

England

Country Profile on the COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributor:

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for England (CRAE)

29.9%

Children at risk of poverty or social
exclusion (AROPE) in 2018 in the
whole of UK

Alternative Recommendations

Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the short term:

- The government needs to ensure that **all children are transitioning back to school successfully and children, in particular young children are kept in school during the future lockdowns as long as the evidence shows it is safe to do so**. Supporting children's mental health, well-being and reducing educational inequality should be at the heart of this.
- The government should put in place a **comprehensive strategy** that embraces a new vision of childhood to support children to recover from the impact of COVID-19 and ensure they join

health and the economy as the three pillars of the government's response. **The voices and rights of children** must be at the heart of the recovery and rebuilding process. This must be accompanied by a commitment to protect children whose rights are more at risk, such as those with disabilities, asylum seekers, abuse victims and those from minority communities.

Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the long term:

- There should be urgent **action and investment** across local and national government, including: funding for early help universal services and public health; supporting innovation and integrated working, particularly with charities; dedicated financial support for children; support for

early years' settings and schools so attainment gains are protected; and unprecedented investment in children's mental health.

- The government must conduct a **review of the social security system**, as part of a broader child poverty strategy to ensure it is sufficient to enable all households to have an adequate standard of living.
- The government should take this opportunity to **end homelessness for all children** and families and renew the ban on rough sleeping and evictions which was in place until September 2020 as a result of COVID-19. They should also ensure that all children and families have access to suitable self-contained accommodation, including households with no recourse to public funds.

Summary of Ratings

Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



Government's efforts to provide sufficient resources and services for families and children:



Government's protection of children's right to participate:



Child Poverty

Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

Government support

The government provided a **free school meals voucher scheme** for all key workers and children in vulnerable situations in school whilst schools were closed, for those at home who meet the benefits-related eligibility criteria and over the summer holidays, for families with no recourse to public funds who are not normally eligible for free school meals. In October 2020, MPs voted against extending free school meals during half term and the school holidays with the Government coming under increased pressure to provide more funding to ensure that children do not go hungry.



During the pandemic, the government introduced a series of new **regulations relaxing duties for children** in a number of vital areas.



- **Social care for children:** regulations which involved 65 losses or dilutions of safeguards for children in care, and children who could come into care were in force until September 2020.¹ Though the majority of those changes have now lapsed, there may be long-term consequences for the children who were in care during this period.
- **Children with special educational needs and disability (SEND):** these downgraded the duties and delayed the timescales for the assessment and preparation of an Education Health Care Plan which enables children with SEND to access specific resources and a school

place whilst schools are not open for all children.² These changes have expired but there will likely be a lasting impact on children who lost their entitlement to support for the first time since 2014.

- **Children who have been excluded from school:** These regulations created potentially long delays for children attempting to hold schools to account over unfair school exclusions, which will have inevitably impacted most harshly on pupils with SEND. These changes have been relaxed but not ended, and are set to continue in some form until at least March 2021.

The government is providing **laptops and tablets** for disadvantaged families, children and young people who do not currently have access to them, including care leavers, children and young people aged 0 to 19 or young children's

1 [The Adoption and Children \(Coronavirus\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2020](#) – The safeguards affected include: social worker visits; reviews of children's welfare in care; independent scrutiny of children's homes, prospective adoptive parents and foster carers; and the process for placing children in care away from their home areas, including outside of England.

2 [The Special Educational Needs and Disability \(Coronavirus\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2020](#). See also [Regulation 5, Notice of the Secretary of State for Education \(2020\) Coronavirus Act 2020](#). Modification of section 42 of the Children and Families Act 2014 (England). Notice 2020.

families with a social worker, and disadvantaged year 10 pupils. Internet access will be provided through 4G wireless routers for care leavers, secondary school pupils with a social worker and disadvantaged year 10 pupils. There are concerns about how effectively this is being rolled out.



