

Back to School Study: Interim report 1

11th August 2020

The [Back to School study](#) is a rapid qualitative study examining how young people, parents, carers and school staff in Bristol feel about returning to secondary school in September, including their views on measures to reduce the risk of Covid-19 infections. This first interim report presents preliminary findings from interviews held with five school staff from three schools and eight families (7 young people, mostly years 7/8 (11-13 years), and 8 parents) from five schools, between 15th July and 7th August 2020.

Key findings

Home learning: young people struggled with the lack of socialising and teacher interaction and sometimes minimal teacher feedback. Staff were concerned that unequal access to technology and space exacerbated socioeconomic divides in educational attainment. Home learning benefits included fewer distractions and less stress for young people, and some better family-teacher relationships.

Feelings about returning to school: Families were keen to return unless they had vulnerable family members. Some young people were concerned about returning to socialising after lockdown, and the effectiveness of their home learning. Staff had many concerns about reopening, including Covid-19 infection risk, young people's emotional wellbeing, managing anticipated behavioural issues, and supporting young people who struggle with learning or are generally seen as more vulnerable, including Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) families. Some staff felt government guidance on reopening was unclear, impractical, inflexible and rushed.

Social distancing and risk reduction in schools: Although families were happy with year group 'bubbles', families and staff felt social distancing in schools would be difficult and such risk reduction measures will impact learning. There was particular concern about young people with additional needs e.g. those with special educational needs (SEN) or who struggle with structured learning/have shorter attention spans, and exam year groups.

Test, trace and isolate: Most parents and young people liked the idea of a school test and trace programme. Self-isolation was generally seen as feasible for most families.

Suggested solutions:

- Live virtual lessons for home learning for future lockdown or self-isolation situations
- Clear and regular communication from school to families on plans for reopening/future lockdowns
- Schools taking a supportive approach to reopening, considering the anticipated emotional impact on young people of lockdown/returning to school
- Directive local authority guidance for schools
- Directives on PPE for staff
- Resources for young people with additional needs/ SEN
- Guidance for schools on exam processes for next year
- Clear messaging to young people emphasising the need to comply with new risk reduction measures for the 'collective good'

Views of families



Home learning

- No interviewed young people had attended school during lockdown or had 'live' lessons. Young people were set work online, often with very little input or feedback from teachers. Some had phone calls from school and some had online tutor group sessions.
- Young people missed the social aspects of school, especially year 7/8 who were just starting to socialise independently of their parents.
- Although young people enjoyed fewer distractions and a more relaxed atmosphere when home learning, the lack of interaction with or feedback from teachers impacted learning and motivation. Some young people found prolonged computer use boring.



Returning to school in September

Most parents and young people knew their school's plans for Covid-19 infection risk reduction when reopening in September and some appreciated the clarity of information received.

- Young people and parents were eager to return to school for young people's learning and socialising. Parents looked forward to the 'return to normality'.
- Families with vulnerable family members were more concerned about the risk of Covid-19.
- Young people's concerns were less about the risk of Covid-19 for themselves, and more about returning to socialising after so long seeing only a few people, and if their home learning had been effective.
- There was consensus that social distancing between young people in schools is impossible due to the numbers of people and lack of space in the school environment. Parents could not see it working unless there was more space or fewer young people physically in school (e.g. split classes in a rota system).
- Young people felt that year group bubbles were feasible, but parents were concerned that they would not be effective at risk reduction because a) year groups are so big (200+), and b) families have multiple young people in different year groups.
- Some young people may see the new rules as an invitation to misbehave, in particular keeping 2m distance from the teachers.
- Social distancing will be particularly difficult at lunch/break times, arrival/leaving school, and in active lessons such as PE, dance and drama.
- Parents and young people were concerned about the impact of social distancing measures on learning, due to distraction by the new rules, and restrictions on teaching methods, including the 2m rule and impact on practical lessons e.g. science or food technology.
- Families were less aware of school plans for hand hygiene but anticipated these mainly focussing on hand sanitiser gel in/near classrooms.

people are just are not gonna do it [social distance]. They're just gonna do what they want and like run around the whole place, then I just like... it doesn't make sense. I mean, maybe they have some magical plan or something like that, but..there's not enough space (yr 7 pupil)



Test, trace and isolate

Most parents and young people liked the idea of a school test and trace programme as it would reassure families, although one parent was not keen due to concerns about use of their child's data.

