



## Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households

### Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing Eleven

#### *Social Change: the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on families and households, and ways in which the church, faith groups and the government can support them*

#### The Call for Evidence

The Commission launched its Call for Evidence in October 2021 as the first major step in our inquiries. It provided an opportunity to engage with a wide range of people aged 18 and over, faith communities, and organisations working with children and families in England in thinking about some of the key issues relevant to the Commission's work. These are described in our first Briefing paper.<sup>1</sup>

We are analysing the responses thematically and sharing the emerging themes through a number of discrete briefing papers. In reporting the emerging themes the Commission is not commenting on them at this stage, but simply sharing them with a wider audience while using them to inform our thinking and to guide the various Commission activities that are taking place to dive more deeply into the evidence.<sup>2</sup> The briefings we share may well spark additional conversations, which we would welcome.

#### About this Briefing

The Commission is examining the factors that promote strong relationships, stability, safety and sustainability within families and households, and the conditions in which children can thrive and reach their full potential. In previous Briefings we have reported on the main themes to emerge from questions relating to the meaning of family and the characteristics of human flourishing, family relationships today, and the issues facing children and young people.

In order to understand the challenges facing families and households today, the Commission is exploring the changes that have taken place in family life over time, and particularly since the Second World War. In Briefing Ten we reported on the key themes emerging from questions about the changes in family life, household patterns and living arrangements that

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<sup>1</sup> *Themes Emerging from the Call for Evidence: Briefing One - The meaning of family*, March 2022

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*



had been observed by those individuals and organisations responding to the Call for Evidence.

In this Briefing we report on the themes emerging from questions about the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on individuals, families, children, and young people. While we know that many people have been affected negatively by the pandemic, we are also keen to understand the positive impacts on families and households, and the lessons we can learn from people's experiences in the past two years. In addition we asked questions about how the church, faith groups and government can support families to deal with the impacts.

Covid-19 has had a dramatic impact on everyone in England and, indeed, the world. As we emerge from this pandemic in 2022 it is essential that the Commission takes account of the impacts which are likely to be felt for some years to come. This Briefing is considerably longer than previous Briefings. We have deliberately brought together the responses to a range of questions in the Call for Evidence about the impact of the pandemic and the needs of families and households going forward.

## Context

In December 2019 news of a novel virus in China heralded the beginning of a global pandemic which caused widespread disruption and death around the globe. Given the ease of travel between countries, the movement of people resulted in the virus spreading long before it had been identified. By March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) had upgraded an outbreak to an epidemic to a pandemic.<sup>3</sup> On 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 a national lockdown was announced in England which required citizens to stay at home and avoid social contact, closed workplaces and schools, forbade national and international travel, and generally shut down the economy except for essential services such as healthcare. Nevertheless, the virus took hold rapidly and by May 2020 there had been 274,219 reported cases in the UK and 38,458 deaths, the highest in Europe.<sup>4</sup>

Since then, England has been subject to a series of lockdowns and a range of restrictive measures on daily living as new variants have emerged and escalated the spread of the disease. By June 2022 there had been 18.9 million reported COVID-19 cases in England, likely to be a considerable under-estimate, and 156,000 deaths.<sup>5</sup> Although all restrictions have been lifted, there are currently some 12,000 new confirmed cases and about 65 deaths each day, indicating that COVID-19 has not gone away. The expectation now is that COVID-

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<sup>3</sup> WHO (2020) Media Briefing on COVID-19 March 11th

<sup>4</sup> John Hopkins (2020) Coronavirus Research Center, John Hopkins University

<sup>5</sup> John Hopkins COVID-19 Data Repository by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering at John Hopkins University. Accessed 20 June 2022



19 should be regarded as a virus that everyone will have to live with for some considerable time to come.<sup>6</sup>

No-one had predicted that COVID-19 would cause such havoc and result in such a high number of deaths. While the lockdowns and restrictions had the desired impact of reducing the spread of Covid-19 in England while vaccines were being developed, they also had wide-ranging consequences for individuals and families whose freedoms were severely curtailed.

While every individual has their own story of life during the past two years, research has highlighted a number of key impacts which have been prevalent across society, irrespective of an individual's or family's personal circumstances.<sup>7</sup> Many of these impacts have had negative consequences and have caused considerable difficulties for families and households. These negative impacts include the following:

➤ **Isolation and loneliness**

There is compelling evidence of extreme loneliness and isolation.<sup>8</sup> Technology which supports personal contact via Zoom calls and FaceTime enabled many people to stay in touch with family and friends, but this is no substitute for physical contact and the warmth of human touch. As the pandemic and the restrictions on daily living continued, long-term loneliness was associated with an increased risk of mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, and severe stress.<sup>9</sup>

➤ **Death in isolation and unresolved grief**

The most difficult impact of coronavirus has been the high death rate. Restrictions meant that visits to patients in hospital and care homes were not allowed, so thousands of people died without loved ones being with them or able to say goodbye. Moreover, many close family members and friends were prohibited from paying their respects at funerals and cremations, and unable to share in the normal end-of-life rituals.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> <https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk> accessed 20 June 2022

<sup>7</sup> Misca, G., Walker, J., and Thornton, G., (2022) *Families and the COVID-19: pandemic: Perspectives from the UK* in P Fronck and K Smith Rotabi-Casares (eds) (2022) *Social Work in Health Emergencies*, Routledge p170-188

<sup>8</sup> Mental Health Foundation (2021). *Loneliness during coronavirus*  
<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/divergence-mental-health-experiences-during-coronavirus>

<sup>9</sup> ONS (2020) *The Office for National Statistics: Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain*: 19 June 2020

<sup>10</sup> Co-op (2020) *A Nation in Mourning Report: Is the UK heading towards a grief pandemic?* Co-op Funeralcare Media Report July 2020