Negative developments ³

Schools were shut from 20 March 2020 until September 2020 for most year groups. Children had to be **home-schooled** by parents or carers who were also working, may not have had access to the internet or computers or the educational knowledge or skills to teach their children. This is likely to have further increased educational inequalities between children who were already disadvantaged, and undo progress which has been made in recent years⁴ to close the significant educational attainment gap.⁵

There are huge safeguarding concerns in regards to how the **lockdown impeded the ability of professionals to reach and support the children in the most vulnerable situations**, with children hidden from view and issues going undetected by professionals whilst schools have been closed.⁶ Early indications are pointing to an **increase in future demand for safeguarding, mental health and other high-need services**. There are concerns that the current lockdown is placing children at increased risk of **domestic abuse**. Refuge (Domestic Violence Support) reported a 700% rise in calls to its National Domestic Abuse Helpline in a single day. The number of domestic homicides is far higher than the average rate for the time of year. Contacts to the National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children's (NSPCC) Helpline about children experiencing domestic abuse also increased by 10% during the lockdown period.

The COVID-19 pandemic is **exacerbating already high levels of poor mental health** amongst children as they feel more anxious, isolated and uncertain as well as making it more difficult for those with existing mental health needs to access support.⁷

NGOs had to face numerous challenges, among which:

- **Loss of funding** – many children's charities rely on donations from the public, shop income and fundraising from large events which have had to be cancelled.
- Many charities are seeing a **rise in need for support for their services** as mental health and safeguarding needs rise and children in care or care leavers are more isolated and social services are operating under capacity or remotely, meaning charities have to plug the gaps. Many are also reporting a **rise in the need for crisis financial support to access**

basic necessities such as food as young people have lost jobs.

- Having to **work remotely** has created challenges for all organisations but particularly those that work through face to face support through young people, one on one or in groups.

Good practice

Children's Rights Alliance for England has been working with 15 other children's charities to gather intelligence on the impact of COVID-19 and issues facing the children's sector and its services through a survey to children's sector statutory and voluntary professionals.⁸

³ Please see [here](#) for a summary of the main issues affecting children and the recovery since the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁴ Education Policy Institute (2020) [Education in England: annual report](#).

⁵ Clare Lally and Rowena Bermingham for UK Parliament (2020) [COVID-19 and the disadvantage gap: Rapid response](#).

⁶ [Recovery Plan – Safeguarding and Child Protection](#) (2020).

⁷ [Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs](#); Marsh, S., Hill, A. (21 October 2020) 'Figures lay bare toll of pandemic on UK children's mental health' The Guardian

⁸ More information can be found [here](#).

Policies for Investing in Children

National strategy to tackle child poverty

There is no strategy or targets to tackle child poverty in England.

There has been no progress on re-introducing binding targets to eradicate child poverty in England or on developing a strategy for achieving them, despite calls by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC).

The UK government's **cross-departmental unit on child poverty was abolished** in December 2016, shortly after the repeal of the Child Poverty Act 2010. This removed the duty to report on child poverty reduction targets and to produce a Child Poverty Strategy. The Child Poverty Act 2010 was replaced by the Welfare Reform and Work Act and the government has insisted that employment is the best route

out of poverty, despite evidence that the majority of households living in poverty are also working.⁹

There has been a **lack of political will** by the UK government to re-introduce a strategy, while the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales have developed their own child poverty reduction strategies.

CRAE has consistently **called for a strategy to tackle child poverty** in England, as part of wider reforms needed in the field. CRAE has also consistently called on the government to urgently develop, fund and implement an action plan to reduce the number of children in poverty and to ensure progress, monitoring and reporting against the indicators that were contained in the Child Poverty Act 2010. Given the growing levels of child poverty in the UK, and the potentially devastating impacts of COVID-19 on families and households on low and precarious

incomes, a strategy to address child poverty is more important than ever.

