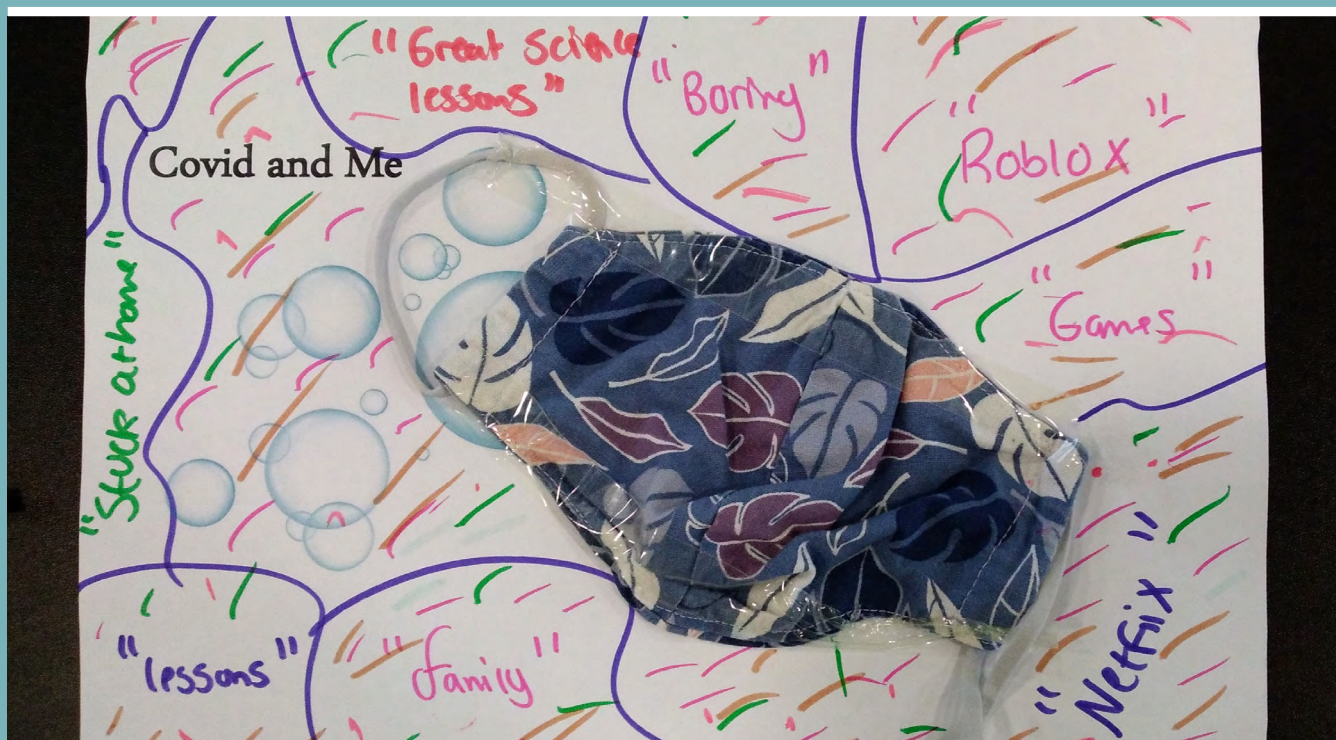# The impact of COVID-19 on Education, Food and Play/Leisure and Related Adaptations of Children and Young People in England

PANEX-Youth Work Packages 2 and 3 Report: Mapping and Key Stakeholder Interviews

PANEX-Youth - **Adaptations of young people in monetary-poor households for surviving and recovering from COVID-19 and associated lockdowns**

The impact of COVID-19 on Education, Food and Play/Leisure and Related Adaptations of Children and Young People in England

PANEX-Youth Work Packages 2 and 3 Report: Mapping and Key Stakeholder Interviews

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Executive Summary

This report presents and summarises the key results from the first two stages of the PANEX-YOUTH research, with a focus on England. It builds upon the insights from the global and national mapping exercise the team conducted through desk-based research while bringing the results from the 32 interviews done with key organisations between February and June 2023. It can be read alongside the WP2 Global and National Mapping exercise report, which is available here: https://panexyouth.com/home-2/resources/

This report builds upon an extensive review of reports and literature on how COVID-19 affected young people (aged 10-24) and specifically their education, access to food, and their play and leisure. Situating the pandemic both in terms of path-dependent responses and intersectional impacts on young people, the report provides insights into the pre-pandemic context to situate different COVID-19 specific policies and responses. The focus is on young people, and particularly those living in monetary poor households. It also highlights various types of adaptations, coping and resilience that arose from an overall failure of national and local governments to provide for the needs of vulnerable young people during the pandemic.

Following the above review, the team conducted the next phase of data collection (WP3), aiming to situate and identify in more detail what had been the key impacts of pandemic-related policy towards the food, education, play/leisure nexus of issues facing young people during and after COVID-19, in England. It also sought to examine what policy/programmes/initiatives were developed, and how local places mattered (including home life/household contexts). To do so, we identified non-governmental and non-profit organisations that played a key role in supporting young people and/or in assessing the impacts of the pandemic on them.

While looking at England as a whole, we also zoomed on West Midlands/Birmingham. The West Midlands was one of the hardest-hit parts of the UK during COVID-19. The region includes some of the most deprived neighbourhoods and a younger than average population. The intent of the interviews was twofold: 1) to understand each organisation's response to supporting young people during/after COVID-19, and 2) from the organisation's views, to identify what adaptations and tactics young people used to deal with the challenges that COVID-19 and associated lockdowns presented. Interview questions focused on the following four primary themes: The role of the organisation and how they engaged with young people, the impact of the pandemic of the food/education/play-leisure nexus, Vulnerability, Place, Social Networks and Adaptation, Legacy and Ongoing Crisis. All interviews were recorded, and our research fully conformed with UCL's ethical guidance. The interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed, with 37 core themes extracted.

The main **findings** from the report (divided into the four sections of the full report) are as follows.

1. COVID-19 and national Government responses as a catalyst for furthering socio-economic inequalities

1.1 At the national level, Governmental policies and responses to the diverse, **localized impacts** of COVID-19 were often not adequate. In the face of local need, local organisations, authorities and communities came together to provide often *ad hoc* support – particularly aimed at vulnerable families.

1.2 COVID-19 and associated lockdowns **increased vulnerabilities and socio-economic inequalities**. These inequalities were felt intersectionally – with, for instance, monetary poor young people from ethnic minorities being particularly hard-hit. COVID-19 also combined with a range of other crises (including climate change and increased living costs following the war in Ukraine) to mean compound challenges. An increased number of families sought help during COVID-19 (for instance in accessing food), with job losses and financial strains prevalent amongst marginalized and vulnerable young people.

The acceleration and combination of everyday pressures on individual families, combined with increased socio-economic inequalities had a snowballing impact on four major components of young people's lives: their ability to learn and access relevant training and skills, their ability to access healthy and nutritious food, their ability to be able to exercise and socialise (i.e. access play and leisure) and their ability to continue developing their confidence and be mentally well.

2. Impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable young people's access to education and related adaptations

The pandemic dramatically impacted access to education, which is intrinsically connected to access to food, for vulnerable young people, but also to play, socialisation, welfare and overall mental wellbeing. Impacts unfolded in line with other vulnerabilities including the digital divide and home conditions that made learning challenging – with all of these factors having in many cases devastating impacts on young people's learning and life trajectories.

2.1 **Education was the most-affected sector with long-lasting cross-sectoral impacts** for young people's lives and wellbeing. COVID-19 responses in the education sector felt confused and disorganized due to the unprecedented nature of the crisis, with most schools and teachers being unprepared. Various schemes and policies introduced by the government had unequal impacts. State schools' core budgets were however not increased during the pandemic; many had to use their other budgets to fill funding shortfalls, or used fundraising to fill gaps (for example to purchase IT equipment).

Policy responses significantly impacted children and young people's abilities to continue learning. Several challenges emerged such as differential loss of learning spanning across primary, secondary, vocational skills and special educational needs schools. Additionally, lack of access to school impacted on other areas of young people's lives – including access to food. Attempts were made to address these intersectional inequalities and the crucial role of teachers and schools should be highlighted. Teachers went beyond their traditional responsibility by liaising with authorities and social services in order to ensure that learning, food distribution and mental support towards students was provided. Schools also stepped in to coordinate efforts in regards to identifying families at risk, not being able to access Internet and digital devices but also food.

2.2 The pandemic and associated lockdowns exposed significant **digital divides and digital illiteracy**, as well as a systematic lack of preparedness for pivoting to online or hybrid learning. At the start of the pandemic, most schools neither had the physical spaces, nor the relevant digital platforms, to deal with physical restrictions within schools and deliver remote learning. The steep learning curve had significant implications for children and young people as IT experimentations resulted in uncertainties and forced adaptability for learners. The digital divide and attainment gaps were found to be prominent in remote learning experiences of most deprived communities and young people living in monetary poor households. Accessibility challenges were exacerbated by home conditions but also the closure of other learning spaces (typically libraries).

In some schools, a community engagement approach was adopted with parents' online help centres, specific training programs and guidebooks introduced. Arrangements also occurred within households and social networks, with families informally grouping for home schooling and in some situations developing innovative home-made solutions to support their children. Keeping learning momentum was key and remaining in touch with families was also a way for schools to maintain their welfare duties (e.g. through hand-delivering learning packs to vulnerable families). Collaboration between schools and local authorities was pivotal and revealed a certain flexibility in providing different forms of learning.

In terms of digital resources, local support mechanisms, driven by charities and communities but also schools, helped provide vulnerable children with devices and tackled the issue of internet access (speed and costs). This included initiatives led by schools, charities, faiths groups and local authorities to secure funding to get dongles and distribute computers (particularly pre-owned laptops). Support also came from private companies.

2.3 The **home setting and learning from home** presented particular challenges for some vulnerable young people. The nature of the 'home setting' impacted learning and particularly affected children living in crowded houses, with several siblings, where electronic devices were shared or where Internet access was (not) supporting many devices connected simultaneously. Such socio-economic inequalities and how learning could be delivered at home emphasized the vital relationship between the school/teacher(s), young people and their parents. Skills matter here, not only in regard to the ability, time and/or resources of parents to support their children's learning, but also to liaise efficiently with the school.

Home learning was extremely difficult for vulnerable young people and this was also related to being isolated and not being able to seek adequate support. The ad-hoc efforts of schools and teachers were often highly localised and therefore young people in some areas were able to cope better than in others.

