Fresh Perspectives

Reviewing and re-shaping the holistic support for vulnerable children and young people, post pandemic

A tool kit for education leaders to support the wider re-opening of schools and other settings

May 2020
Leeds City Region Alternative Provision Association (LAPA)

The Leeds City Region Alternative Provision Association (LAPA) is a not-for-profit unincorporated association with the aim of bringing educational experts from across the region together to share expertise through free CPD and guidance.

LAPA membership is diverse and experts include educational psychologists, social workers and Headteachers and Specialist Leaders of Education from Alternative Provision and other specialist settings.

LAPA also examine a broad range of educational issues and use their collective expertise to report on a series of recommendations which will seek to help schools across the region to improve education for vulnerable children who are either in Alternative Provision or at risk of exclusion.

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Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed expertise to this toolkit. We would like to thank all those who have generously given their time to advise the Leeds City Region Alternative Provision Association including Lisa Cherry (Trainer, key note speaker and expert in the field of trauma), Dr Pooky Knightsmith (Child Mental Health Expert), Gemma Dixon (Headteacher of a special school in North Yorkshire), Cathy Kennedy-Paine (National Association of School Psychologists, Oregon), Abigail Clay (nationally and internationally respected expert in the complex and increasingly challenging world of safeguarding), Simon Flowers and Tom Shaw (Carr Manor Community School),
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1 Introduction

Fresh Perspectives – purpose of report

The effects of the essential Government measures to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus have been far reaching and have created vulnerabilities in most people. But there are some children and young people, who even before this crisis were already very vulnerable – those in Alternative Provision or other specialist settings; those with social, emotional or mental health needs; those suffering adverse childhood experiences.

The support that these children and young people had, in many cases, has been reduced significantly and the societal changes, created by COVID-19 restrictions, may have exacerbated pre-existing conditions, vulnerabilities or trauma: social and emotional challenges, domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health problems. It would be unwise to proceed on the basis that all children and young people can return to their education settings and recommence their routine and learning as before – the majority of students will be able to but for the most vulnerable, far too much water has passed beneath the bridge.

The writing and publishing of this toolkit is intended to be guidance and not policy and should be used to inform educational leaders throughout Leeds and neighbouring towns and cities, in relation to how they may approach wider school re-opening for their most vulnerable cohort when it is safe to do so.

The COVID-19 virus has and will present unique and demanding challenges for educational settings in the Leeds City Region and beyond.

Present trends suggest that although children and young people can contract COVID-19, the chances of them developing severe symptoms are less common. However, we do know that the outbreak of this highly infectious disease can seriously impact their psychological and physical wellbeing. Many vulnerable children and young people will suffer bereavement, separation and loss, isolation and other stressful or traumatic experiences such as abuse and neglect. They may also have been burdened by the stresses or mental health problems of their parent or carer.

For too many of these children - particularly those in Alternative Provision or other Specialist settings - they were already very vulnerable. This toolkit and the recommendations made have a specific focus on this cohort, but there will be many more children - including children who were not previously identified as particularly vulnerable - that will have suffered adverse experiences and may require additional support when educational settings re-open more widely.
The adverse experiences of some children and young people during the pandemic are likely to have harmed brain development, imposed setbacks in terms of social and emotional responses and created or amplified barriers to learning. The diverse challenges that educational settings will face when they re-open cannot be understated. However, research shows that any damage caused can be repaired or reduced through new and consistent positive experiences, nurturing and caring relationships and appropriate support and interventions. All of which need to be delivered in a planned and timely manner.

As you find your way through this toolkit you will note that our recommendations are underpinned by an approach based around a practical, manageable and compassionate leadership style; a focus on staff wellbeing and the re-opening of safe, nurturing and trauma informed settings with a priority to first put your arms around your staff so that they are prepared for the task ahead and then identify and reduce the harmful effects of being away from school for so long so that vulnerable children and young people can begin to heal and continue and move forward in their learning.

This toolkit acknowledges the fact that all educational settings are unique, therefore our recommendations are broad and intended to create discussion – allowing education settings to make their own local judgements in relation to how best to approach re-opening and develop a coherent package of support.
### Practical and warm-hearted leadership

#### Purpose

This section of the tool kit is intended to help education setting leaders ensure that their workforce is emotionally and professionally prepared for the return of vulnerable children/young people.