Self-isolation was generally seen as feasible for families. Many families had already self-isolated and had mixed experiences. Having helpful neighbours made it easier. Lack of space made it harder.

Suggested solutions

- In future lockdown or self-isolation situations, parents and young people would like home learning to include live virtual lessons, to improve learning and social interaction. Some parents wanted clarity on plans for supporting learning in the event of future lockdowns.
- Parents suggested more clarity on the symptoms of Covid-19, if they were expected to report them.
- For the return to schools in September, clear and regular communication from schools about the changes made appears to be important to reassure parents. One parent suggested splitting the class and having half in attendance, half learning online, although this is not possible within current government guidelines. Some parents also advised that schools need to be understanding of the learning challenges young people may face on return to school.

Views of school staff

Home learning

- Despite the obvious limitations and challenges of home learning, staff did report some benefits, e.g. improved communication and relationships with families via 'check-up' phone calls.
- Staff were concerned about lockdown increasing the divide in educational attainment between families of lower socioeconomic status who had poorer access to space and technology for home learning.
- Learning for young people without computers was particularly affected, and provision of laptops from the government was inadequate and too late.
- One staff member was concerned about unknown long-term impact of lockdown on learning.

Returning to school in September

Staff had many concerns about reopening schools, including Covid-19 infection risk, young people's emotional wellbeing, managing anticipated behavioural issues related to anxieties and readjusting to being back at school, and supporting young people who struggle with learning or are in 'vulnerable' categories.

- The huge amount of work senior leadership teams had put into making plans for September was appreciated
- Staff had a "resigned acceptance" of returning to school. Some were unsure how/whether planned changes would work in reality. A long transition period was anticipated.
- Some staff were negative about government guidance on reopening, seeing it as contradictory and unclear, and designed to benefit the economy rather than young people. They felt schools have been "set up to fail."

"[there is a] complete disconnect between those [gov] announcements and reality of teaching"

- Concerns:
 - The Covid-19 infection risk - school are like "petri dishes"
 - After a period of relative isolation, young people adjusting to the social aspects and routine of school, associated anxieties and behavioural issues, and how the school would manage these

"what's difficult to predict is the more abstract side of it, so the underlying anxieties and worries that students might have about being together... and how that might affect behaviours and interactions with each other"

- The emotional impact of the pandemic and return to school on young people, and lack of advanced planning from schools on how to deal with this.
- 'Explosion' of safeguarding issues being reported from the period of lockdown
- Uncertainty and concern about plans for exams next year
- Particular areas of concern: BAME families due to increased risk from Covid-19; English as an Additional Language (EAL) families who may have spent lockdown not speaking English; young people with SEN, due to their need for close physical contact; vulnerable young people who have not engaged with home learning; young carers/those with family members at greater risk from Covid-19; years 7, and those going into exam years; young people who are already "avoidant" of school.

Covid-19 risk reduction measures will impact many young people:

- Staff felt young people would follow the new social distancing/hand hygiene rules as they are generally "conformists", but were concerned/unclear about enforcing rules.
- New rules, especially pupils distancing from staff, are likely to particularly impact those with additional needs e.g. SEN, those who find structured learning difficult, those with shorter attention spans, and years 7, and exam years.



Suggested solutions

- Directive guidance from local authorities so schools don't have to independently plan how to comply with government regulations.
- School leaders demonstrating an understanding of how difficult school closure has been for young people
- A supportive approach (e.g. a trauma-informed response and recovery curriculum) focussing on young people's anxieties and emotional wellbeing rather than getting back to normal/academic achievement.
- Exam processes for next year – more guidance needed, and possibly repeating the use of teacher-assessed grades.
- Time and staff to address needs of young people with additional needs/SEN.
- Directives on PPE for teachers, especially those working closely with young people.
- To increase compliance with social distancing measures schools may need to "convince" pupils and emphasise the "collective good", as well as provide clear messaging and regular reminders.

"a recovery curriculum [and] the importance of emotional wellbeing and attachment aware, kind of, principles ... should be something that's kind of clearly articulated and shared in government guidance to all schools"

Further details

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