2.4 COVID-19 also impacted **general learning, vocational courses and demographic inequalities**.

The pandemic had particularly profound impacts on vocational training and young people preparing and sitting GCSEs and A levels. Young people in more disadvantaged areas were more likely to emerge worse in terms of 'learning loss' as well as being disadvantaged in attempts to mitigate impacts of COVID-19 on examination processes (e.g. through algorithms designed to predict students' grade outcomes). Beyond long-lasting learning gaps, the pandemic impacted young people's mental health with these impacts continuing post-lockdown. Educational challenges, immediate and long-lasting impacts were unfortunately not isolated from other daily pressures, and this includes access to food and play/leisure.

3. Impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable young people's access to food and related adaptations

Access to food was severely impacted for vulnerable young people during the pandemic and food insecurity increased amongst monetary poor households, along with rising difficulties accessing a balanced diet. Housing insecurity and mental health also intersected with challenges in securing nutritious food – particularly since the pandemic, when the cost of living crises exacerbated the need for families to choose between paying for food, heating and/or rent.

3.1 **Food poverty was exacerbated during and after the pandemic amongst monetary-poor households**. Families from minoritized ethnic groups were particularly affected. Young people relying on accessing food at school suffered greatly as reliance on school meals was significantly disrupted during lockdowns periods. Government schemes (such as vouchers) provided some support but did not fully alleviate the pressures of food poverty.

In the first stage of the pandemic, the lack of coordination of government responses (particularly the non-provision of food during holidays) led to a range of local adaptive responses. Led by schools but also charities, religious and faith groups in partnership, food banks' food was distributed to young people but also to their families, as an emergency response. New community groups emerged (e.g. associations of volunteers within local communities) and mutual aid groups (family/friends/ neighbours) through social networks.

3.2 Difficulties in accessing food, **particularly nutritious food**, combined with online-learning limiting movements and the closure of sport facilities meant that young people's lives, their ability to remain physically active but also to keep healthy diet patterns was severely

impinged upon. The quality of food in some food banks and food parcels was not always high, with a higher-than-desired proportion of (ultra-)processed foods being distributed by some. Children's eating habits altered, in part leading to an increase in obesity.

> "Young people relying on accessing food at school suffered greatly as reliance on school meals was significantly disrupted during lockdowns periods."

3.3 **Experiences of food changed**, as the combination of lockdown and restricted mobilities meant that individual self-sufficiency towards producing and preparing food increased. This was combined with a change of eating habits driven by financial rationales, typically stricter budgeting, less impulse buying, preferences for non-perishable and inexpensive food, and a reduction in meat and diary consumption. In some cases, it also transformed the families' attitudes and practices towards food, with an increase interest in cooking, experimenting with new recipes and consuming non-perishable food products such as pasta and rice.

Online videos posted on Facebook promoted cooking activities to engage communities' solidarity and in some instances created a "play book and food book" targeting the young population with home-cooked food ideas. Organisations and charities specialising in food and healthy living stepped in to provide such resources.

4. Impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable young people's access to play /leisure and related adaptations

Play and leisure were by far the most ignored aspects of young people's lives in terms of the national government response, with little considerations given to play/leisure and the longer-term impact on their development and mental wellbeing. For young people living in monetary poor conditions, such restrictions on their everyday lives were even harsher.

4.1 **Play was not a priority for government spending and policies either before or during the pandemic**. Funding support packages focused on leisure, and especially sport and sports facilities (including those also aimed at adults). Organisations such as playgrounds did not receive funding, despite playing a key role during the pandemic for vulnerable young people (providing places to go but also food and educational resources). This demonstrated a lack of understanding of the role of some of these places, as support and community hubs.

4.2 **The lack of play/leisure options had a detrimental impact on young people's development and health**. Not being able to play and have leisure was connected with not being allowed to socialise and interact with others. Closures and social distancing restrictions in schools, playgrounds, leisure centres and other spaces, as well as limited opportunities within homes, meant that play and leisure were particularly curtailed for young people living in small homes, without gardens.

In general, vulnerable children (at least those with less supervision and care provided by adults) tend to play outside the home and have dedicated times and spaces. This ability was impacted due to mobility restrictions and their amount of play was reduced during lockdowns and due to social distancing – as were organized activities and clubs that provide a range of support and opportunities for socialization for young people.

Socialising outside being restricted, the bedroom became the primary play area, heightening the significance of e-gaming and making the digital realm key to socialization for many young people. While this led to significant negative impacts, it also played a key role in young people's resilience and ability to sustain forms of social interactions. However, again, not all were equal in accessing online play due to the issue of the digital divide and cost of data. Young people experiencing intersectional disadvantages were more vulnerable to digital leisure exclusions.

4.3 **Young people did engage in alternative forms of indoor/outdoor playing**. Children forged adaptations, such as by reclaiming neighbourhood streets and re-appropriating them as spaces of interactive play. Even if these processes were not implemented on a larger scale or supported by local authorities (e.g. through play streets schemes for example), creativity and adaptability emerged in various temporary small-scale adaptations of outdoor spaces and community streets that often involved children and adults.

Playworkers and play organisations remained engaged in developing innovative ways of gathering children to play online; through various support measures, they also arranged the delivery of play and food parcels to those in need. In some cases, groups of organisations (e.g. faith-based, community, schools, Police, playworkers) came together to provide resources and support, all co-delivered through play spaces and activities.

4.4 The reduction of play, leisure and social interactions opportunities led to a range of adaptations based on versatility, and improvisations (which included in some instances **bypassing authorities' regulations**). Many young people (teenagers and above) used public and semi-public spaces to meet despite restrictions, often facing the risk of fines. This led to breaking boundaries as a form of coping.

5. Ignored voices and an abandoned generation?

Despite the many challenges that they faced, the voices of (especially vulnerable) children and young people in England were mostly ignored, as this age group was neither considered as a priority nor 'at-risk' from a public health perspective. Young people were abandoned but also targeted by divisive health discourses (at least as presented by some parts of the media and in some social media). The lack of support, post-pandemic, reinforced this feeling.

The impact of the pandemic will have detrimental consequences for many children and young in the short and long-term, with many of these not yet visible. The pandemic led to the rise of a COVID-19 generation. The challenges facing this generation exacerbated by the on-going cost of living and inflation crisis with noticeable inequalities amongst regions in England, and between different demographic groups (particularly in terms of income, ethnicity and dis/ability).

The role of the PANEX-YOUTH project continues here as lessons, recommendations and possible solutions need to be constructed for and with young people – a key focus for WP4, which involves detailed action research with young people.

Table of contents

Introduction

PANEX-Youth was a large-scale research project (which ran 2022-2024), whose main aims were to understand how young people adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic and assess the wider impact of such adaptation processes in South Africa, Brazil and the UK (England). It was jointly funded by the ESRC, the NRF and FAPESP, gathering researchers from 5 Universities: University College London (UCL) and the University of Birmingham, in the UK; University of the Free State (UFS) and University of Fort Hare in South Africa; and, the University of São Paulo, in Brazil.

Ambitions

PANEX-Youth aimed to understand how young people have adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic and to assess the wider impact of such processes of adaptations. To do so, we adopted a nexus approach, focusing on the interconnections between three key elements of children and young people's everyday lives that were impacted by the pandemic: food, education, and play/leisure. These elements were embedded within a wider understanding of the settings (local places) and home/personal contexts (household composition and home/personal life) of children and young people.

The findings of the research aim to support global recovery and the longer-term resilience of societies in a post-pandemic world. To achieve this we used an action research methodology to co-create knowledge with young people, and the communities in which they live, along with non-government bodies and non-profit organisations that focus on this age group. The findings from this later stage of research will be published in a subsequent report.

The Research Stages

Stage 1 – Global Mapping Exercise

Aim: Map and develop typologies of the pandemic's impact on the food/education/play-leisure nexus with a focus on young people's vulnerabilities globally.

Stage 2: – National and Regional Mappings

Aim: Situate and decrypt, in each of the three countries and regions (West Midlands/Birmingham, UK; Central RSA/Mangaung and Moqhaka, South Africa; and São Paulo State/Paraisópolis, Brazil), what have been the key impacts of pandemic-related policy towards the food, education, play/leisure nexus of issues facing young people during and after Covid, what policy/programmes/initiatives were developed, and how local places matter.

Stage 3: Zooming in on local adaptations of young people in monetary-poor households

Aim: Conduct an in-depth case study analysis in six case study areas, in each case study region indicated above, with a focus on incremental and innovative strategies and the impact of those adaptations on everyday survival and recovery.

Stage 4: Co-design of multi-scalar solutions to foster young people's recovery and resilience

Aim: Co-design with our community of young people and our community of practice solutions that will help vulnerable young people to recover and be prepared in the eventuality of future major health and socio-economic crisis in line with the food, education, play/leisure nexus.

The research presented in this report

This report presents and summarises the key results from the first two stages of our research: our global and national mapping exercise (WP2) and our interviews with key organisations and professionals (WP3).

The mapping exercise was conducted solely through desk-based research. The methodology used in conducting this assessment involved the search and analysis of publicly available documents between the period of June 2022 and April 2023. The documents were retrieved from several sources: UK Government websites (e.g. Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS). Department of Education (DfE), Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC). UK Parliament websites, HM Treasury website, Bank of England monetary publications, Republic of South Africa ; reports produced by Brazilian government websites (Department of Basic Education, Department of Health, Department of Higher Education and Training, The Presidency), Statistics South Africa website, National research institutes, such as IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics), IPEA (Institute for Communicable Diseases, Global Burden of Disease website and reports, The Applied Economic Research), FJP (Joao Pinheiro Foundation), INEP (Anísio Teixeira National Institute for Educational Studies and Research), FIOCRUZ (Oswaldo Cruz Foundation), and the National Youth Council, Communicable Diseases

of South Africa, RSA Government Gazette ; In addition, academic papers, press releases, multinational reports from INGOS (e.g. UN, UNESCO, UN Habitat, UNICEF, WFP, UNDP), IGOs (IMF, OECD, The World Bank, OECD), international advisory groups (e.g. KPMG), Think Tanks (e.g. The Brookings Institution) and reports from charitable and non-profit foundations (e.g. Catholic Relief Services, Carnegie UK Trust, Child Poverty Action Group, The Edge Foundation, Sutton Trust, Plan International), NGOs (e.g. Youth Employment UK) and collaborative networks - Brazilian Network Information Center (NIC.br) and the Brazilian Internet Steering Committee (CGI.br), PENSSAN Network (Brazilian Research Network on Food Sovereignty and Security and Nutrition), National Campaign for the Right to Education, and Civil Society Working Group on the 2030 Agenda - were also used. These documents were consulted several times during the study.