Access to adequate financial resources

Before COVID-19, there were 4.2 million children living in poverty in the UK in 2018-19, around 30% of children.¹⁰ A report by the Institute of Public Policy Research has predicted that the number of children living in relative poverty is now 4.5 million, with an increase of 200,000 compared to 2018/19.¹¹

Regressive reforms to the social security system over recent years, coupled with insecure and insufficiently paid work and high housing and childcare costs, has meant that **low-income households have not had sufficient financial resources to ensure an adequate standard of living.**

Emerging data on the impacts of COVID-19 shows that 42% of families with children, and single parents in particular, are facing serious financial difficulties and struggling to make ends meet, compared to 24% of other households.¹² The Trussell Trust has reported that the number of families with children receiving food parcels has almost doubled, when compared to the same period last year.¹³

Many non-UK nationals who have leave to remain in the UK (e.g. those on work or family visas) are subject to the 'no recourse to public funds' (NRPF) condition, which prohibits them from claiming most social security benefits. Some British children whose parent(s) have NRPF due to their immigration status are also left unable to access many benefits, as they cannot make a claim in their own right. While the exact number of children affected by the NRPF restrictions is not known,

⁹ What has driven the rise of in-work poverty? D. Innes, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, February 2020

¹⁰ Households Below Average Income, Statistics on the number and percentage of people living in low income households for financial years 1994/95 to 2018/19, Tables 4a and 4b. Department for Work and Pensions, 2020.

¹¹ 1.1 million more people face poverty at end of 2020 as a result of coronavirus pandemic, finds IPPR, 4 June 2020

¹² CPAG calculations using data provided in: Kempson, E. and Poppe, C. (2020) *Coronavirus Financial Impact Tracker: key findings from a national survey*, Standard Life Foundation

¹³ Food parcels provided to children during April 2020, compared to the same period in 2019. Food banks report busiest month ever, as coalition urgently calls for funding to get money into people's pockets quickly during pandemic

the Children's Society has estimated that it amounts to at least a hundred thousand children and 1 million adults.¹⁴ Children's organisations are calling on the government to suspend NRPF policies in response to the COVID-19 crisis, so that families can access the social security support under the same conditions as everyone else.

Access to services

Families' and children's **access to statutory support** from children's social care services has been impacted by severe reductions in funding from central government since 2010. Early intervention services, designed to support families before a situation reaches crisis point, have been most severely impacted. Funding for children and young people's services since 2010/11 has fallen by 23% whilst

early intervention services have suffered a 60% cut in the same period.¹⁵

At the same time, the **demand for children's services has risen significantly**, with the number of child protection enquiries increasing 139% since 2008-2009 and the total number of looked after children reached a new high of 78,150 in 2018-2019.¹⁶ This inevitably means that some children and families who need support are not able to access it until their situation reaches crisis point.

Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the **spending power** of children's services will be threatened as business rates, council tax and other revenue streams are diminished by the economic impact of the pandemic.¹⁷

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people is likely to be deep and long-lasting, and **local authorities** are currently experiencing **immense additional pressures** on their finances as they carry much of the burden of responding to this unprecedented crisis.¹⁸

Recommendations¹⁹

- A cross-government action plan to implement the recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, including a strategy to eradicate child poverty.
- Significant investment in local authorities so they can fulfil their duties in supporting low-income households, children and young people.
- Significant public investment in local, universal early help services that support children and young people.
- A social security system based on human rights standards and that enables all households to have an adequate standard of living.

14 A Lifeline for All: Children and Families with No Recourse to Public Funds, The Children's Society, May 2020

15 Under Pressure: Children's and young people's services 2010/11 to 2018/19: a summary, Action for Children, NCB, NSPCC, The Children's Society and Barnardo's, 2020.

16 Children's services funding facts and figures, Local Government Association, 2020; and Department for Education (2019) Children looked after in England including adoption: 2018 to 2019.

17 Under Pressure: Children's and young people's services 2010/11 to 2018/19: a summary, Action for Children, NCB, NSPCC, The Children's Society and Barnardo's, 2020.