➤ **Managing underlying health conditions, shielding and mental health**

People with underlying health conditions were deemed vulnerable and required to shield, meaning that they, and often those caring for them, were not allowed to go out for essential food shopping or minimal exercise for months on end. For some, this resulted in increased anxiety. Shielding has been shown to have had a disruptive effect on people's independence, confidence, social relationships, and mental health.<sup>11</sup> All the emerging evidence suggests that mental health issues have escalated. Nine months into the pandemic, data published by the Mental Health Foundation indicated that almost half of the UK population had felt anxious or worried in the previous two weeks; and this rose to 64% of people with a pre-existing mental health condition.<sup>12</sup>

➤ **Family violence**

ONS data show that the number of offences flagged as domestic abuse by the police increased each month between April and June 2020, coinciding with the first lockdown period, and then at the easing of lockdown from May onwards when those experiencing abuse may have felt safer in contacting the police.<sup>13</sup> The Centre for Women's Justice (CWJ) reported in 2020 that increases in domestic abuse were evident around the world, including in the UK.<sup>14</sup>

➤ **Children and parenting**

Only children of keyworkers and those with special educational needs were permitted to attend school. The majority of schools were closed and most children were expected to continue their education at home. Parents who were working from home during lockdowns were juggling work, with supervising their children's education, and in many homes bedrooms and kitchens doubled as offices and classrooms. Pressure on living space, especially for those with no outside space, could be considerable. The Children's Commissioner for England pointed out that pre-existing vulnerabilities were exacerbated during the pandemic: unemployment, poverty, mental health issues and domestic abuse all increased due to the pressures of being confined at home.<sup>15</sup> Her report indicated that a toxic trio of domestic abuse, addiction and severe mental health affected increasing numbers of children.

➤ **Inequalities and ethnicity**

While the coronavirus was no respecter of geographical boundaries or ethnicity, evidence of social inequalities in relation to COVID-19 emerged. There is evidence of the interaction of racial, socio-economic, and health inequalities, and an increase in the risk of mortality among COVID-19 patients from UK Minority Ethnic/Global Majority Heritage groups. This interaction became more obvious as the pandemic continued, resulting from inequalities in exposure to the social determinants of health, including the conditions in which people live and work.<sup>16</sup>

While the negative impacts of the pandemic have been significant, not everyone experienced the severe restrictions as particularly stressful. The UK Household Longitudinal



Study found vulnerability and resilience to be influenced by factors such as gender, employment and pre-existing challenges, including financial insecurity and being a lone parent.<sup>17</sup> Some individuals and families coped better than others while disadvantaged groups were more likely to have experienced increased pressures in their daily life.<sup>18</sup>

Spirituality has been identified as an important factor in the development of resilience<sup>19</sup> and belief systems are key to how the pandemic has been understood, constructing meaning through familial lenses.<sup>20</sup> Organised religion provides a belief system which can be present both within the family system and in the religious structures and practices outside of the family.<sup>21</sup> While churches were closed during lockdowns, services were offered online and virtual attendance increased substantially. Nevertheless, The Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture found that the closure of churches in the UK had a serious negative impact on both individual and societal wellbeing.<sup>22</sup>

The pandemic has drawn attention to the different factors which influence coping and resilience and the extent to which certain groups in society were significantly disadvantaged. The pandemic also encouraged an increased level of community support. In our Call for Evidence we were keen to discover how the pandemic had been experienced, to note the positive factors as well as the negative impacts, and to learn about how the church and faith groups can offer support to families and households dealing with the aftermath of

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<sup>11</sup> Kinmond, K. (2020) *Coronavirus: The impact of shielding on mental health and wellbeing*. British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy

<sup>12</sup> Mental Health Foundation. (July 2020). *Coronavirus: The divergence of mental health experiences during the pandemic*. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/coronavirus/divergence-mental-health-experiences->

<sup>13</sup> ONS (2020) *op.cit*

<sup>14</sup> Centre for Women's Justice (2020) *Covid-19 and the surge in domestic abuse in the UK*.

<https://www.centreforwomensjustice.org.uk/new-blog-1/2020/11/10/covid-19-and-surge-in-domestic-abuse-in-uk>

<sup>15</sup> Children's Commissioner. (2020). *Childhood in the time of Covid*. In Children's Commissioner for England *Report 2020*. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/childhood-in-the-time-of-covid/>

<sup>16</sup> Bambra, C., Riordan, R. Ford, J. and Matthews, F. (2020) *The Covid-19 pandemic and health inequalities*. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 2020;74:964–968.

<sup>17</sup> Daly, M., Sutin, A., & Robinson, E. (2020). *Longitudinal changes in mental health and the COVID-19 pandemic: evidence from the UK Household Longitudinal Study*. *Psychological Medicine*.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291720004432>

<sup>18</sup> Misca et al (2022) *op.cit*

<sup>19</sup> Walsh, F. (2016). *Applying a family resilience framework in training, practice, and research: mastering the art of the possible*. *Family Process* 55, 616–632. doi: 10.1111/famp.12260

<sup>20</sup> Walsh F. (2020). *Loss and Resilience in the Time of COVID-19: Meaning Making, Hope, and Transcendence*. *Family process*, 59(3), 898–911. <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp>

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

<sup>22</sup> The Centre for the Study of Christianity and Culture (2021) *Churches, Covid-19 and Communities; Experiences, Needs, and Supporting Recovery*. University of York <https://churchesandcovid.org>



an unprecedented period of individual loss and collective trauma. Here we highlight the key themes emerging from the responses to our questions.

### **Thinking about the coronavirus pandemic and the associated lockdowns and restrictions on daily life, in your experience what have been the most positive impacts on:(i) individuals? (ii) families and households?**

Most of the responses focused on how periods of lockdown had offered individuals and families a different perspective on life, especially those adults who were able to stay at home without the stresses of travelling to work and thereby enjoy a reduction in the fast pace of everyday life pre-pandemic. A number of key themes have emerged from the data.