The following is an example of the search terms that were used coupled with "during COVID-19" at the end of each: "adaptation techniques", "digital divide", "vulnerable and disadvantaged young children", "Free School Meals (FSM)", "food insecurity", "physical activities and sports", "play and leisure", "community-led initiatives", "schools and teachers", "food banks and charities", "Impact on West Midlands schools", "young people's perception and trust", "government lockdown policies", "government and communities", "government and charities", "funding", "informal and formal approaches", "socio-economic implications", "policy coordination", "accessibility and mobility", "remote learning and VLE", "active travel", "young people's employment", "economic inactivity", "learning inequalities", "children's behaviour and mental wellbeing", "poor households", "BAME population", "home space and learning", "loneliness and isolation of young children" and "creative play". The total documents found were 435 across the board with 365 selected for their relevance of which 159 were not referenced here, leaving 206 documents used in this report.

Following the above review, the team conducted the next phase of data collection (WP3), aiming to situate and identify in more detail what had been the key impacts of pandemic-related policy towards the food, education, play/leisure nexus of issues facing young people during and after COVID-19, in England. It also sought to examine what policy/programmes/initiatives were developed, and how local places mattered (including home life/household contexts). To do so, we identified representatives from a range of organisations that played a key role in supporting young people and/or in assessing the impacts of the pandemic on them.

This included representatives from the following types of organisations:

- Charities (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) working either across England or in specific English regions, and specialized in the following sectors: food education, food policy, food provision (including food banks) and healthy food; education provision, education and digital technology, education policy, education and youth, social mobility and educational disadvantage; play provision, play policy; support to disadvantaged and vulnerable young people.
- Not-for profit social enterprises focusing on youth education, youth employment, food and nutrition.
- Schools/Colleges.
- Private Companies specialized in supporting education organisations and play provision.
- Research Institutions with specific expertise in education, food and health and children/young people.
- Local and Combined Authorities.
- Diocesan and Faith groups.
- National networks representing community organisations in the faith and play sector.
- Young People Ambassadors.

While looking at England as a whole, we also zoomed on West Midlands/Birmingham. The West Midlands was one of the hardest-hit parts of the UK during COVID-19. The region includes some of the most deprived neighbourhoods and a younger than average population. The intent of the interviews was twofold: 1) to understand each organisation's response to supporting young people during/after COVID-19, and 2) from the organisation's views, to identify what adaptations and tactics young people used to deal with the challenges that COVID-19 and associated lockdowns presented. Interview questions focused on the following themes: The role of the organisation and how they engaged with young people, the impact of the pandemic of the food/education/play-leisure nexus, the connection between vulnerability, place, social networks and adaptation, the legacy of Covid-19 and the importance of the cost of living Crisis. All interviews were recorded, and our research fully conformed with UCL's ethical guidance. The interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed, with 37 core themes extracted.

1. COVID-19 and national Government responses as a catalyst for furthering socio-economic inequalities

As one of the four countries of the United Kingdom, England has distinct laws and policies governing education, play, and other aspects of children's lives. During COVID-19, each of the Governments of the UK's devolved nations (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) operated restrictions and lockdowns in different ways. COVID-19 started to spread in the UK at the end of January 2020. The government was initially slow and reluctant to implement restrictions but shifted its approach completely at the end of March 2020 by enforcing a first stay-at-home order. In England, this first period of lockdown was followed by two further periods of national lockdown, combined with different COVID-19 alert levels in a variety of localities. National responses were hugely criticized for not being apt enough to tackle vulnerabilities and in effect enhanced intersectional burdens further.

1.1 The importance of localised responses

During the pandemic, the UK Government provided a range of emergency programmes that impacted directly or indirectly on young people and their households. These programmes included tax and spending measures to support households, which encompassed: (i) additional funding for the NHS, public services, and charities (£48.5 billion); (ii) measures to support businesses (£29 billion), including property tax holidays, direct grants for small firms and firms in the most-affected sectors, and compensation for sick leave; and (iii) increasing payments under the Universal Credit scheme and other benefits (Agarwal et al., 2022) to support vulnerable people (£8 billion). A furlough scheme was introduced allowing employers to furlough employees 80% of the hours they could not work (UK Parliament, 2021). Incentives and support were provided to encourage firms to hire and train 16-18 year-old apprentices (ibid). Critical workers' children and vulnerable children were allowed to attend schools but many missed out and remained at home (Roberts and Danechi, 2021).

Overall, consensus emerged from interviews that government policies were chaotic and not appropriate to needs. A lack of coordination and ability to provide localised responses accounting for the diversity and complexity of issues and problems was noted by numerous interviewees. One of them summarised this as followed:

> *"Part of the problem about the way government worked was that they were hyperlinks and hyperlinks which would take you from one department to the next department and to another department. It was a total chaos"* (Representative from a national network representing community organisations in the faith and play sector, 22/02/23)

As a result, national policies and supporting programmes were not enough, specifically when concerning (vulnerable) young people. At a local level, these policies were adapted significantly and, as we will discuss later, complemented by significant ad-hoc initiatives (including material and financial support) provided by either local organisations (charities, schools, community or faith groups) or local authorities (for example local authorities through their social workers). This resulted into a double-sided situation: while general guidance, restrictions and funding streams were sketched out at national level in a uniform manner, responses at local level were extremely diverse. This was repeatedly noted by representatives from the food and education sector.

> *"Despite the fact that we look back on the pandemic as a time when central government was suddenly very centralized with powers to impose quite uniform restrictions on life at a local level, things did vary quite a lot"* (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the education sector across England, 01/02/23).

1.2 Increased vulnerabilities and socio-economic inequalities

The pandemic affected individuals and families unequally with higher mortality rates among men, people with pre-existing conditions, and amongst monetary poor and particular ethnic groups. COVID-19 mortality was the highest among Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black Caribbean groups (Raleigh, 2022). The pandemic also had multisectoral impacts, bringing an economic contraction, fluctuations in the labour market and a strain on poor households due to lockdown measures, the higher cost of living (which has persisted in the years following COVID-19 lockdowns) and a disruption in supply chains. COVID-19 was a major factor in a substantial drop in UK GDP, an inflation increase close to 2% between August 2020 and April 2021, reaching 7% in March 2022 and climbing to a staggering 11% in the last quarter of 2022 (combined with other factors, such as the war in the Ukraine). This dramatically affected vulnerable poor households, shifting many to severe poverty. The number of families seeking help increased significantly and this was observed by interviewees from all sectors (education, food, faith).

"What we saw over the pandemic was this vulnerability list grew and grew. We kept adding people" (School/College Representative, 29/02/2023)

The impact on youth unemployment was also significant. The numbers of 16-24 years old seeking employment doubled from March 2020 to 450,000 in mid-2021 (Youth Employment Group, 2021). When compared with other age groups the 18-24 years old bracket lost one third of its workforce whilst the 35-44 years old counterparts less than 15%; this evidenced a "U-shaped impact" due to the pandemic (Henehan, 2021).

"Young people were more likely to work in sectors which were shut down for example hospitality and retail. We saw quite a large drop in young people in employment. (...) Then following the reopening in 2021, when restrictions were lifted, there was a quite rapid bounce back in young people's employment levels as you'd expect when everyone's been desperate to go out to. (...). But I'd say youth employment hasn't still not recovered to the levels that you saw pre-pandemic" (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working across England to support disadvantaged and vulnerable young people, 16/02/2023).

Some programmes were quite successful however – for example the 'Kickstart Scheme', which was considered as an effective response (N03, 16/02/2023). However, the lack of responsiveness and understanding of young people's needs were raised as major failures from the government.

"Some of the responses were slow. A lot of the vocational courses are linked to employment and work experience, hence a lot of the apprenticeships and jobs were lost and if they were lucky, they were furloughed" (Representatives from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the education sector across England, 17/02/2023).

A key issue in the longer-term time frame has been the conjuncture of several crises and their compound impact on vulnerable young people's and their families' livelihoods.

"We went from COVID-19 where everybody was struggling into the cost of living. It was really compounding. The financial side of things, the cost of living linked to the lack of jobs out there, mental health and a messed up education, just became one massive jumble" (Representatives from Local and Combined Authorities – Children/ Youth Services, 06/06/2023).

Indeed, food poverty and reliance on food banks increased dramatically, with a rise in food prices of 16.8% from July 2021 till December 2022, a 45-year high expansion (Bank of England, 2022, 2023). Eight out of ten low-income families faced job losses, financial strains, and increased reliance on free school meals and food schemes (Child Poverty Action Group and the Church of England, 2020).

The acceleration and combination of everyday pressures on individual families, combined with increased socio-economic inequalities had a snowballing impact on four major components of young people's lives: their ability to learn and access relevant training and skills, their ability to access healthy and nutritious food, their ability to be able to exercise and socialise (i.e. access play and leisure) and their ability to continue developing their confidence and be mentally well. Here mental wellbeing sits as a cross-cutting issue within the food/education and play-leisure nexus. We examine all three components, in turn, in the next sections of the report.

2. Impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable young people's access to education and related adaptations

The pandemic dramatically impacted access to education, which is intrinsically connected to access to food, for vulnerable young people, but also to play, socialisation, welfare and overall mental wellbeing. Impacts unfolded in line with other vulnerabilities including the digital divide and home conditions that made learning challenging – with all of these factors having in many cases devastating impacts on young people's learning and life trajectories.

2.1 Education as the most affected sector with long-lasting cross-sectoral impacts

COVID-19 responses in the education sector felt confused and disorganized due to the unprecedented nature of the crisis, with most schools and teachers being unprepared.

"During the first lockdown, all schools were shut to everyone. Teachers went home to their families and everyone was trying to figure out what are the next steps. Shortly after, they quickly re-opened to key worker pupils and those deemed most vulnerable and that was quite an interesting dynamic to witness" (Representatives from Local and Combined Authorities – Children/ Youth Services, 16/03/2023).

Various schemes and policies introduced by the government had unequal impacts (Wright et al., 2022), particularly during the first national lockdown. Schemes targeted access to technical equipment, training and catch up. £1 billion 'catch-up' funding was initiated in June 2020 to support children's missed learning from early lockdowns; £650 million were also allocated for the National Tutoring Program (House of Commons, 2022). According to the House of Commons Education Committee (2022), the catch-up funding programme remained fragmented and bureaucratic mechanisms hindered equality of access between schools. An additional £250 million was channelled into training 500,000 teachers, £400 million to help give early career practitioners and 500,000 school teachers extra support (DfE and Williamson, 2021). As noted by one of our interviewees,

"There were various different things and different pots of money. It got quite confusing because at various points they gave schools extra pots of money for extra cleaning supplies and other similar things. So there were various bits and pieces of budget like that. The one thing definitely that did not happen was enough catch-up funding for schools in England. A lot of funding did go in, but a lot of how it was done was very haphazard" (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the education sector across England, 30/03/2023).