#### Context

When education settings re-open some children and young people will have suffered trauma: bereavement, abuse and neglect, mental health, domestic violence, poverty.

Education settings will be well aware of their very vulnerable children/young people and how best to support them. However, education settings must also be prepared for other children/young people who may also have suffered trauma during school closure. It is therefore vital that the professionals working within education settings are prepared emotionally and professionally for this. The importance of staff well-being and professional development – so that they are ready for what may come - cannot be understated.

All staff will have been affected by the virus in different ways. It is also likely that some staff will have suffered trauma personally and settings must also be prepared for that.

#### Key questions/considerations for your setting

- What training is/will be available for all staff in relation to bereavement, adverse childhood experiences and developing understanding of trauma and attachment – resources/CPD can be found at [www.leedsap.org](http://www.leedsap.org)

- How will you re-assure staff, children and young people that the physical setting is safe? For example, the setting may look very different due to social distancing rules and this may impact upon the ability of some children and young people to cope if not properly planned and explained. Consider informational videos to share with staff, parent/carers and children and young people to demonstrate the new layout, routine and expectations

- What will your staff well-being strategy look like? Consider this carefully as evidence shows that staff stress, upset and worry and how they carry this can impact upon how children/young people feel¹. If staff are not in a good

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¹ Mind, Brain and Education, The Influence of Social Contagion Within Education, 2018
2 How childhood trauma affects child brain development, NSPCC, 2020

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place, they may influence the children and young people and impede recovery.

- Following any staff CPD – consider very carefully how this will create sustainable impact. For example, rather than being a “tick box exercise” consider how it may positively influence your practices and policy going forward (see Post Traumatic Growth)

- How will your setting gain an insight into the feelings and concerns of their staff and student body so that they can shape and inform re-opening? For example, you may wish to consider carrying out staff and student surveys to anticipate potential issues. However, educational settings need to be mindful of how they construct such surveys because there could be loaded questions or a series of questions that can heighten anxieties e.g. ‘do you feel safe in school’ vs ‘how safe do you feel in school on a scale of 1-10’. Ideally, leaders should use this to address other aspects of their longer-term internal development plan and not just COVID-19 (see Post Traumatic Growth)

- How will you manage the expectations of staff and children and young people prior to re-opening – particularly for children/young people whose needs are such that they need to know what is happening now and next? For example, it is helpful for those who have difficulty with executive functioning if clear and set routines are in place and these are communicated well in advance so that they know exactly what to do and when. Leaders may also want to consider taking photos of the new learning environments so that children and parent/carers have a visual of what they will be walking into to support anxiety around the building or classroom

- How will you make sure, well in advance, that everyone knows what behaviour and routine is expected of them? Again, for some children and young people with complex needs being clear on this early on will help them to cope. This is also applicable to staff; do they know what is expected of them and what to do in certain scenarios e.g. crisis behaviour or a child or young person/staff showing symptoms?

- How will you plan and structure any response to staff and student bereavement? You may wish to consider a bereavement addendum to your safeguarding policy (see www.leedsap.org for a template bereavement addendum in the CPD section)

- Strategies and plans should be woven into a pre-planned timetable and not re-active
Time and space to heal, repair and re-build

Purpose
This section of the tool kit is intended to help education setting leaders ensure that enough time and space is dedicated to the mental health of staff and children/young people.

Context
We know that the brain develops from before we are born and then right through childhood, teenage years and into adulthood. We also know that adverse experiences can have a significant effect on brain development.

It is common ground that the virus, associated trauma and closure of education settings will have had an effect on brain development and set back some children/young people who were already very vulnerable. Through the creation of new, positive experiences and care and support, we know that we can reduce the harmful effects and improve brain development²

It is therefore important that education settings focus on the emotional well-being of staff and students.

Key questions/considerations for your setting

• How will you include in your re-opening plans the time, space and opportunity for children/young people to come into your setting and feel safe and at home again – no pressure, just be in the building again to re-connect with adults and peers and feel safe?

• Some children and young people will have been living within volatile and stressful environments for months. Some will be hypervigilant and dysregulated – how will you make your building feel safe, predictable and calm. In some cases, you will need to build trust and relationships from scratch

• How will you consider the sensory needs of some children/young people and the impact of increased numbers, busy corridors and noise?