#### **Valuing a slower pace of life**

The chance to slow down was reported by many people as a positive outcome of lockdowns, and this had created time for new activities and more quality time spent with family members living under the same roof:

- *Individuals - Slower pace of life for some, greater appreciation of some of the 'basic' aspects of life e.g. the outdoors, the home, simple pleasures. Maybe greater sense of connectedness with neighbours and local community. Families - for some, enjoyed more family time together*
- *There has been opportunity to slow down and spend more time at home. There has been the opportunity to accept change and to make change which is never easy and is often avoided - so it has helped us to face up to challenges*
- *Slowing of the pace of life. My family managed to keep reasonable contact through dog walks. Treasuring those times*
- *More time together as a family. More talking with each other. The pace of life slowed right down ... fewer demands for meetings*

#### **Increasing time for reflection**

The slower pace of life was used by some people to reflect on what is important in life, and to re-assess the balance between work and leisure:

- *More chance to reflect on one's own purpose, ethics, morals, direction*



- *More time to reflect and get to know oneself; Families are a lot closer to each other now and know each other better*
- *Learning about stillness and less busy schedules. Time for ourselves. Time to think*
- *It accelerated a sense of the question of "What is life all about?" by breaking people and families out of the cycle of routine and ordinary expectation.*
- *Individuals have had more of a chance to reflect on what really matters – COVID has been a big wake-up call. Families have had a chance to rethink balances between work and family in a new way, and to reassess what things are worthy of their time*

### **Increasing technological competence**

Some people had been grateful for the opportunity to increase their technical skills, and to learn new ways of staying in touch with family and friends:

- *COVID has forced a lot more parents to engage in educational activities at home. They have also become more confident in the use of information technology to keep in touch with family and friends, do their shopping online and participate in personal development resources available online*
- *Learning to communicate in new ways, e.g. Zoom and WhatsApp*
- *Those who have embraced technology have found new ways to connect. Some have seen kindness from neighbours they did not know. Families have found new ways to connect, engaged in on-line school and activities*

### **Appreciating spirituality**

A number of respondents referred to their engagement with church services on-line, and others talked about their increased appreciation of their faith:

- *COVID appears to have drawn people closer to spirituality and to appreciate places of worship and events for communal gathering more than ever before*
- *Watching religious services on the internet*
- *Realising how much the church community means to me*
- *Services on internet. More bible study. Enhanced need for God. Realising that the world is fragile*



## Having a better quality of life

The time to think and live life differently had resulted in some people experiencing what they described as a better quality of life:

- *Improved quality of life for some. People have made some positive changes to their lives. Some things have become less important, and stress has reduced*
- *Individuals - time to rethink priorities, make space for the people and things that matter to them and create a more sustainable rhythm to work, home and life  
Families - more time together, more meals together, better connection and quality time between couples themselves and with their children, more involvement/support from both partners in household chores and childcare*
- *Working from home has been really life-giving for many of my more introverted friends and enabled them to do their work without wasting time commuting to exist in an office space with others whom they don't actually need or want to interact. There has been more availability, investment and appreciation of technology that allows better inclusion of some that are usually excluded. Some of my parishioners who are supermarket workers said it was the first time they'd felt important and appreciated rather than belittled in their job. Many families and households got the opportunity to spend time together in a way they hadn't done in years. They valued this opportunity to refresh and reconnect with each other. Also led to many being able to spend some time improving their living spaces through DIY, decorating and gardening*

## Valuing community

During the lockdowns, the restriction of movement outside the home and the inability to gather together with friends resulted in some people being more aware of their own communities and valuing neighbourliness:

- *Being more local, having less commuting, learning about the possibilities for working from home, spending more time in my community and local environment, finding new walks, appreciating local key workers more; spending time with family/household members; finding out we can do with less (e.g. less travel, less external entertainment)*
- *Rediscovery of neighbourliness*





- *The most positive impact has been one of increased support for one another within communities, with neighbours looking out for one another, and individuals volunteering to help others*
- *We have all learned the importance of helping others*
- *People have reflected on the speed of life, and taken the chance to review after-school activities and church commitments, and take a step back from these so that life is less busy/full; there is more of a sense of community with neighbours*
- *Some people have seen kindness from neighbours they did not know*

## **Rebuilding and re-evaluating relationships**

The ability to stop and take stock of life enabled some respondents to rebuild and re-evaluate their relationships:

- *For some, an opportunity to recalibrate and refocus - and to strengthen important relationships; rebuild relationships; re-evaluate where worth and identity come from*
- *Being able to stop and take a breath and reassess everything; families having time to be together and get to know each other again*
- *Talking to each other more. Relying on each other more. Re-evaluating relationships in a positive manner. More time spent actively together*

This re-evaluation enabled some people to acknowledge just how important relationships are:

- *Realising the need for relationships*
- *More time to think and re-evaluate your life (relationships, work, family). Making more of an effort to stay in contact as have seen the preciousness of life and relationships*
- *One of the most positive impacts from the pandemic was that people were given space, space to reflect. To realise what is most important ... I think it showed many people what is actually important in life; gave families an ability to have a lot of quality time with each other and to be grateful that they had each other*
- *More time to spend together has led to pressures around relationships but it has also been a time of growth of recognising how valuable each person is and of wanting each other to flourish and thrive*



## Positive impacts for children

Some parents mentioned some positive impacts for children:

- *Some children for whom school is an unsafe environment have found online learning a positive experience*
- *Some autistic young people loved being away from school and the stress, pressures and sensory overload that causes them*

## Recognising the positive and the negative

While the majority of those answering this question simply recorded positive impacts, a few described a mixed picture, with positive and negative impacts being highlighted together:

- *During lockdown, loneliness has been highlighted, especially for individuals who live alone. A positive impact of this has been how individuals and families have reached out to those on their own, through community groups, creating support bubbles, WhatsApp groups, mutual aid groups, food hubs and many other lockdown initiatives. Many people have turned to the church for help and community, feeling the confidence to join in with an online service where they [may] not have walked into a church building. Families and households spending more time together has had a polarising effect. Time together strengthens relationships. However, where there are large underlying and unresolved issues, that same increased time together has brought the conflict to the surface and forced it to be dealt with for good or for bad*
- *The pandemic has brought with it immense challenges and sadness. Despite this, and particularly in the earliest days of the pandemic, it also brought a renewed sense of familial and community cohesion. This has meant that communities rallied around each other to support individuals who might have been lonely, and families and households were supported through food deliveries where needed. In many ways the pandemic did not so much create new problems, but exacerbated and shone a light on issues that were already existing. Perhaps some of this good-will has now waned, but the pandemic also highlighted the potential for individuals and families within communities to organise around the flourishing of others*



## Summary

The majority of responses to this question have drawn attention to the value of having more time together as a family, more time to reflect on what is important in life, and more time for relationships. Those who were not designated as keyworkers appreciated a slower pace of life. The following answers were typical of many:

- *Increased interest in the natural world; greater interest in keeping fit; more interest in the home - baking, gardening. More time together as family; the pandemic has forced greater interactions relationally within the family; there have been less outside influences on the family*
- *Some people have reported improvements in their mental health because they have been able to work from home, saving time on travelling and with reductions in stress levels. The quieter lifestyle and reduction in pressure to be out of the house has also benefitted some people, enabling them to recharge depleted batteries. Some have enjoyed having time to develop new interests and skills, or to return to those they had left behind. Some people have reported enjoying being able to spend more time together as a family, with more time to talk to each other and do activities together. Some have enjoyed home schooling and significant numbers of teenagers have reported decreases in their symptoms of anxiety and other mental health conditions through not being at school*

Although this question asked respondents to share positive impacts in respect of the pandemic, there were a few who stated quite forcibly that, in their view, there had been no positive impacts for them and that the whole pandemic had been a struggle and very stressful. We turn to looking at the reports of negative impacts next.



## Thinking about the coronavirus pandemic and the associated lockdowns and restrictions on daily life, in your experience what have been the most negative impacts of the pandemic on: (i) individuals? (ii) families and households?

Not surprisingly, the answers to this question contained some painful and upsetting personal examples of just how the pandemic and the daily restrictions during lockdowns had impacted negatively on many people. Most answers referred to a myriad of negative impacts which are closely interconnected. Nevertheless, emphasis was placed on some defining factors more than others, indicating different triggers in the experience of living through a prolonged period when COVID-19 dominated daily life in England.

### Isolation and loneliness

The impact which almost everyone responding to this question described as deeply troubling was the isolation which accompanied lockdowns and the feeling of loneliness this engendered for many people, especially those living alone or shielding. Not only has isolation been difficult for many to endure, it has resulted in increased anxiety and mental health issues:

- *Self-isolation and social distancing have fuelled anxiety and uncertainty leading to mental health challenges in the young and old, particularly those who were already housebound before the pandemic*
- *Debilitating isolation, mental health problems, self-neglect*
- *Increased loneliness, loss of purpose. Fear*
- *Social isolation and spiralling decline in mental health resulting in suicides, especially among young men*
- *Loneliness, isolation, fear of financial loss, loss of education for children, loss of social skills and confidence*

Many responses from people who were living alone and from those with disabilities spoke of the increased difficulties as time went on:

- *Many single people were left more isolated than ever*
- *Many on their own felt very lonely and isolated. Anxieties have heightened ... Those who were struggling before COVID are practically sinking now*



- *As a disabled person I have seen DNR [do not resuscitate] notices imposed on disabled people without their consent; I have had friends die of COVID; I have personally been in total isolation for 3 months, only seeing family and friends through a window; there have been difficulties getting food delivered. My previously busy life was completely put on hold, and it is now very difficult to pick it up again as so much has changed. Isolation. Drop in personal mental wellbeing. Sense of being imprisoned*
- *I have been socially isolating for many months and as a result feel very anxious. Our only grandchild, who lives in New York aged 2 ½ when we last saw him, is now over 4, which has affected us greatly*

## **Mental health issues**

Alongside isolation, many people had experienced mental health issues:

- *Increased loneliness and isolation for some; increased mental illness caused by isolation*
- *There have been catastrophic effects on mental health, addiction and domestic abuse*
- *Increased feelings of helplessness and dread*
- *Mental health has suffered a lot, where there is domestic or child abuse this has worsened*

Other consequences of the pandemic also resulted in mental health problems:

- *My son lost his home, his marriage and job because of lockdown and is now struggling with mental health issues. There is no support access to mental health support, no help with housing just nothing*



## Loss of social interaction

The lockdowns inevitably meant that it was impossible for people to meet up with others as gatherings were not allowed. While social media, FaceTime and Zoom allowed many people to stay in touch remotely, these technologies were not available to everyone. People described a loss of confidence resulting from the lack of contact with others:

- *Reduction of social contact. Reduction in confidence. Increase in anxiety. For those with mental health problems, loss of coping mechanisms*
- *Many people never saw or heard from anyone*
- *Not being able to touch loved ones outside the household, shake hands, give a hug to someone in distress*

Some people referred to the impact of churches and other buildings being closed:

- *For individuals, not being able to gather together was a huge negative. Some organisations have closed their doors during lockdown, leaving people without the regular contact they once had*
- *Lack of fellowship*
- *Difficulty in practising your faith in a place with others*

The most devastating impacts recounted by many respondents were caused by the inability to visit loved ones who were very ill and/or dying:

- *People have been deprived of contact with loved ones even in death*
- *Not being able to see those who are ill/dying*
- *Separation from wider family and trauma of not being able to be present for significant events - including caring for a dying family member*
- *Not being able to be with my husband when he died*
- *Not being able to physically support friends such as our best friend who died of cancer during this and his wife's subsequent descent in to alcoholism*



## Juggling work and schooling

Many parents referred to the struggles they had experienced in juggling their work with the need to support their children with their education while schools were closed for all but a relatively small number of children:

- *The isolation and stress of trying to home-school and work from home has been huge*
- *Stress of working from home, especially for children needing to go school, working at home and being under pressure to help them*
- *Families where both parents had to work, and also had to home-school led to tensions, stresses, strained relationships and children not getting the education they deserved*
- *In some households there was little space and much pressure on parents as they tried to work from home and home-educate their children. In poorer households there was often only one electronic device to be used by all the children. Tensions could be high in crowded households*
- *Pressure of combing homeworking and home schooling. Increased likelihood of domestic abuse*

## Relationship stress and domestic abuse

Many responses talked about the strain on relationships during lockdowns and the tensions which resulted in domestic abuse:

- *Family tensions, domestic violence, overcrowding*
- *The tensions of living in a constrained space; increased domestic abuse and difficulties leaving such situations*
- *Marriages were put under a huge amount of pressure, with no support; increase in domestic violence with no escape for victims*
- *Increased levels of domestic violence and more arguments as people were in the same space for long periods of time*



## Experiencing a range of other pressures

Respondents referred to a number of other stresses and pressures which had negative impacts on individuals and on families. These included addictions and financial difficulties. We were told that the economic impact on many families had been ‘massive’:

- *Increased obesity, alcoholism, smoking and gambling addictions*
- *From my personal experience as a therapist, adults and young people have been severely impacted in several ways; increase in eating disorders, depression, domestic abuse, drug related offences increased, financial worries and loss of job for some, loneliness, marginalisation of vulnerable people who were already vulnerable but also vulnerable to COVID*
- *Stress resulting from financial worry, interruption of careers and loss of a framework for organising time and enjoying friendships*
- *Many families have felt the pressures and strains of lockdown, with many placed under financial strain, loss of jobs, or experiencing conflict and abuse*
- *Increasing stress, especially financial, causing many families real difficulties in providing for basic needs and increasingly resulting in domestic violence*

## Reduced support

Some responses highlighted the reduced support available to families and households during the pandemic, and the negative impacts this lack of support had on people’s wellbeing:

- *There has been much reduced access to support for separating families either to help them avoid separation or help them to mediate collaborative solutions. Also courts have been so much slower - the Children and Family Advisory and Support Service have reported times to court-based child arrangements taking over 40 weeks! ... These are entirely out of line with what is appropriate for children whose family attachments have been disrupted*
- *Inconvenience of accessing services such as doctors, dentists, hospital appointments*
- *Worry both perceived and actual when family support isn’t as readily available as before*
- *The impact on families with a child/children with special needs/disabilities has been significantly higher. They are far more reliant on outside support whether that be*





*schools, respite, family/friends and they have been missing this over the last 18 months*

A few people described how they had not received support from the church community:

- *The overnight disappearance of all support structures for many single parent families, for our family with a severely disabled child: absolute isolation; loss of any support, therapy or care; helplessness; lack of hope; extremely poor mental health resulting in near crisis situations. We received absolutely no support from our church community, not even to check about how we were! We have not returned to that church since, and no one has even commented, even though we had attended every single week for 3 years prior to COVID*

### **Pressures on keyworkers**

Keyworkers, especially those working in hospitals and care homes, faced increased pressures as they sought to tackle the consequences of the pandemic. Many were exposed daily to the ravages of COVID while attempting to manage home and family life. Research has shown that front-line workers experienced additional stresses as they tried to keep their families safe while being exposed to COVID on a daily basis:<sup>23</sup>

*'Personal testimonies have illustrated the profound feeling of helplessness amongst care workers, nurses and doctors. Health and social care professionals had to balance COVID-safety and protecting their own well-being with the need to provide continuing support and intensive care to sick and vulnerable people.'*<sup>24</sup>

A number of people who responded to the Call for Evidence also described the impacts on keyworkers:

- *Key workers have seen increased stress, pressure and exhaustion, with many of the usual means of relaxation unavailable*
- *Some families became financially stretched, others became overworked, particularly those in front-line services roles*
- *As a nurse, the fear each day as to what I would face at work*

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<sup>23</sup> Misca et al (2022) op.cit

<sup>24</sup> Ibid p176



## Summary

The negative impacts of the coronavirus pandemic were highlighted starkly in the responses to the Call for Evidence, and they make for sobering reading. The combination of impacts has resulted in a number of difficulties for many individuals and families, with many people wondering just how long these impacts will last and when daily life will feel 'normal' again. These concerns were summed up in a number of responses:

- *Many individuals living alone have been scarred by the extended isolation. It changes your brain chemistry in bizarre and unexpected ways. We don't know yet if this will change back. Lockdown exacerbated existing problems. Those in poverty suffered more. Those in abusive relationships had a nightmare beyond imagining. Those working long hard hours to get by had their hours extended, and had to somehow keep their children provided for with no family support. Those with existing mental health problems had to just cope without support with exponentially higher levels of anxiety. It was brutal in a thousand different ways for a thousand different families*
- *Many individuals have become very isolated which has exacerbated mental health difficulties. Young people reliant on friends to support them through family difficulties or other challenges have been left with nowhere to go for support. Domestic abuse and child abuse have increased. Threatening and manipulative behaviour have increased. There has been no help for those struggling with mental health conditions as services have stopped or not had resources to cope with demand. Some have been bereaved with very little support, and without access to funerals. Families have been overstretched trying to cope with home-schooling as well as work, causing stress for parents which can be taken out on children. Children have sometimes struggled with the demands of home-schooling, as they are not used to having to work independently. Difficulties in relationships have been exacerbated, increasing relationship breakdowns. Families have had concerns about job insecurity or financial worries*
- *People experiencing a poverty of resources, poverty of relationships, or poverty of identity have, and will continue to be, most impacted by the coronavirus pandemic*

There were references to the continuing 'disorientation' and 'fear' which has accompanied the pandemic, the sense of the world 'being turned upside-down', and a desire for certainty in the future.



## In your personal or professional experience, what have been the most challenging aspects of the coronavirus pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns for children and young people?