State schools' core budgets were however not increased during the pandemic with priority given to educational recovery funds, allocating free school meals, cleaning fees, and further training school staff and teachers (Roberts and Danechi, 2022). Many, as noted by our interviewees, used their own budget, or used fundraising to fill gaps (for example to purchase IT equipment).

Policy responses significantly impacted children and young people's abilities to continue learning. Several challenges emerged such as differential loss of learning spanning across primary, secondary, vocational skills and special educational needs schools (Howard et al. 2021). Private/independent schools managed to adapt more quickly, shift to online learning and hence tackle learning gaps. In comparison, State schools' responses were slower, particularly those located in deprived areas. Difficulties went beyond learning and resulted from having to address a range of other urgencies.

"Inequalities emerged in schools located in the most disadvantaged areas. Kids' safety, access to food and making sure that they were doing fine was the main focus, forgetting that they had work to do. It was about doing printouts of materials and delivering them to their houses, along with food packages and devices. Whereas all the way, on the other end of the spectrum, you have people in top private schools advancing faster and finishing their homework...So, as you might expect the pre-pandemic gap between state schools and independent schools grew bigger" (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the education sector across England, 30/03/2023).

Indeed, intersectional inequalities were reinforced due to a range of combined factors, from access to digital divides, home-learning conditions and ability to receive support and supervision, as discussed later in the report. Household resources and abilities of parents (including capacity to be present rather than in critical work) have been shown to impact students' learning, thus widening the learning gap (Bayrakdar and Guveli, 2022). The learning gap between students coming from privileged backgrounds in comparison with students from poorer backgrounds deepened (Schleicher, 2020).

"The pandemic impacted differentially on groups of learners and their families and basically to cut a long story short, the more disadvantaged learners were, the more they suffered. On top of that you got the economic challenges which were impacting some learners much more" (School/College Representative, 04/05/2023).

Attempts were made to address these intersectional inequalities and the crucial role of teachers and schools is to be highlighted. Teachers went beyond their traditional responsibility by liaising with authorities and social services in order to ensure that learning, food distribution and mental support towards students was provided. Over a third of them used their own personal laptops and devices to sustain educational continuity (Nelson et al. 2020).

Various mechanisms were used by teachers to ensure their welfare and safeguarding duties, from having 1-to-1 online or phone calls with children, visiting vulnerable children at their homes, seeing the students at school, in line with the distribution of food parcels and handing meals vouchers at their expense (Moss et al. 2020, HRW 2020). Schools also stepped in to coordinate efforts in regards to identifying families at risk, not being able to access Internet and digital devices but also food. This effort was repeatedly noted by the interviewees:

"At the very beginning, it was an extraordinary effort from schools and teachers who really went above and beyond in the emergency response. They made sure to have regular physical visits to students' houses and ensure that all kids were safe" (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the education sector across England, 30/03/2023).

Such efforts were strongly connected to digital poverty and home conditions.

2.2 Digital divide and digital illiteracy

There was no prior requirement for schools and colleges to engage in remote teaching and learning before the pandemic (Howard et al., 2021). This translated into various issues in an unprecedented crisis context: many schools and teachers were not ready to shift online, many children and young people did not have access to devices, and/or to appropriate Internet connectivity and bandwidth.

Schools' IT environment and teachers' digital literacy

At the start of the pandemic, most schools neither had the physical spaces, nor the relevant digital platforms, to deal with physical restrictions within schools and deliver remote learning (Howard et al., 2021).

"The majority of schools, I would say, didn't have the IT infrastructure in place to be able to go straight to online learning. So, there was a huge learning curve between schools that had better IT systems setup, a better leadership in that area and others that did not. Hence some schools found more difficulty to adapt, and it took them a lot longer. This had an impact on the pupils because they were not able to access the learning directly from their teaching staff" (Representatives from Local and Combined Authorities – Children/ Youth Services, 05/06/2023).

The learning curve had significant implications for children and young people as IT experimentations resulted in uncertainties and forced adaptability for learners. Access to relevant software, lack of

substantial guidance and nature and quality of learning materials that were provided were raised as key challenges by the young people and educational organisations we interviewed. In some schools, a community engagement approach was adopted with parents' online help centres, specific training programs and guidebooks introduced to reinforce the school-teachers-parents-pupils nexus (Edge Foundation, 2020). Arrangements also occurred within households and social networks, with families informally grouping for home schooling and in some situations developing innovative home-made solutions to provide support to their children (Coleman, 2021).

It is worth reiterating that many teachers were not trained to be able to teach online and while learning platforms and funding supports was introduced by the UK government – i.e. the 'Skills Toolkit' with the aim to improve workplace skills, and £8 million funding support for digital skills referred to as digital 'boot camps' (Baker et al., 2020) – was not initially adequate to ensure an efficient shift to online-learning. Beyond the skills gap, many teachers did not have access to appropriate equipment, which significantly impacted the shift to online learning.

> *"Half of all teachers did not have access to a device or even connectivity to get on and do the work that they needed to do. Some entities were providing devices, which were completely unfit for purpose. Also you cannot give them a device on Friday and expect them to join a team's meeting on Monday without software training. I mean, you can't ask teachers in schools to improvise. I remember one head teacher saying to me, that while children were having computers thrown at them from all angles, teachers were still struggling to get to school in order to borrow a computer so they could do their jobs. Teachers did not have access to a device!"* (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the education technology sector across England, 06/02/2023).

The first stage of the pandemic and particularly the first lockdown period thus resulted in severe uncertainties and fast adaptation techniques. In many cases, as highlighted by several interviewees, learning remained paper-based, with learning packs distributed or made available for pick-up at schools. This was not solely related to issues of the digital divide and literacy, as discussed below, but simply to the inability of schools

and teachers to immediately shift to some forms on online learning.

Keeping learning momentum was key and remaining in touch with families was also a way for schools to maintain their welfare duties. As noted by one of the headteacher we interviewed:

> *"We created learning packs and we had them hand-delivered. School's staff went to deliver them door-to-door around the area, to make sure that all children got them. The following week, we would go around again, collect them, mark them and give them the new packs. This process was very time-consuming, but it also meant that we could also see the children, get our eyes on them and interact with them. In parallel to that and regular check-ins, teachers and the staff were also making sure to phone and communicate with the children at least once a week"* (School/ College Representative, 29/02/2023).

This was common practice and concerned many schools during the pandemic, particularly the ones concerned with numerous families at risks:

> *"I heard of all sorts of stories where head teachers and other staff went knocking on children's doors, putting textbooks at their doorsteps and delivered devices to people who needed them the most"* (Representative a private company specialized in supporting education organisations, 16/03/2023).

Collaboration between schools and local authorities was pivotal and revealed a certain flexibility in providing different forms of learning, as noted by one of our interviewees:

> *"The Council did ask if anybody had at home any laptops that they no longer wanted or needed to be donated and then they would make them fit for being used within the schools...Teachers who were at home would do connect online with the kids or make phone calls to ensure an equity between kids who had devices and connectivity and the ones who did not. So that is why at the beginning no live lessons were performed. We just did basic arithmetic and basic things that parents would be able to support them with. It wasn't until we received devices for all students, in the second lockdown that we started doing*

live lessons and recorded ones" (School/College Representative, 29/02/2023).

Collaborations went beyond traditional partnerships, as noted by our interviewees in Birmingham, with for example the police stepping in to help with the delivery of papers and pens (and food) to the most vulnerable households.

Later on, when access to online learning was still a challenge, labour intensive methods were used including continuing printed resources (Julius and Sims, 2020), phone and video calls, home delivery, postal services rather than using school websites and online tools. Digital asynchronous learning such as pre-recorded lessons and recording voice messages became a norm to alleviate pressures on disadvantaged parents and their children sharing devices with siblings (Coleman, 2021). Crucially, tackling continuing access to education was addressed through actions targeting digital exclusions and poverty.

Digital exclusions

Digital exclusion, social exclusion, poverty and health inequality (Stone, 2021; Ofcom, 2021) impacted education. The digital divide and attainment gaps were found to be prominent in remote learning experiences of most deprived communities and students living in monetary poor households (ibid.). Many children, particularly those in low-income monetary households, did not have access to computers at home, when the COVID-19 pandemic started.

"During the pandemic, in a lot of the schools and colleges that we worked with, the technology issue came up as one of the very early challenges and as a real marker of disparity by socioeconomic group. There was then an issue with the bandwidth and connectivity. We had reports that multiple children were sharing their parents' mobile phones and with limited data, they could not join multiple classrooms at once or download their homework... issues around resources, emerged such as one family only sharing one laptop and whether there were any designated areas for learning... technology became a kind of reinforcer of existing socioeconomic divides" (Representatives from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the education sector across England, 17/02/2023).

This translated into very difficult learning environments, as noted by one of our young interviewees:

"I had a sibling and my best mate had 4 siblings. My dad was online working so we all had to share that. My best mate with four siblings had one laptop. How were we meant to be doing work on one laptop? The schools literally said do it on your phones and we really did, because it wasn't Zoom lessons that we started with, we were going through PowerPoint presentations on our phones, which was problematic. So, access to technology was a massive barrier in the first lockdown" (Young People Ambassador, 23/02/2023)

> **"The digital divide and attainment gaps were found to be prominent in remote learning experiences of most deprived communities and students living in monetary poor households."**

At national level, the digital divide was rapidly identified as a key challenge to sustaining education. A scheme in the summer 2020 was set up in order to distribute 220,000 laptops to pupils in need and six-month Internet passes for pupils without consistent access. It was followed by further 'waves' of equipment provision (a total of 1.313,449 million devices), in addition to over 76,000 wireless routers and more than 33,000 data plans (UNICEF and Carnegie UK Trust, 2021). Whilst the figure fell as a result of the measures outlined in the previous section, 28% of school pupils remained without proper internet access during the pandemic, whilst relative levels parental engagement and home-tutoring confidence also affected the quality of home learning (Stone, 2021).

Digital exclusion and digital confidence were thus highly linked to geographical location and significantly

varied within ethnicity groups, for people in social housing or those struggling with English language and health inequalities (Coleman, 2021). A key issue here as raised by one of our interviewees was the poor IT infrastructure which combined to digital poverty, significantly affected young people.