• How will you prepare for and manage the surge in the disclosure of abuse and neglect that may occur?

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1 Mind, Brain and Education, The Influence of Social Contagion Within Education, 2018
2 How childhood trauma affects child brain development, NSPCC, 2020

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• How will you invest time and space to allow children and young people to talk through any worries, upset or stresses that they may have?

• How will you reassure your children/young people who may feel like they have lost significant learning time without putting “catch up” pressure on them and staff? Consider how you will sensitively show them that you have plans to address these gaps and help to heal a sense of loss that some may feel.

• How will you build into your plans sensory/well-being breaks for any staff, children and young people who may need them. For example, “wobble rooms”, movement breaks, calm rooms, relaxation exercises, reading, dance.

• You may wish to consider the use of personalised and robust transition plans for the most vulnerable children and young people to ensure their return is tailored to their needs. Remember, you will know your children and young people the best and some may need more intensive intervention than others.

• Consider the use of virtual face to face contact with the most vulnerable children and young people before their return – smiling, positive and welcoming faces will start the process of creating new and positive experiences². This interaction may also help to inform the transition plans that you will put in place.

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1 Mind, Brain and Education, The Influence of Social Contagion Within Education, 2018
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Holistic programs of recovery

**Purpose**

This section of the tool kit is intended to help education setting leaders ensure that consideration is given to establishing personalised recovery plans/interventions for vulnerable children and young people.

**Context**

The children and young people most severely impacted by the pandemic will likely struggle to ‘settle to learn’ and it would be naïve to think that we will not see this manifest itself through challenging behaviour or disengagement. Some children and young people will have been living in stressful, volatile environments and some may have experienced some form of bereavement.

For other children and young people, for example someone who has difficulty with executive functioning, may be out of routine, may not have been eating a healthy diet or following a healthy sleeping pattern for some time. We know that these factors can influence a child and young person’s ability to cope. We also know that for some children and young people who have experienced trauma, they may have developed a “fight or flight” survival mentality to help them to survive in a threatening environment – this may manifest itself in behaviours such as absconding, fighting, substance abuse or other negative and hostile behaviours.

Therefore, settings should anticipate this and each vulnerable child and young purpose will need an individualised approach/plan and some may need more intensive and longer lasting support than others.

**Key questions/considerations for your setting**

- Consider providing opportunities for children and young people to share experiences or concerns. For example, drop in sessions or surgeries with appropriately trained staff

- Consider updated training for all staff. For example, safeguarding, bereavement or adverse childhood experiences (see the CPD section of [www.leedsap.org](http://www.leedsap.org))

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2 How childhood trauma affects child brain development, NSPCC, 2020

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• Consider the use of creative and therapeutic sessions to calm and find alternative ways to draw out and appropriately deal with emotion related to the pandemic. For example, creative story writing, art, music, drama

• Consider the implementation of a recovery based curriculum – (see Barry Carpenter – The Recovery Curriculum at www.recoverycurriculum.org)

• Consider which supportive interventions your children and young people will need on an individualised basis. For example, some children and young people may need more time than others to build relationships with staff again and others may need more intensive and longer lasting interventions focused on emotional regulation

• Consider identifying those with the most significant needs first, while being ready to identify and plan for moderate-concern and lower-concern children and young people, as needed
### Review and Post Traumatic Growth

#### Purpose

This section of the tool kit is intended to help education setting leaders review in the aftermath of adversity and consider and plan for Post Traumatic Growth.

#### Context

Post-traumatic growth can be defined as positive changes which occur for people and organisations as they transition through and out of a traumatic event. To be clear, it does not mean that the event was positive, only that the person or organisation were able to learn from the adversity and make positive changes to future plans or culture.

Post-traumatic growth is the belief that although there has been some adversity – it is the beginning of a story and not the end of it.

#### Key questions/considerations for your setting

- Consider a ‘lessons learned’ exercise/whole organisation de-brief post pandemic in relation to all of your operational and strategic areas, highlighting positive and negative aspects and feed this into your overall organisational development plan

- Consider reviewing all of your relevant policies and procedures and potentially updating some with lessons learned information. In particular, your policy in relation to full closure and business recovery

- Consider any survey data gathered as part of the re-opening phase and use this to feed into your overall and ongoing organisational development plan
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