### Context

The negative impacts of the pandemic have been well-documented and there is increasing concern about the potentially detrimental consequences for children and young people who missed normal schooling. It is clear from the responses reported above that many parents found the challenge of home-schooling particularly demanding. Research in the UK<sup>25</sup> has found that parents who were working experienced higher financial stress and poorer wellbeing than adults without children, highlighting the additional responsibilities experienced by parents.

We know that parents' reactions to change are likely to determine children's experience and reactions. The research on the impacts of the pandemic suggests that families with more coping resources reported better wellbeing than those with fewer resources.<sup>26</sup> Children coped well when parents were able to offer structure, attention, and care, adapt to the circumstances and manage their own emotions. Protective factors included financial security and the appropriate space to work at home effectively.<sup>27</sup> Parents with positive coping mechanisms also reported improved relationships with their children.

Parents who experienced greater anxiety, more worries and mental health issues were more likely to find coping during the pandemic a greater challenge than others who were able to adapt to the situation.<sup>28</sup> Reports by Ofsted and Save the Children have indicated that repeated isolation has impacted children's educational progress during and since the

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<sup>25</sup> Cheng, Z., Mendolia, S., Paloyo, A. R., Savage, D. A., and Tani, M. (2021). *Working parents, financial insecurity, and childcare: mental health in the time of COVID-19 in the UK*. *Rev. Econ. Household* 19, 123–144. doi: 10.1007/s11150-020-09538-3

<sup>26</sup> Misca, G., & Thornton, G. (2021). *Navigating the Same Storm but Not in the Same Boat: Mental Health Vulnerability and Coping in Women University Students During the First COVID-19 Lockdown in the UK*. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12

<sup>27</sup> Daly, M., Sutin, A., & Robinson, E. (2020). *Longitudinal changes in mental health and the COVID-19 pandemic: evidence from the UK Household Longitudinal Study*. *Psychological Medicine*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291720004432>

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*



lockdowns.<sup>29</sup> The effects of school closures on education provision,<sup>30</sup> learning and wellbeing have been described as severe for most children, especially for those with disabilities, those from poorer households and those living with only female adults.

We asked respondents to the Call for Evidence to tell us what, in their experience, had been the most challenging aspects of the pandemic and the lockdowns for children and young people. A number of key themes have emerged, reflecting the research evidence. These include the impacts of: isolation and the lack of socialisation; living in poor home conditions and unhappy families; mental health issues; and fear for the future.

### **Isolation and lack of socialisation**

The majority of responses referred to the impacts of lockdowns which required most children and young people to be at home while schools and all community facilities were closed. The government allowed families a short period outside the home for exercise each day but meeting other families was forbidden. This meant that children were unable to meet up with their friends, leaving them dependent on social media for contact. Not all children and young people had access to mobile phones and computers and so were socially isolated:

- *We believe the most challenging aspects of the pandemic on children and young people have been the intensity of families spending huge lengths of time together during lockdown and the lack of ability for socialisation outside of the home. There has of course been financial stress and job loss for many families during this period*
- *Lack of contact with peers ... Lack of physical social interaction*
- *Young children have missed out on opportunity for socialisation and in some cases have experienced fear and concerns of their parents/adults*

Several people expressed concerns that, with a lack of structure to their everyday lives, children's needs were not noticed and mental health issues increased, especially for children with special needs:

- *Children and young people falling through the gaps. Needs which would be spotted in an education setting not being picked up on. Not having good endings or transitions for those who were at key stages*

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<sup>29</sup> Ofsted (2020) *COVID-19 Briefing Series* <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/ofsted-covid-19-series>; Gordon, M., and Burgess, M., (2020) *The hidden impact of COVID-19 on children's education* Save the Children International

<sup>30</sup> Gordon and Burgess (2020) op.cit.



- *Loss of the structure and routine provided by school or college life; loss of social interaction with peers; having major milestones such as key exams disrupted; anxiety about their futures being disrupted; loss of major rites of passage such as proms, graduations, key birthday celebrations, loss of contact with grandparents and extended family*
- *Small children and babies born during the pandemic have missed out on socialising with others and learning how to interact. School-age children and young people have missed almost two years of in person, full-time education*
- *Some families really struggled to facilitate their online learning with limited broadband access and devices in order for multiple children to access what was needed at the same time*
- *Mental health and isolation concerns as a result of no access to friends - reduced exercising - falling behind in schoolwork*
- *Child with Autism being unable to escape from large family when time alone was needed to calm down/recharge*

### **Missing out on sports, clubs and church communities**

The lockdowns closed clubs and sports facilities, thereby increasing the sense of being isolated and cut off from normal activities:

- *Lack of seeing friends, lack of sport and other recreational activities*
- *Feeling isolated and a big decline in interaction, not being able to see friends, socialise, be at school, all the things that children and young people need to do to grow*
- *Resources being stripped away, sports, art, drama etc.*
- *Children's relationship with church and disengagement from church community*



## Living in poverty

Many respondents pointed to the challenges for children and young people growing up in relatively poor homes where material resources are scarce:

- *During the pandemic, there has been a sustained increase in adversity for many families, which has accumulated over time, including, for example, increases in poverty, exposure to poor housing, isolation and poor parental mental health*
- *Families living in poverty have struggled to balance children living at home with other commitments. Often lacking the availability to educate children at home. Families in poverty have been unable to provide the stable environment to oversee their children's' development throughout the pandemic leaving them further behind. A lack of money and a loss of income. Some families struggled to provide space, equipment*

## Unhappy families

The lockdowns increased the tensions at home, especially where relationships were already strained. This could expose children to domestic abuse:

- *Children that used school as a haven away from a chaotic violent household, suddenly no longer had that safe place*
- *Children being stuck in cramped housing conditions, especially if this results in increased tension between the adults in the household*
- *Lockdowns within the family home where there is ongoing abuse are devastating for young people. There has not always been sufficient support available, particularly during the pandemic, even for quite severe mental health issues, including suicidality. Young people have not been able to see friends, and where friends are providing the support enabling young people to get through life this has left them vulnerable and with increasing mental health difficulties. Some young people have not had access to counselling or other professional support because they have not had internet access, or privacy at home to speak about concerns*