"There is too much digital poverty in this country in terms of what internet access and who is able to connect to the fastest internet…the only thing the government was able to do was giving sort of weird dongles out to kids, but the most required thing is, an efficient infrastructure available for everybody…one thing that we learned was that a lot of teenagers are not nearly as connected as we all thought they were. We had a lot of teenagers who don't have smartphones or had obsolete smartphones with limited data and had poor Wi-Fi access, even if they had their service with a major provider" (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the education sector across England, 30/03/2023)

Overall, national support was not sufficient and again too slow. Other local support mechanisms, driven by charities and communities but also schools, helped by providing vulnerable children with devices but also tackling the issue of internet access (speed and costs). This included initiatives led by schools, charities, faiths groups and local authorities to secure funding to get dongles and distribute computers (particularly pre-owned laptops). Support also came from private companies.

"Local IT companies and some corporate companies were getting rid of old equipment, and they went on delivering them to young people" (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the education sector across England, 01/02/23)

The combination of these actions did not fully address issues deriving from digital poverty and an unequal IT infrastructure. Access to and cost of data, bandwidth, as well as places where the Internet could be accessed were identified as key blockages in young people's ability to continue learning. Here, the provision of a computer, phone or tablet was not enough:

"where they did have the technology, often there was then an issue with the bandwidth; we heard about multiple children sharing mum's mobile phone to access Internet. The phone had limited

data, meaning that they couldn't get into multiple classrooms or couldn't download their homework or whatever it might be". (Representatives from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the education sector across England, 17/02/2023).

Another one also pointed out:

"we just all assume that teenagers are online all the time. That was a real eye opener just how many of them are not that much online and have real limited access particularly due to the cost of data". (Representative from Diocesan and Faith groups, 16/03/2023).

Accessibility challenges were exacerbated by home conditions but also the closure of other learning spaces (typically libraries) as recalled by one of our interviewees.

"There were so many issues with the lack of devices but also the lack of connectivity. To access data, people would normally go to libraries, cafes and those kinds of places. But then, all was shut down and they were cut-off (Representative from a national network representing community organisations in the faith and play sector, 22/02/23)

"It was also difficult in terms of resources and devices, because we were stuck at home. All my siblings were on the Wi-Fi all the time. My younger sister borrowed an old laptop from her school… You could only borrow equipment for so long, so for example, I could only borrow the camera for so long because other students needed to use it. At that time, I had a laptop that I purchased that helped me finish my education for my A levels. It would have been very hard to navigate and manoeuvre getting into college without it, because we did not have access to any facilities" (Young People Ambassador, 27/04/2023).

Here, educational settings played a key role, particularly when schools and colleges were allowed to re-open (particularly in Further Education Colleges).

"Colleges have a lot of open space, big suites, probably more than schools, with learning centres, libraries, suites of computers, or open areas where you can get your laptop out and so on. So in terms of connectivity, in urban areas, college

students used to come to access Internet here" (School/College Representative, 04/05/2023).

However, for non-FE College students, such forms of digital access were not an option, with ongoing impacts on their learning.

2.3 Home settings and learning from home

The nature of the 'home setting' impacted learning (Di Pietro et al., 2020) and particularly affected children living in crowded houses, with several siblings, where electronic devices were shared or where Internet access was (not) supporting many devices connected simultaneously. Tackling the digital divide hence was not enough to ensure that young people continued learning.

"We started campaigning for the digital divide and did a fundraising to buy devices. We raised a significant amount and ended up getting enough devices, one per family. When the second lockdown happened we were more set up to go online, but the difficulty remained in overcrowded houses. Children didn't have the space to efficiently participate in online education" (School/College Representative, 29/02/2023).

Digital poverty was embedded within overall poverty and impoverished socio-economic living conditions:

"Access to a desk, to a decent Internet connection, to a quiet place to study, or just space to be on your own, away from your family was not possible. Poorer young people invariably had a lot less access to those things or to outside spaces" (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the education sector across England, 01/02/23).

Such socio-economic inequalities and how learning could be delivered at home emphasized the vital relationship between the school/teacher(s), young people and their parents. Skills matter here, not only in regard to the ability, time and/or resources of parents to support their children's learning, but also to liaise efficiently with the school.

"Parent's education level was really significant. This varied quite widely across different ethnic groups. Essentially parents who were educated to a higher level not only felt far more confident

supporting their kids with their school work at home, but also in communicating with the school and feeling like they were part of a partnership. On the other hand, parents who weren't educated have had more negative experiences with the education system and felt far less confident to support their kids at home. This revealed ethnic and gender disparities" (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the education sector across England, 01/02/23)

Home learning was hence extremely difficult for young people and this was also related to being isolated and not being able to seek adequate support.

"It was all online. It wasn't fun, and I struggled with it quite a lot mainly when engaging with the online lectures" (Young People Ambassador, 27/05/2023).

This is where the ad-hoc efforts from schools and teachers were effectively highly localised. While some schools and teachers went much beyond their core duties, others did not.

"There was no assistance being online at home, apart from being given the camera. If things were explained to us, it would have been so much better. For example, my teacher used to sit down with me and check my images, but on screen, you can't really do that, especially if you don't have the certain software. At home, I didn't have all the required software and some are expensive to purchase. At college, I could be on a well-equipped desktop but at home I was stuck with an obsolete laptop with a small screen. I never got an in-person visit from any teachers or principals to support me" (Young People Ambassador, 27/04/2023).

Difficulties in sustaining learning were hence highly spatialised but other factors also interfered, from age groups to the types of courses that were studied.

2.4 General Learning, vocational courses and demographic inequalities

The pandemic had particularly profound impacts on vocational training and young people preparing and sitting GCSEs and A-Levels. New grading scales were introduced to exam systems for GCSEs/A-Levels and some schools were allowed to open for years 10 and

12 to support GCSEs and A-Level preparation (Howard et al., 2020). The cancellation of exams and the introduction of alternative grading scales were however criticized for disadvantaging students studying in more deprived areas, resulting in high-achieving students from historically low-achieving institutions being downgraded, and lower-achieving students from high-achieving institutions having their grades inflated (Finn et al., 2022). Adjustment made after these criticisms did not suffice to address those inequalities. The national Education Committee Institute raised the alarm immediately arguing that "north and the Midlands are doing worse than the south and disadvantaged pupils are doing worse than non-disadvantaged pupils, but very notably all pupils in more disadvantaged areas have a high likelihood of suffering severe learning loss. It is not only poor children; it is [also] non-poor children in disadvantaged areas" (Laws, 2020). Such disequilibrium were reiterated in March 2022: "it is clear that school closures have had a disastrous impact on children's academic progress, with 2023 results reiterating this trend clearly highlighting a learning gap characterising a so-called Covid-19 generation" (House of Commons Education Committee, 2022). Such consequences were shared by some of the young people we interviewed testifying from the dramatic consequences of the pandemic on young people's education but also life trajectories:

> "I fully believe that the lockdown set my best mate two years behind. For a fact, I think the lockdown was detrimental to his trajectory and to his academic progress and to him being able to function. He didn't get the GCSE grades to get into college, so he had to re-sit for his GCSEs. He got into this college that just accepted everybody for 'A' levels, doing a course that he didn't really like. He finally dropped out of college because he realized that he was not happy with his course choices and went chilling with different people that affected him negatively. He had to go out and sell substances to people in order to be able to look after his family and his mum...He now has fully dropped out of college, left the country and has gone back to Pakistan to live with his dad" (Young People Ambassador, 23/02/2023)

> "I know someone from college, she was the oldest in her family, and she had so many responsibilities with several siblings to take care of. She was trying to adjust to the new setting of trying to learn at home but fell behind during

> that time. So, she tried to catch up with her studies, but it was overwhelming. She couldn't join university right after finishing her A-levels and did take her a longer and stressful time to get to the point where she wanted initially to be" (Young People Ambassador, 26/05/2023)

Gaps in learning affected all subject areas, even in priority topics such as English and Maths, despite 'catch-up' programmes. Studies showed that in November 2021, students remained behind Math and English skills by at least 2 months (Edge Foundation, 2021) and gaps persisted until January 2022 in mathematics, reading, languages and physical education (Ofsted, 2022). This was due to the decisions of schools to prioritise other types of support as eluded to earlier.

> "There were a lot of inequalities in terms of schools in the most disadvantaged areas. Such schools focused on the safety of the kids, making sure that they had food and less on making sure that they had work to do. They were busy doing printouts of school materials and delivering them to their house, along with food packages because a lot of the kids didn't have the equipment that they needed." (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the education sector across England, 30/03/2023)

Other curriculum areas, and especially the applied sciences and sports, were particularly negatively affected, with less than 70% coverage of the usual curriculum (Edge Foundation, 2021, Woodrow and Moore, 2021). Vocational courses (e.g. at Further Education Colleges) were also significantly disrupted (Stone, 2021).

> "Vocational courses have been more impacted during the pandemic because it was difficult to learn practical skills" (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working across England to support disadvantaged and vulnerable young people., 16/02/2023).

Disruptions also arose from a lack of attention and understanding, at government level, of the nature of vocational exams.

> "On the day that the UK government announced that the academic exams (GCSE) were going to be cancelled that year, BTEC exams were taking place on that day. They didn't even announce

anything about the BTEC exams because nobody in government has come through the vocational route, so they didn't even think about the vocational side" (Representatives from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the education sector across England, 17/02/2023).

Students enrolled in vocational courses were less affected by the digital divide as many had been provided with a computer prior to the pandemic and also benefited from bursaries to purchase kits and materials. However, vocational training was significantly impacted by the difficulty of learning practical skills online.

"I think we can say that for those young people that were relying on vocational training that was in person, certainly their experience was impacted. The distraction that they had, and the quality of that online experience paled into significance in terms of what they should have been experiencing in person" (Representatives from a not-for profit social enterprise focusing on youth education and youth employment, 30/01/2023).

Later on during the pandemic, significant resource-demanding adjustments were needed to accommodate social distancing requirements:

"It put a lot of pressure on vocational teachers because if you are running sessions with fewer students, and due to social distancing, you have to run more sessions and the workshop space is limited. There was a lot of pressure on the resource of teaching, particularly vocational subjects and technical subjects, which needed workshops" (School/College Representative, 04/05/2023)

Overall, the impact of the pandemic on young people's education was dramatic, fostering for those living in monetary poor conditions an increase in socio-economic vulnerabilities with long-lasting impacts. While our study focused primarily on children above 10 years, it was flagged up during our interviews that online learning was also very difficult for younger children. Beyond long-lasting learning gaps, the pandemic impacted young people's mental health with these impacts continuing post-lockdown, as noted by one of the social workers we interviewed:

"I had to go and pick up a girl today that has had an absolute crisis in the middle of the street, running out of school, who's trying to do a GCSE. This girl was considered one of the most consistent and mentally strong. She had to present online to 800 people but literally had a meltdown for the first time on the street. She was screaming because of her anxiety and stress around doing the GCSE and this is because of the feeling of falling behind on proper education. I am sure there are many more out there sharing that same situation" (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working across England to support disadvantaged and vulnerable young people., 16/02/2023).