18 Local Government Association (2020) A child-centred recovery.

For more info on resources and services: (a) Supporting families during the covid-19 pandemic, 4 June 2020, Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG); (b) Fact checking claims about child poverty, 22nd June 2020, Children's Commissioner for England; (c) The impact of Coronavirus on food: How have things changed since the start of lockdown?

From an online survey of 4352 adults in the UK conducted on 14th-17th May by YouGov Plc, The Food Foundation; (d)

Under Pressure: Children's and young people's services 2010/11 to 2018/19: a summary, Action for Children, NCB, NSPCC, The Children's Society and Barnardo's, May 2020; (e) Pressures on children's and young people's services: a deep dive, May 2020

19 Please see also here for a list of the top recommendations that the children's civil society sector is calling for to ensure children are at the heart of the COVID recovery.

- Labour market reforms to ensure that wages are sufficient to enable working households to meet their essential needs (including housing) and ensure that all children can have an adequate standard of living.
- Reinstate the £2.2 billion per year lost from funding available for children and young people's services over the last decade.
- Set out a sustainable plan to increase investment in children's services beyond 2010 levels in order to respond to rising levels of need – particularly in light of the COVID-19 crisis.
- The government should take this opportunity to end homelessness for all children and families and renew the ban on rough sleeping and evictions which was in place until September 2020 as a result of COVID-19. They should also ensure that all children and families have access to suitable self-contained accommodation, including households with no recourse to public funds.
- Please see here²⁰ for a list of the top recommendations that the children's civil society sector is calling for to ensure children are at the heart of the COVID recovery.

Children's participation²¹

Despite some limited progress, children are still too **often shut out of policy debates and this has been the case during the COVID-19 crisis**. There has been no attempt by the UK government to engage with children and young people on the crisis or in the response, even though both have clearly had a profound impact on children's lives and will for generations to come.

A key challenge which remains in England is that **children's views are still not taken seriously by many**, despite pockets of good practice and progress in particular areas, for example, the proliferation of school councils. Children have also highlighted particular problems arising from not being listened to by teachers, social workers and the police, while the availability of good quality, independent advocacy is patchy.

Where children do have a statutory right to participation, for example

children in care, **children are not always aware** that they have this right.

Where there has been progress in relation to strategic decision making, for example the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport commitment to increasing attention to the voice of youth, the **budget allocated to deliver it was limited**.

Particular groups of children also less likely to have their voices heard, for example disabled children or children who are under ten years and there has been no progress in lowering the voting age to 16 in England despite developments in other parts of the UK.

²⁰ [Delivering a recovery that works for children: Full list of recommendations](#)

²¹ CRAE State of Children's Rights in England report regularly assesses how well children are having their participation rights implemented

The report [See it Say Change](#) it also highlighted children's own views about how well they are listened to

The 2015 civil society report to the UN committee also covers this issue and is available [here](#)

The most recent Concluding Observations on the UK by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child also highlights issues in relation to the implementation of participation rights and is available [here](#)

Recommendations

- At a domestic level we would like to see children's right to express their views, and to have these views given due weight according to age and maturity enshrined in all laws relating to children and apply to all children, including those in the armed forces.
- Children should also be informed of their right to be heard and taken seriously, and training and support should be provided on an ongoing basis to all professionals working with children, including the judiciary. Any consultative methods should be fully assessable and of good practice standard.
- Independent and confidential advocacy should be widely available to ensure children can actively take part in decisions about their lives and future. Where a child is the subject of administrative proceedings, including statutory reviews for children in care, care planning, child protection conferences and reviews, school exclusions, special educational needs assessments and tribunals, and hospital admission processes (including mental health settings), there should be a statutory right to an independent and confidential advocate.

For more information, please consult the [2020 Eurochild Report](#) or contact Enrico.Tormen@eurochild.org and Zuzana.Konradova@eurochild.org

