas. The activities available to children and young people is likely to be related to the financial resources available to families. Many activities have cost implications of fees and travel. We heard about the car being used more often than public transport, something that is likely to be less available to economically disadvantaged families.

The financial impact on families of Covid-19 is complex. There is evidence that poverty has increased overall during the pandemic. However the temporary £20 a week Universal Credit uplift that was removed in October 2021 seems to have made a real difference to some in that child poverty data published by DWP in March 2022 showed a fall nationally of around 400,000 from the previous year. Despite this, in 2020/21, the North East overtook London to have the highest rate of child poverty in the UK, at 38% - up from 37% the year before. This equates to just over 11 children in a classroom of 30. Some families that had not been struggling financially before Covid-19 were struggling due to the impact of Covid-19. This included working families and was likely to include families from both advantaged and disadvantaged areas. Poverty is likely to worsen further with increases in key costs of living.

Inequalities due to economic disadvantage in access to activities after and outside school are known and documented (Chanfreau et al., 2015). Children and young people were very vocal to us about what they missed during the pandemic. For some, the impact of having missed activities due to Covid-19 might change the future life that is now possible for them. This was certainly perceived to be the case by a young person whose training plans for sport achievements were cut short. There is much research on the benefits of out-of-school activities for children (Chanfreau et al., 2016).

There have been repeated calls to address inequalities in activities (Child Poverty Action Group, 2022). What is needed now, given the impact of Covid-19, is an immediate and visible increase in activities, clubs and experiences, including opportunities for learning new skills and gaining a range of experiences that are open to young people. They need to be accessible to children with a range of needs and, for most, they need to be provided free. Some schools and other organisations have agreed lists of activities that they want all children to experience (i.e. National Trust[3]). It is time now to recognise that children have missed out even more than before on a wide range of experiences at different

ages, broader than the curriculum, and to work with other organisations, providers and stakeholders to make sure that all gain access to these opportunities.

We heard from several groups in disadvantaged areas about the positive impact on them during Covid-19 of services, activities and resources that they and their families were able to access at times during the pandemic. This included play activities during the summer, help with food, and access to digital resources. They received this help from a variety of sources, including community centres, schools and youth organisations. There is much research on the value of comprehensive community initiatives such as extended schools and children's communities (Cummings et al., 2011, Dyson et al., 2016, Dyson et al., 2013, Cummings et al., 2007).

Child Poverty Action Group has called for funding for schools to develop extended provision. They have asked the government to: 'Provide a statutory framework and strategy with adequate additional, ring-fenced funding so schools in England can provide programmes, activities and services that go beyond the core function of classroom education; ensure every school has the funding and resources to provide comprehensive before- and after-school care, and holiday provision which is suitable for its pupils and families; and enable every school to provide additional services that support families in their community with their wider needs e.g., dedicated mental health and wellbeing practitioners, and welfare rights advice' (Child Poverty Action Group, 2021). Our evidence suggests that this kind of provision is very much needed now.

Young people from particular groups had something particular to say that often stood out in relation to what we heard from others. We therefore think this needs further research. One group of young people were so used to disruption in their lives that they accepted the changes due to Covid-19 as part of life as usual. We did not hear such a viewpoint from any other group. This was an older group, aged 15, from a pupil referral unit. A small number of children and young people, whose ages spanned a wide range, who were from some community groups spoke about how grateful they were for the activities, food and other support they had received from the organisations. Young children from some of the BAME communities we consulted were the few we heard from who spoke openly about deaths in their wider families from Covid-19. Some of these children also spoke about the racism they experienced in daily life. The needs of more able students are being lost in the concern to

[3] https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/50-things-to-do-before-youre-11--activity-list

cater for catch up and learning loss, with the risk – particularly in the disadvantaged – of loss of motivation and disengagement. Our research demonstrated the variety of experience across different groups of young people and the importance to find spaces for all children and young people to be heard. Certainly there is a need for research over time into the experiences and needs of particular groups in response to Covid-19.

What has surprised many people we have spoken to about our findings has been the clarity with which children have been able to voice their experiences. Our research, the variety of accounts of children and young people's views and experiences, and the examples in this research of many groups of young people being able and prepared to engage with us in processes that have taken their views into engagement with stakeholders, have demonstrated the importance of listening to young people. We have also seen in many of our focus groups the learning that the teacher or youth worker with them has had about their views. Often, in a busy school day, relationships are structured around the curriculum and around rules of interaction for the classroom, and this does not always leave space for children and young people to give accounts of their feeling, views and experiences. The strangers, our researchers, asked open questions with no agenda. What emerges from this, therefore, is a need for schools and other youth organisations to provide more opportunities for such engagement without an agenda and for children and young people to be listened to.