Lack of social interactions, stress, isolation, and missing out of key stages of their lives were recurrent issues mentioned by interviewees.

"Children and school readiness has been impacted for the COVID-19 generation. We are seeing this impact on attainment and most importantly in low confidence levels. Learning is a social activity, a private and introverted activity. Therefore, if you're not confident in a group situation and some young people are still in their bedrooms and not going out to play now, confidence will be lost. (Representative from Local and Combined Authorities – Children/Youth Services, 06/06/2023).

Ongoing challenges facing the education sector are also linked to the consequences of the pandemic for the teachers and headteachers workforce who themselves have suffered greatly.

"Another thing that I think hasn't really been researched was the pressure on school leaders. A lot of early retirements took place. Teachers felt responsible for the children and that pressure of a responsibility during COVID-19 was a traumatic event for them" (Representative from Local and Combined Authorities – Children/Youth Services, 06/06/2023).

Educational challenges, immediate and long-lasting impacts were unfortunately not isolated from other daily pressures, and this includes access to food.

3. Impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable young people's access to food and related adaptations

Access to food was severely impacted for vulnerable young people during the pandemic and food insecurity increased amongst monetary poor households, along with rising difficulties accessing a balanced diet (Goudie and McIntyre, 2020). Food insecurity is directly linked to housing insecurity, and during the pandemic the inability to access nutritious meals also affected young people's mental well-being (Defeyter et al. 2021). In addition to housing insecurities and financial strain and gender, ethnicity emerged as a factor, with BAME communities consistently encountering disproportionately higher levels of food insecurity compared with white communities (ibid., Goudie and McIntyre, 2020).

3.1 Food poverty

Food poverty is a major challenge in England and has been increasing as a result of the pandemic and subsequent challenges such as the war in Ukraine. Children in the most deprived households benefit from the free school meals scheme. In other words, state funded schools in England have been required by law since 2014 to provide free lunches to pupils in reception, Year 1 and Year 2, who are not otherwise entitled to benefits-related free school meals. From Year 3 onwards, free food meals are only offered to the most vulnerable (particularly households on universal credit) (Department of Education, 2018) and leave many vulnerable families struggling to access food.

"The threshold for free school meals (FSM) is very low in this country. It is set as £7400 as the eligibility income threshold. So if you are running over that you are not entitled to receive any FSM. It is estimated right now, that we have 1.4 million children that are on Universal Credit, which means they are living in poverty with no support to receive food at school" (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks)

organisation working in the food policy and healthy food sector, 10/02/2023).

Access to food outside school has relied on the voluntary sector whose support significantly stepped up during the pandemic (and after). These organisations are the main suppliers of emergency food welfare in Britain, including food banks as there is no explicit state support for people who experience acute food shortage (Barker et al. 2019). With austerity measures that affected Britain since 2009, such groups and organisations have seen their funding declining, while numbers of beneficiaries have increased.

"The cost of living crisis has been a burden on vulnerable families and our busiest months ever in the history of the food bank were during the pandemic...We are seeing more people using food banks for the first time and that speaks volumes and is a worrying trend!" (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the food provision (including food banks) sector, 23/03/2023)

In this context, young people relying on accessing food at school suffered greatly as reliance on school meals was significantly disrupted during lockdowns periods (Schleicher, 2020). Due to lockdown restrictions, the stigma of receiving assistance from food banks, fear of the virus (especially if some household members were vulnerable), loss of income (e.g. cost of public transport), and lack of awareness of community and charity schemes, many food-insecure households struggled to access support (Connors et al., 2020, Goudie and McIntyre, 2020). In the first stage of the pandemic, the lack of coordination of government responses (particularly the non-provision of food during holidays) led to a range of local adaptive responses. Led by schools but also charities, religious and faith groups in partnership with food banks (Caplan, 2020, Bayes

et al., 2021), food was distributed to young people but also to their families, as an emergency response.

> *"Schools sorted the food themselves, they either bought food parcels, or got their own cooks, doing their own food parcels and giving it out. Then the government did a voucher scheme, which had a lot of issues in terms of accessibility* (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the education sector across England, 30/03/2023)

Through solidarity, dedication and an increasing number of volunteers coming forward, non-government organisations were able to set up collection points, provide door-to-door delivery, and keep food pantries open for the community while applying the rules of safe distancing (Oncini, 2021). Free food parcels were delivered through very diverse, and locally-based arrangements, as outlined above (Moss et al., 2020, Nelson et al. 2020, HRW 2020). Here local knowledge was key with organisations working with vulnerable people able to identify and contact those in need and then coordinate distributions through existing networks and the use of social media. Such approaches included partnering with the local police or schools mobilising their non-teaching staff to bring supplies to the most vulnerable. New community groups emerged (e.g. associations of volunteers within local communities) and mutual aid groups (family/friends/neighbours) through social networks. These fostered informal support such as helping a neighbour to access food or shopping (Lasko-Skinner and Sweetland, 2021). As noted by one of the organisation representative we interviewed:

> *"During the pandemic our charity was transformed into a food bank. We set up a new breakfast program during the summer of 2020, at a time when schools were closed and children started their summer holidays. We took into consideration the health inequalities and the nutritious aspect while preparing them together in order to provide a healthy and a balanced breakfast. We collaborated with schools, as they were more knowledgeable in determining who was most in need. Schools became the food hub. So over the pandemic, we delivered over a million boxes. Several of the recipients' families were migrant and of ethnic background, so we adjusted the food to fit their preferences. For example, we swapped apples for mangoes*

> *and our initiative just grew more popular... Additionally, there are some good stories of head teachers who walked 10 kilometres every day, trying to find the families who did not come to schools to pick their boxes up"* (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the food education, policy, provision and healthy food sector, 10/02/2023)

Children receiving free food meals were rapidly given food vouchers but those did not initially include holiday periods, which created significant anxiety amongst vulnerable young people. The DfE Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) programme that started back in 2018 with £2 million to operate and pilot the programme fell short in 2020 by £1.3 million and the need for non-funded DfE holiday programmes and clubs became essential to filling the gap during the pandemic and to sustaining the health and wellbeing of the most disadvantaged children (Bayes et al., 2021). Free school meal provision was then extended over holiday periods. This occurred through lobbying from a significant number of organisations and well-known individuals (particularly Marcus Rashford).

> *"During the pandemic free food meals were temporarily and finally by March, they were made permanent due to extensive lobbying that we took part of. That was definitely a great progress"* (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the food education, policy, provision and healthy food sector, 10/02/2023)

The vouchers systems provided flexibility for young people to access more diverse food. It however remained with barriers, for example due to their format in not being cash or executed via credit cards, hence stigmatizing families (Connors et al., 2020).

> *"The voucher scheme, which the government implemented to replace the FSM had several problems. We received reports that some supermarkets were not accepting them. Additionally, there was a stigma, with people trying to pay with vouchers and being seen interacting with vendors. It was filled with issues"* (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the food education, policy, provision and healthy food sector, 10/02/2023).

The issue of being solely accepted by some supermarkets was combined with accessibility challenges (with some young people's mobilities being restrained for cost and health reasons). As a result, young people often relied on local food providers and small-scale grocery markets, who tend to sell food at higher prices and not accept the food vouchers (House of Commons, 2020).

The range of measures and forms of collaboration ensured the distribution of food through schools, food banks and (inter-) household sharing (AAPG, 2022) and gradually addressed the government's fragmented responses (Barker and Russell, 2020). It was only in the later phases of the pandemic that the government response became more efficient with increased food supplies along with food donations coming from supermarkets (Pautz and Dempsey, 2021). A key remaining issue was the ability of vulnerable young people to access nutritious food.

3.2 Nutritious food and health

Difficulties in accessing food, particularly nutritious food, combined with online-learning limiting movements and the closure of sport facilities meant that young people's lives, their ability to remain physically active but also to keep healthy diet patterns was severally impinged upon. Children's eating habits were altered, in part leading to an increase in obesity (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021, 2022). These outcomes were determined by a number of factors.

First, food poverty and the increase of food banks was a trigger in increasing consumption of (ultra-)processed rather than fresh food. On the one hand, the use of food vouchers offered a welcome initiative for some young people.

"I remember starting the lockdown, and during that term time being given vouchers for school meals, and realizing that you know, these vouchers were what will allow me and my brother to have a good decent nutritious meal. We would go to the local supermarket, we would cash in these vouchers, buy foods that we liked and make stuff at home. It was a really nice time, and it also allowed us to avoid all the ultra-processed food that was at home." (Youth Ambassador, 23/02/2023).

On the other hand, the food distributed in parcels, to young people of all age, was overall poor. Criticisms were raised in terms of the value and nutritious content of some of the food packages and a lack of sensitivity to food allergies and intolerances (House of Commons 2020, Defeyter et al. 2021).

> "It was only in the later phases of the pandemic that the government response became more efficient with increased food supplies along with food donations coming from supermarkets."

Social distancing and arrangements within schools also restricted access to nutritious food and the diversity of food options was limited.

Children lost the "dining hall experience" and "missed out the nutritious ingredients they needed" (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the food education, policy, provision and healthy food sector, 10/02/2023).

As explained by one of our young people interviewee:

"Me and my friends had to eat in the same area, we weren't allowed to move around like before. Beforehand, my school had around 3 different canteens, different areas; we were now only allowed to go to one. They also limited the amount of food that was available, and hot food wasn't available as much as we had it before. (...) For months, I was eating sandwiches at school and cold baguettes". (Young People Ambassador, 23/03/2023)

Additionally, ease of access to junk food via online food delivery services (OFDS) such as UberEats/DoorDash/Menulog/Deliveroo became a key concern, with the top OFDS explicitly targeting UK children on social media

into consuming unhealthy items, particularly during lockdowns (Jia et al., 2021).

"With the lack of on-street advertising and transport type of advertising, marketing suddenly shrunk for the big food players. They started bombarding the young population via online tools. We had reports of students being overwhelmed with online ads during their lessons. For example, while they are doing math, an advert from UberEats would come up on their screen telling them to go get a pizza. So even while they were being schooled, they were being targeted by junk food companies and all types of big food companies. There was no escape for the youngsters and they felt exploited. This led to a rise in obesity rates in children" (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the food policy and healthy food sector, 10/02/2023).

