

The pandemic and SEN: existing problems, emerging challenges

This blog was created drawing on the concerns of young people voiced to NCB in an online survey. It was prompted by Disability History Month 2020 and its focus on 'Access'. To read more, please visit: <https://ukdhm.org/>.

Disabled children and young people and those with special educational needs (SEN) face challenges which existed before the pandemic and lockdown. Here, disabled children and young people and those with SEN share their experiences of learning and support in lockdown and highlight some barriers that they continue to face.

Lack of inclusive learning

Teachers have had to innovate quickly and adapt to a new way of learning. However, for some young disabled people and those with SEN, online learning has been inaccessible. A young person explained: *'I didn't get help with my work at college and found it hard to focus and concentrate online'* and another highlighted that *'I couldn't do work online and found all the different links, apps and platforms very confusing.'*

Another young person described how they *'Found online learning boring and confusing'* and concluded *'I didn't end up doing much learning.'* For one young person the issue was that *'people [are] not making reasonable adjustments to be able to do email or do 1-1 video calls.'*

If online learning is not accessible and inclusive, the ramifications for those pupils who fall behind others could be long lasting and have far reaching implications. As a young person emphasised *'make accessibility a priority not an afterthought.'*

Experiences of changes to support

Individual support has changed for young disabled people and those with SEN. A young person explained that *'stuff moved online or on the phone, meetings have been postponed or cancelled'* and that *'mentoring moved online and temporarily stopped.'*

Furthermore, for some young people the virtual support they received was not the same as receiving face to face help. A young person highlighted that:

'To simply email with concerns, it was not the same as being able to speak to someone in person or even over the phone about everything – all your worries, fears, stresses.'

Another young person said that *'there have been issues with the internet,'* highlighting the challenge that many children and young people face of insufficient internet connections and technology at home.

Despite issues with online support, some young people have been assessed by services over the pandemic. A young person said that:

'I have a social worker and had extra funding at the beginning of lockdown but that stopped pretty quickly and my social worker ignored me for two months. My annual review should be Nov/Dec time.'

The young people's varied experiences of support demonstrates the complexity of accessing and receiving support throughout the pandemic for disabled children and young people and those with SEN. Continuing everyday barriers

Disabled children and young people and those with SEN continue to face discrimination and barriers that existed before the pandemic. For example, a young person explained:

'I've found it really difficult when I've had to go on public transport. When I get on, they'll ask me to go to the top floor of the bus if it's full. But when I explain that I can't due to a disability, the other passengers give me evil stares because they ignore the embarrassment that I feel.'

With the national lockdown easing and areas entering local area restrictions, more people have been going outside to meet others in outdoor Covid-19 secure spaces. However, a young person explained *'I miss going out and sometimes I couldn't handle it for days even with my mum or dad. The park was so busy.'*

A young person summarised their experiences:

'as a vulnerable group, we've faced additional challenges yet most people also often don't see the challenges we've had to face due to the fact we have invisible disabilities.'

The importance of being young and independent

Young people discussed the importance of still being able to be a young person during the pandemic. They said *'young people need to be able to meet up and do fun stuff without adults around,'* and that going forward adults and professionals should *'let the young person decide where they want to spend time during lockdown.'*

Being able to practice everyday activities safely, such as getting transport to a destination or meeting friends and family in the park, is vital to young people's mental health and wellbeing. A young person explained they have *'struggled with my mental health, not being able to see my friends.'*

Recommendations

Young people have consistently highlighted the need to protect and support their mental health. A young person explained that:

'in our return to the "new normal", mentoring and mental health support would go a long way to reducing a feeling of alienation and helping to relieve stress whilst we adjust to a new way of life.'

Another young person reiterated the importance of mental health support and explained going forward they need *'a safe place to talk about their feelings.'*

Additionally, a young person explained that their local authority's 'lack of communication and uncertainty is majorly effecting me' and another suggested that councils 'talk to real disabled people and create guidance for the local level,' again stressing the need for local discussions with disabled children and young people and those with SEN directly.

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