Children and young people's lives have been more politicised during the pandemic than ever before. By this, we mean that they have seen themselves (as a group) the subject of news broadcasts far more often than before. And they have been aware of news and have had questions and opinions. They had questions about a range of the political implications of Covid-19, such as racial inequalities. The urgency of the Black Lives Matter movement was mentioned by some.

They have felt blamed for having lower risk from Covid-19, for spreading it, and for the focus on their needs such as education. They have been aware of news and debates around the vaccine and the behaviour of adults during Covid-19. The actions of some adults have puzzled them. Hypocrisy of those in power was something that was mentioned frequently by children and young people who felt rules should apply to all.

Our focus groups with and pictures and writing from children and young people give a real insight into how they felt during Covid-19. They highlight how seriously children and young people took the situation. They spoke of the contradictions they noticed. When the government was enforcing strict distancing rules we heard that it felt odd getting onto a small bus with a lot of people.

Covid-19 saw a collision of children and young people's worlds. School and home were pushed together far more than before. As for adults, our worlds became focused on home. Previous non-digital socialising, which for many young people would involve exploring context away from home, was not possible. It was not surprising that digital activities gained much favour, enjoyment and time. There is a paradox here of a constraint to the home environment yet an explosion of awareness about health services, politics, the global reaction to the pandemic and much more. And engagement with these worlds was of course uneven, not least due to the digital divide, with family members sharing multiple devices and not having immediate digital access.

Whilst some people would hide children from such issues, the reality is that children's lives are not sheltered, but are deeply influenced by a range of inequalities and injustices, and there is usually some awareness of them. Children and young people need safe spaces to talk about their views and experiences. There is a growing number of approaches to community change in which children's views and experiences are placed centre stage and their stories listened to. These include poverty proofing (the audit approach developed by Children North East[4]) and community organising (with the place-based alliance Citizens UK[5]). An increasing number of schools (Chapleau, 2020) and other organisations involve children and young people in both approaches.

Children and young people have been demonstrably affected by the negative impacts of the pandemic, and this is particularly the case of those living in poverty. The VOICES project has demonstrated that children and young people are not passive recipients of change. They are actively engaged in shaping their lives. This research sets out a powerful youth-engaged agenda for change. Society owes it to them to step up.

[4] https://children-ne.org.uk/how-we-can-help/poverty-proofing-services/
[5] https://www.citizensuk.org/chapters/tyne-and-wear/

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Appendix 1 Voices Timeline

First Lockdown

March 23rd 2020

Schools close Mar 23rd.

June 1st phased lockdown easing. Primary schools, selected years open to all.

Schools re-open Sept 6th.

Second Lockdown

Nov 5th 2020

North East England in Tier 3 Dec 2nd.

Schools open to all Sept 1st and stay open.

Government provides holiday food for poorer families after Marcus Rashford joins national campaign.

Dec 8th, 1st Covid vaccine.

Third Lockdown

Jan 3rd 2021

National lockdown Jan 3rd.

Schools closed to most children Jan 6th, some reopen Mar 8th.

Key worker and vulnerable children attend school.

Some easing of lockdown from March with rule of 6.

Meeting outside from March 29th.

Many school groups having to self isolate.

2021

Schools open to all after Easter.

Sports and activities resume.

More easing of restrictions.

Many school individuals and groups having to self isolate.

2021

Schools stay open.

NHS roll out Covid vaccine for children 12 - 15 years old Sept 20th.

Pre - Project
March 2020 - Sept 2020

Phase 1
Oct 2020 - Dec 2020

Phase 2
Jan 2021 - March 2021

Phase 3
April 2021 - Aug 2021

Phase 4
Sept 2021 - July 2022

Pre - Project

Children North East deliver resource packs to families.

Newcastle University team and Children North East meet weekly to plan Covid response.

Phase 1

Focus groups in 11 organisations, 180 children.

Drawings from one organisation.

Phase 2

Online focus groups 24 organisations, 373 children.

Drawings from 9 organisations.

Co-produced action with young people on transport.

Phase 3

In person focus groups 36 organisations, 624 children

Drawings from 5 organisations.

Co-produced action with young people on transport and employment.

Phase 4

Comics groups and follow on focus groups with 70+ children in phase 4.

Follow-on focus groups in co-produced action continuing on transport, employment, health and digital activities with 30+ young people.

for everyone to be safe.