Relationship to food became problematic, even if it also led to a range of experimentations, with positive outcomes for young people.

3.3 Experiencing food

At household levels, the combination of lockdown and restricted mobilities meant that individual self-sufficiency in producing and preparing food increased. This was combined with a change in eating habits driven by financial rationales, typically stricter budgeting, less impulse buying, preferences given for non-perishable and inexpensive food, and a reduction in meat and diary consumption (Hassen, Kapetanaki and Spotswood, 2022, Oncini, 2021). In some cases, it also transformed the families' attitudes and practices towards food, with an increase interest in cooking, experimenting with new recipes and consuming non-perishable food products such as pasta and rice (Hassen, Kapetanaki and Spotswood, 2022). Interest towards cooking came as a form of play and was used by play workers online:

"Playworkers were telling me all sorts of creative things that they were doing. They were physically dropping bags of play, full of arts and crafts materials and games, and they would sometimes drop ingredients and recipes and then, on Facebook or on Zoom, would do a cooking session with the kids, so they got fed". (Representative from a research institution with specific expertise in education, food and health and children/young people, 31/01/2023)

The change in habits did extend to the young population with an increasing interest to grow food hence generating a self-sufficient adaptation (Lasko-Skinner and Sweetland, 2021). Here the use of vouchers did indirectly contribute in empowering young people to buy their own products, cook and feel more independent.

Online videos posted on Facebook promoted cooking activities to engage communities' solidarity and in some instances created a "play book and food book" targeting the young population with home-cooked food ideas (Bayes et al., 2021). Organisations and charities specialising in food and healthy living stepped in to provide such resources.

"Every day we ran an initiative called 'Cooking with Jack', a virtual live cooking show. We taught families to prepare lunches at the cost of a free school meal. So the ingredients never cost over the amount of what a free school meal would cost. We wanted this to be accessible to all families and young people out there using simple ingredients" (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the food policy and healthy food sector, 10/02/2023).

Despite those positive experimentations, the struggles in accessing food had a detrimental impact on young people's development and mental health. This was worsened by other intersectional constraints, including their ability to play, engage in leisure and hence socialise.

4. Impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable young people's access to play /leisure and related adaptations

Play and leisure were by far the most ignored aspects of young people's lives in terms of the national government response, with little consideration given to it and with the longer-term impact on young people's development and mental wellbeing. For young people living in monetary poor conditions, such restrictions on their everyday lives were even harsher as

"The safe spaces for them to be active, to run and play were hugely limited by Covid. And for those young people who don't even have back-gardens, it became unimaginably a small world. So they were vulnerable" (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the food policy and healthy food sector, 10/02/2023).

As for accessing education and food, such challenges triggered further vulnerability, with longer-term consequences.

4.1. Play: a non-priority for pandemic policies

Play and leisure are fairly well recognised as children's rights in England. In January 2009, the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) published the Play and Leisure Policy Statement that set out how children and young people's right to rest, play and join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and leisure activities could be promoted. However funding to the play sector shrank dramatically in the past 10 years.

"When the coalition government came in, in 2010, they cut all their central funding for any infrastructures to support children's play. Since then, we turned to be one of the most cut sectors because it is not a statutory service. Play is not considered important, it is considered frivolous" (Representative from a research institution with

specific expertise in education, food and health and children/young people, 31/01/2023)

This was reflected in the support provided by the government to play and leisure policies during the pandemic. The government provided £1 billion split into three packages. The first sub-package was the Sports Survival Package (£600 million). It aimed to aid grassroots sports and protect the spectator type of sports in England. The second sub-package (£270 million) was directed towards supporting community sports centres and clubs by Sport England. The third sub-package (£100 million) was given to local authority leisure centres (DCMS, 2021) and aimed at supporting the reopening of public sector leisure facilities, preserving sustainable operations and adequate delivery of activities that were not provided for the public in private clubs (e.g. swimming), sustaining a healthy lifestyle across England and ensuring that facilities could fully or partially re-opened by end of March 2021 (Sport England, 2021).

Funding play and leisure was hence primarily focused on sport activities. No funding was allocated to the play sector per se and typically to the support of formal and informal play places. Organisations from parks and park trusts (for outdoor playgroups) to sport organisations and youth clubs but also adventure playgrounds remained outside of government supporting schemes (King, 2021). These organisations did not receive funding despite playing a key role during the pandemic for vulnerable young people (including through providing food and educational resources). This demonstrated a lack of understanding of the role of some of these places, as support and community hubs.

"We are a community-like playground...Kids call our playground their safe place, their happy place, their sanctuary, somewhere where they know they are going to be listened to, a place where they feel they can be themselves, be who

they are…We actually attract a lot of low-income and poor families because of who we are and because there is no other adventure playgrounds and play places around us" (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the play provision sector, 22/02/2023)

Play organisations managed to sustain their activities and support towards young people by adapting their activities and engage with food provision.

"I know from direct experience that it was much easier to get funding for food during the pandemic than it was for play. Many of the regular kind of or perennial funding sources for the charity sector were turned over to COVID-19 emergency relief funding streams. I put in so many applications to those for children's play and never got a penny because it wasn't considered a priority, with the only funding we got was to feed our children over the summer holidays from those sources" (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the play provision sector, 15/03/2023).

This was similarly shared by another play worker:

"The only funding that has come was through the holiday activities. That was due to the government response to Marcus Rashford's FSMs' initiative and effort. So, a lot of playgrounds, a lot of adventure playgrounds, a lot of projects are now running almost totally on that half-holiday funding" (Representative a private company specialized in supporting play provision, 9/02/2023)

The lack of interest and attention given to play translated into a lack of considerations given to the re-opening of playgrounds but also any kind of places targeting children and young people which were not part of recovery support schemes.

"There was a significant time-lag difference between adult spaces, essentially cafes, pubs and restaurants beginning to reopen, even if it was highly restricted, and activity spaces for children reopening" (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the education sector across England, 01/02/23).

This policy exclusion severely impacted young people.

4.2 The lack of play and its detrimental impact on young people's development and health

Not being able to play and have leisure was connected with not being allowed to socialise and interact with others. Children and young people missed their friends during periods of lockdowns and health restrictions. They missed hugging and missed crucial steps in their lives:

"What children have said is that they missed their friends because they weren't at school anymore, and because they weren't allowed to meet up outside with them. So children were only seen as COVID-19 vectors of disease. UK government in their response ignored children's needs." (Representative from Local and Combined Authorities – Children/Youth Services, 06/06/2023).

> "I know from direct experience that it was much easier to get funding for food during the pandemic than it was for play."

This was linked to the closure of schools but also to the non-recognition of their rights to play and have leisure.

Children's right to play was noted by authorities but in practice was not implemented or addressed (Casey and McKendrick, 2022). Regulations in terms of the number of household members that could mix were highly restrictive for families with several children. This restrained families with more than one child to mix, all together. As such, for most of the pandemic, play was segregated in schools by age groups, which was detrimental to many children. Lockdowns halted children and young people's physical activities with gyms, leisure clubs, pitches, playgrounds and sports' courts, all shut down (Sport England, 2020), with significant impacts on young people's health and wellbeing, specifically those very active in sport activities.

Housing and socio-economic conditions here played a key role in restricting the ability of young people to continue exercising:

"My access to leisure was limited. We have at our home a backyard garden that is full of trees, council owned, so our activity was limited there. I am an athlete, a gym person and footballer, and it was very difficult to do home workouts. I was lucky enough to buy some weights before the prices massively increased. It was a bit difficult because I was between teams. My workout was impacted, inconsistent and quite staggered" (Youth Ambassador, 27/04/2023).

Daily sports routines and exercises were altered and needed to be adapted to confined spaces (ibid.). Young people's physical activity was reduced by 68% (Spacey, Hatton and Crawshaw, 2021). In general, vulnerable children (at least those with less supervision and care provided by adults) tend to play outside their home and have dedicated times and spaces (Casey and McKendrick, 2022). This ability was impacted due to mobility restrictions and their amount of play was reduced during lockdowns and due to social distancing. Similarly, collective and group activities either disappeared or shrank due to social distancing (Spacey, Hatton and Crawshaw, 2021). This included adapting play at schools in periods of social distancing.

"A lot of our schools don't have a huge amount of outdoor space. They carefully planned how to use the playgrounds and at different times in order to maintain the social distancing" (Representative from Local and Combined Authorities – Children/ Youth Services, 05/06/2023).

During periods of lockdowns, some schools offered the possibility to parents of children with learning difficulties to use playground facilities, during school opening hours.

As a result, isolation increased, impacting self-confidence and abilities to engage with the others in all types of situations.

"We're seeing an impact on attainment and most importantly confidence because you can't learn, if you're not feeling self-confident. A lot of learning is a social activity as well as a private and introverted activity. Therefore, if some young people are not confident in group situations and are still in their bedrooms and not going out to

play now, this is an issue". (Representative from Local and Combined Authorities – Children/Youth Services, 06/06/2023)

Socialising outside being restricted, the bedroom became the primary play area, heightening the significance of e-gaming (Casey and McKendrick, 2022). For many young people, play and social interactions shifted online with 92% of 16 to 24 years old reported engaging in online gaming (Ofcom, 2021). While this led to significant negative impacts, it also played a key role in young people's resilience and ability to sustain forms of social interactions.

"You know the boy isolated alone in the dark room with the screen is not a physical activity and it has dangerous repercussions. However, I would say it did saved them to an extent, by interacting with each other through avatars, similar to talking to each other in real time" (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the play provision sector, 15/03/2023).

Key here was mental wellbeing. However, again, not all were equal in accessing online play due to the issue of the digital divide and cost of data. Young people experiencing intersectional disadvantages were more vulnerable to digital-leisure exclusions (Woodrow and Moore, 2021).

4.3 Alternative forms of indoor/ outdoor playing

Despite the above trends, as the pandemic progressed, several play adaptations occurred across England where children reclaimed neighbourhood streets and re-appropriated them as spaces of interactive play (Russell and Stenning, 2021). Even if these processes were not implemented on a larger scale or supported by local authorities (e.g. through play streets schemes for example), creativity and adaptability emerged in various temporary small-scale adaptations of outdoor spaces and community streets. For example, the use of non-traditional playgrounds such as woods, and temporary activities led by parents, volunteers or by play workers, such as chalk hopscotches, play trails, colouring houses windows brought intergenerational play to the fore.

"We came up with an innovative system engaging parents. We asked parents to take to local parks a bag with fabric, ropes and foil blankets and let

the children create their own place space within the local park, whether it's a locked playground or not. In fact, we were advocating quite strongly for the playgrounds to become zones for both dog walkers and the children to come play and rest. Adults and children also went out on the streets and we monitored car traffic cars, and started doing chalking, hopscotch and giant bubbles, We also had giant balloons to play with, and other kids were playing football and doing other fun things. On Sundays we played music on the streets" (Representative a private company specialized in supporting play provision, 9/02/2023)

Playworkers and play organisations remained engaged in developing innovative ways of gathering children to play online (King, 2020); through various support measures, they also arranged the delivery of play and food parcels to those in need.

"Well, the play workers had a van, and they would go out and distribute food, activity packs and fun stuff. They knew the children and what they wanted. Our Instagram page helped in spreading out the word and was really significant throughout the period of lockdown. So, we built up relationships with families and via our Instagram posts started to support parents and guiding them to find things at home so their children could play with. We stumbled on Zoom by coincidence and used it as a platform to deliver play sessions limited to fourteen minutes limits which is the optimum screen time for a child. The children were totally in control, and encouraged them to use loose parts and find anything around them to start playing with us. We used cups, lemons, vegetables, or some fruit and started passing them from one screen to another. We also played hide and seek on the screen which was incredibly fun" (Representative a private company specialized in supporting play provision, 9/02/2023)

The acknowledgment that poverty and deprivation were also affecting play was also at the core of schools but also local authorities' work. Many schools organised the distribution of books, papers and colouring pens, while also handing out food and learning materials. Similarly, local authorities and social workers used their budget to purchase play items and distribute them to the most vulnerable families. In some cases they joined forces with other groups to fill gaps:

"through our own connections and people wanting to help (…), we went to buy loads of colouring books and pens and papers and stuff like that" (Representative from Local and Combined Authorities – Children/Youth Services, 06/06/2023).

> **"... as the pandemic progressed, several play adaptations occurred across England where children reclaimed neighbourhood streets and re-appropriated them as spaces of interactive play."**

Faiths organisations also stepped in and included play sessions as part of the support provided to their communities:

"We met for half an hour every Sunday at our church for about eighteen months. We had a group of about 12 children who came every single week and we played all sorts of games. While online, we would play a song, and we were bouncing around doing actions. We also played scavenger hunt games where children had to run around the house, find things and bring them back. Parents took part of this as well and the children absolutely loved it. It was the highlight of their week" (Representative from Diocesan and Faith groups, 16/03/2023).

Such collective efforts demonstrated how, at local levels, play and leisure were considered as crucial components of young people's development leading to significant efforts. Here, the role of social workers

is to be noted. They were also the first to be able to socially interact with young people.

> *"We were probably the first adults other than their immediate family that they saw when they out on the streets. We used to sit on the end of the path, chat with them, and play games and have silly conversations"* (Representative from Local and Combined Authorities – Children/Youth Services, 06/06/2023).

Such mobilisations allowed alternative arrangements to provide support to young people in retaining elements of social interactions and play in their lives.

4.4. Playing by going around regulations

The play and leisure of children and young people living in monetary poor households were impacted further due to the combination of three key factors: limited access and poor quality of green and public spaces around their homes; limited opportunities to play at home (due to overcrowding, no garden or difficult family conditions); the digital divide restricting a shift to online playing/socialising and hence enhancing digital-leisure exclusions. The reduction of play, leisure and social interactions opportunities led to a range of adaptations based on versatility, and improvisations (which included in some instances bypassing authorities' regulations). Illicit and liminal leisure practices also increased.

Many young people (teenagers and above) used public and semi-public spaces to meet despite restrictions, often facing the risk of fines (Woodrow and Moore, 2021). This led to breaking boundaries as a form of coping.

> *"During the lockdown, the rise of gaming really became a massive thing. Everyone was playing using PlayStation and Xbox devices. I do remember that some rule breaking took place during the lockdown, where people went to each other's houses. People in my school and the ones I saw on social platforms were meeting at one person's place and no one would be able to see them from the outside. This meant the world for 14 and 15 years old kids. It really helped them stay afloat because you can't lock a teenager with no other form of entertainment"* (Youth Ambassador, 23/02/2023)

Places were also used differently and without authorization (Russell and Stenning, 2021).

> *"In my street, adults and children were all out in the streets as much of the time as we could manage, monitoring cars, etc. We did lots of chalking, lots of hopscotch, and lots of giant bubbles. The kids were playing football and doing other things and we'd have music every Sunday"* (Representative a private company specialized in supporting play provision, 9/02/2023).

Those initiatives were spontaneous and ad-hoc highlighting the role of improvisations as a form of coping and caring. Similar examples were shared by social workers, who bypassed regulations to provide support of the kinds indicated above. Reflecting on the action of one of the members of her team, one interviewee shared:

> *"She knew she was not supposed to go into the house as she was putting herself at risk. But, when she was faced with a young person who was crying and her mum who was desperate, she said I couldn't just stand there and do nothing."* (Representative from Local and Combined Authorities, 06/06/2023).

5. Ignored voices and an abandoned generation?

Vulnerable young people's access to education, food, play/leisure and on their abilities to grow, develop, be mentally well and healthy was dramatically impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic. What is apparent is that the voices of children and young people in England were mostly ignored, as this age group was neither considered as a priority nor 'at-risk' from a public health perspective. This observation was commonly shared by all interviewees who also heard some concerns directly from young people.

"Young people vocalized it. They said we have been forgotten about, we have been left behind" (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the play provision sector, 22/02/2023).

In a context where the responses to COVID-19 were driven by science but also politics, strategies and policies, one of our interviewees shared her anger:

"UK government in their response ignored children's needs. Children should be recognized as a discrete group, be treated differently and be allowed to have contact with each other and be able to continue playing. Children paid the price for older people. It is an uncomfortable truth, and I think it reflects how the senior leaders of this country think about children, negating the proper rights to education. We should have protected the children rather than older people. The Government are not interested in children's experiences. I don't think they ever listened to children because they don't vote because they are not eighteen years old! (Representative from Local and Combined Authorities – Children/Youth Services, 06/06/2023).

Consensus amongst interviews emerged that young people were abandoned but also targeted by divisive health discourses (at least as presented by some parts of the media and in some social media). The lack of support, post-pandemic, reinforced this feeling.

"It was pretty clear from young people that they felt very unsupported by governments and that the government often referred to them as being part of the problem. Children perceived themselves as the ones who are spreading COVID-19 during the early stages. The Government never spoke to young people directly and there was there wasn't any recognition of the sacrifices they were making, particularly those who lost their education and accessibility to food and services. Young people told us they did not feel that the Government were looking after their interests and that they lost trust in authorities. Some of them do feel abandoned and left to their own" (Representatives from a not-for profit social enterprise focusing on youth education and youth employment, 30/01/2023).

This feeling of abandonment was combined with disempowerment.

"It is really a key concern to see how little power has been given just to the young people to actually be heard at different stages" (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the food policy and healthy food sector, 10/02/2023).

In particular, while the implications of the pandemic on their education and lives' trajectories became very quickly visible (for example highlighted in government reports (typically the Education Committee) and widely debated in national media, there remained limited attention to young people's needs.

"There was never a recognition of the sacrifices that young people were making, particularly those who lost their education and access to training opportunities. Young people told us they

did not feel that governments were looking after them and their interest. (...) Young people did not feel heard or listened to" (Representatives from a not-for profit social enterprise focusing on youth education and youth employment, 30/01/2023).

The impact of the pandemic will have detrimental consequences for many children and young in the short and long-term, with many of these not yet visible. The pandemic led to the rise of a COVID-19 generation.

Overall,

"more could have been done" (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the education sector across England, 01/02/23)

and the national responses for children and young people were not appropriate.

A key reason flagged by our interviewees as linked to the inappropriateness of policy formulation.

National decision makers *"are not interested in children's experiences"* (...). Decisions and policies were *"adult-led"* (Representative from Local and Combined Authorities – Children/Youth Services, 06/06/2023).

The pandemic will have continuing consequences for their future in terms of professional life trajectories, healthy lifestyles, mental wellbeing, educational opportunities, self-confidence and more besides. Such consequences are exacerbated by the on-going cost of living and inflation crisis with noticeable inequalities amongst regions in England (North/South and North East/North West divides), whilst increasing the socio-economic strain on ethnic groups and widening divides within cities (typically in London). Many lessons must be drawn, starting by reflecting upon where political priorities need to be.

"The government needs to look at how they treat the young people in the first place, they need to start caring and realising that they are the foundation to this country because as they grow and develop, then they will start building the foundations again. It's a constant our foundations are always building because our generations are always changing (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the play provision sector, 29/2/ 2023).

The role of the PANEX-YOUTH project continues here as lessons need to be constructed for and with young people – a key focus for WP4, which involves detailed action research with young people.

> **"The impact of the pandemic will have detrimental consequences for many children and young in the short and long–term, with many of these not yet visible."**

Conclusion

Young people, and particularly vulnerable young people, suffered dramatically during the pandemic and continue to do so. While a significant amount of public funding was allocated to emergency funding during the pandemic, it was nevertheless often insufficient and poorly targeted. Some (vulnerable) children and young people are struggling and will struggle to catch up and have had their lives changed during the pandemic. The latest Destitution Report published in October 2023 (p.9) by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation testifies as to the dramatic increase of the most severe forms of material hardship which includes the inability of families to "meet their most basic physical needs to stay warm, dry, clean and fed". They note that "approximately 3.8 million people experienced destitution in 2022, including around one million children. This is almost two-and-a-half times the number of people in 2017, and nearly triple the number of children. There is an urgent need for action to tackle destitution in the UK" (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023: 2). The daily survival of children and young people and their families was effectively ensured due to the involvement and commitment of individuals, communities, charities, schools and teachers but also faith groups, who all unprecedentedly stepped-in as part of the 'pandemic' solidarity and war effort. Their role and actions are to be remembered, and opportunities to support and amplify that work (alongside suitable national government investment) carefully planned-for in the future.

The work on the PANEX-YOUTH project will continue. There is a need to draw lessons and make recommendations for future pandemic-preparedness, as well as to help find solutions for some of the compound challenges that affect the most vulnerable young people. However, any such recommendations and solutions need to be co-produced with young people. We are currently working with over 50 young people in the West Midlands to explore what incremental and innovative strategies have allowed them to survive the pandemic and its aftermath, to examine the impact on those adaptations on everyday survival and recovery, to question how those adaptations differ from, contrast with, or complement other policy and programmes in particular places, and to co-produce knowledge and innovative thinking with them. Our next (WP4) report will outline how young people want to see their voices heard and what this means in terms of mechanisms and support that will allow them to cope, be resilient, but also to thrive and fulfil their aspirations.

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