## Multiple factors

While respondents highlighted some specific themes, the majority also talked about the negative and cumulative impacts of multiple factors, which included the amount of time spent on social media and boredom:

- *Children unable to meet up or enjoy the tangible contact with grandparents at their homes, and worse still if they were in care homes. Relying on electronic gadgets for contact is good but can become impersonal, leading to apathy. Uncontrolled online supervision may have led to unhealthy addiction to games or accessing dodgy websites or inviting “complete unknown” people to be friends. Lack of physical exercises and social interaction with peers. Less expression of much needed emotions in childhood. Boredom*
- *Disruption of education and excessive time using screens which has led to Increased access to pornography. Financial difficulties, domestic violence, lack of seeing friends, lack of sport and other recreational activities*
- *Missing socialising with friends and the structure of school. Many children I have worked with have struggled with being at home with nothing to do and no access to school material as this was offered online and they have no computer. Even with a computer some parents are not equipped to support their children. Exposure to adult behaviour without a break ... Many families did not have enough food as children wanted to eat more with boredom*

## Summary

There was consensus in all the responses that children and young people have faced a number of challenges as a result of the pandemic, many of which will have lasting impacts. While some children enjoyed more time with their parents and family life became less hurried, others struggled to keep up with schoolwork and/or experienced disharmony at home. Some people pointed to the widening inequalities for children and young people depending on their home circumstances:

- *Mental health, isolation, fractured inter-personal relationships, social anxiety. Academic pressure and stress from playing catch up and a greater gap between those who didn't have adequate access to resources or care and those who did, thus widening the inequalities gap. This directly impacts child outcomes*

Falling behind in schoolwork has increased anxiety and led to a reduction in confidence



- *Loss of confidence. Lack of self-worth. Nervousness returning to school when so far behind. While some families have flourished, some have faced huge struggles through domestic violence*

We also heard about the fears expressed by children and young people, some ‘taking on the worries of adults’ about the future:

- *Fear of losing parents and loved ones*
- *Fear for the future. Anxiety for vulnerable friends*
- *An increase in fear and anxiety and a lack of hope to offset that*





**In your view, how should individuals, families and households be supported to deal with the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic by: (i) church and faith groups; (ii) government. Please give examples of support that you know is available**

In addition to understanding the challenges faced by families and households during and beyond the COVID-19 lockdowns, the Commission was keen to know how the church and other faith institutions and the government could support them to deal with the impacts. We received information about a number of initiatives which we are considering as we continue to collect evidence.

**Support provided by the church and faith groups**

We record first the support that respondents to the Call for Evidence believed could be offered by the church, bearing in mind that the Government closed all places of worship from the end of March 2020 until early June 2020 when they were allowed to open for private prayer only. Not all churches and some other places of worship across faith groups re-opened at that time, and many churches did not return to offering a full range of pre-pandemic activities until 2022. We received a number of comments expressing concerns, on the one hand, that churches were closed during lockdowns while, on the other, praising the efforts made locally to support people. The following responses were typical of many which expressed huge disappointment that churches closed their doors

- *... at the time of the greatest national need for decades - the decision was a shame and a disgrace ... I think the Anglican church will take a long time to recover from having so totally dropped the ball. It was the opportunity of a life-time and they completely died on the job ... at the same time I was extremely impressed by the leadership shown by clergy I know, who organised online services, cake competitions to keep people from feeling lonely - basically became one-person broadcasting corporations*
- *The churches should not have been closed during the pandemic; priests/clergy/lay workers should have been more readily available for families/individuals to talk to*



The vast majority of respondents indicated that the church and other faith groups have an important role to play in the recovery from COVID-19. Just a few were of the view that churches should not be getting involved in dealing with the aftermath of the pandemic. For the most part, responses focused on ways in which churches should be providing different kinds of practical and emotional/pastoral support within local communities.

### **Prioritising support for families**

Given the widespread consequences of the pandemic on everyday life, there was considerable consensus in the responses that churches should be prioritising support for families at the present time:

- *With the pandemic having had such a significant impact on family life, we believe it is vital that the church prioritises supporting and empowering parents as families navigate life post lockdowns. As a signposting charity, we are privileged to be aware of a significant amount of parenting courses and materials churches can use to support and empower families in their community. This includes specialist online courses and counselling by the charity Fegans, support for Christian parents by Parenting for Faith, and parenting programmes to support parents living in more deprived circumstances by Kids Matter. All of these, and more, have been created using research evidence*
- *Immediate practical support where needed, but also emotional and spiritual support to face our fears and anxieties*
- *Church and faith groups to provide: 1) a system of support through regular check-ins with people as facilitated by thriving connect groups/cell group structures; 2) food banks and befriending service for drop-ins; 3) small group courses on strengthening relationship skills, coping with anxiety/stress and mental health*
- *Church groups can offer pastoral care and support, fellowship and family through social groups, services and prayer. Many church buildings have been used to house and support the work of food banks and soup kitchens*
- *Churches/faith groups can particularly offer emotional support in the form of listening, pastoral care/visitation, parenting courses, groups for different types of need e.g. bereavement, those feeling isolated or anxious, groups for babies/toddlers and their parents/carers to make connections and build relationships. Offering provision for children and youth e.g. youth clubs, relational youth work*



## Talking about struggles

Recognising the difficulties some families and households have experienced and are still experiencing many responses referred to the importance of talking about the struggles that are prevalent and suggested that the church should open its doors at all times and be a place that is safe for this to happen:

- *Church and faith groups need to be able to open doors as often as possible. Being a place for people to gather and be loved to allow them to see that God loves them. Disciples from the church need to go out find people that need and help them respond to their need*
- *[Churches can offer] safe spaces to talk and share concerns, facilitate and enable support groups*
- *Opportunities to get together and talk about what we are struggling with. Practical support too, but it is the relationships that are most vital*
- *Church and faith groups should sponsor counselling sessions for anyone who wants to discuss their experience of the pandemic*
- *Emotional support should come from the church...but it hasn't. The church has hidden itself away and not only missed an opportunity to be relevant and helpful, but has lost the support of current members*

## Dealing with grief

One of the sad consequences of the pandemic that has been particularly difficult for many families and households has been the large loss of life and the inability for many to mourn their loved ones appropriately. Many people referred to this and the need for churches to enable people to grieve:

- *Space to lament and hold grief*
- *Space to grieve - feeling ALL the emotions*
- *We can make our services and groups safe and have support for bereavement, loss and mental health. We have a hugely important message about love, healing and wholeness to offer*
- *More space for reflection, healing, quiet led prayer - like prayerful meditation*



- *Opportunities to gather and to be supported in mental wellbeing, grief, building towards the future*
- *We are proactively looking to set up a Renew Wellbeing space in our community which is centred around holding a space for people to come where it's okay not to be okay*

## Reaching out

There was considerable consensus that the church and faith groups should be reaching out to their communities to support everyone in the aftermath of a pandemic that is still continuing to impact people's lives:

- *Taking of the Eucharist to those feeling unsafe to go to church, help with food parcels and prescriptions*
- *Our church has set up a group for people who may be lonely or isolated since the pandemic. We have also started afternoon activities and a service with food for families in need*
- *Church/faith groups should continue to be safe havens and reach out to the community*
- *Opportunities to address isolation and loneliness, early intervention mental health support, support for those returning home from hospital*
- *Love and support, offering worship differently; going to where people are*

## Providing practical support

A number of people told us about the practical support that the church can offer:

- *Our church has just returned to running lunch clubs - and people are telling us they appreciate the company and are feeling less isolated, and we'd love to have more resources to do more of this kind of building community - instead of scrabbling round to find enough resources to give out bread and basic provisions. Another local church is buying houses to provide housing for those who struggle, and will have mentors to help tenants get their lives back on track and find jobs ... I'd love for the church to be engaging more on a faith level with people - but at the moment, we are all about meeting basic needs in our community*



- *Offer safe spaces to grow in confidence, experience emotional healing through sharing experiences, and have fun together, e.g. Kids Matter, toddler groups, holiday clubs, church family services, drop-in coffee morning, food banks*

Some of the support described is targeted at helping children and young people deal with the aftermath of the pandemic:

- *Our church is putting on lots of events for teens, children and students, as they feel these groups were the most negatively impacted during the pandemic*
- *[Provide] opportunities to process the pandemic. Let Hope Arise, was a great project run at Hope Church Islington in June 2021 which allowed children the opportunity to process the pandemic through the arts.*
- *My teens have started attending an afterschool club run by a local church and this has been a safe place for them to explore their faith, emotions and friendships. We are so grateful for that. They are planning a youth weekend away next year, which the children are looking forward to. A charity locally offers counselling for young people, which my daughter has accessed. Our church offer Kids Matter parenting courses for young families and a food club in the holidays for families who need a helping hand*

## **Creating connections**

Several responses highlighted the important role faith groups play in creating connections:

- *Church should make an effort to provide platforms for people to connect*
- *We have seen the toddler group at our church explode in growth as parents have been hungry for connection with others. It has been amazing to see toddlers go from being very shy and clingy, because they have not been used to seeing so many other people, to learning to play with other children, share toys etc. Parents of children with additional needs have been particularly affected by lockdown as their usual medical support networks were shut off. It has been wonderful to see them growing in confidence as they and their children have been welcomed into our community and given practical support as well as meeting others in situations like theirs, so they know they are not alone*
- *Opportunities to meet together in community to build up a community of support*
- *Re-creating those communities where families help each other*



## Offering support Online

Online services appear to have been especially welcomed during the lockdowns and there is a call for online support to be continued now that churches are open for worship again:

- *Churches that offer online services can reach out to those who cannot cope or make it to a building. Also making their services as accessible as possible*
- *Regular Zooms [that] you could join were good as it helped to have a routine within the week when a lot of evening routine with small groups was lost. Making online Church really approachable for children - offering more drop-in centres, inclusive services*
- *Greater flexibility in church attendance and greater recognition that many cannot attend church on Sundays due to shift work in many frontline sectors*
- *Online church services on YouTube and Zoom chat at coffee time. This has helped people to stay in touch and to mix in breakout rooms, which has actually improved conversational mixing compared to standing in church, mug in hand!*

## Working in partnership

A number of responses suggested that churches and faith groups could do more if they worked in partnership with local authorities and other local organisations. A number of organisations, including counselling services, working alongside churches were mentioned:

- *Churches have a key role to play and need to work more effectively in partnership with local authorities and services. They are likely to be better places for early identification of struggles in families and children. Therefore, building up churches resources and equipping churches to care for families, address poverty (through CAP) and provide family counselling, parent groups, places of safety and refuge for broken families is important. For example: Church based counselling for families in need: working with families together, to enable better communication, love and care for one another, and to help families flourish*
- *At the very least churches should be able to refer people in their communities to outside services where they are needed. This means that networks of communication need to be good, even during lockdowns, so that where there are problems, or*



*safeguarding issues these will be picked up and acted on. Individuals, families and households still need opportunities for spirituality. This means churches need to provide opportunities for prayer and worship suitable for everyone, including children and young people, and those without internet access. Churches need an understanding of mental health, and of domestic/child abuse so that they respond in ways which are experienced by people as being supportive and demonstrating understanding. In particular they need an understanding of trauma informed care*

### **Support provided by Government**

The Call for Evidence also asked people about the support that should be provided by government to help families and households deal with the aftermath of the pandemic. Responses contained a number of suggestions about what the government could and should be providing. These were fairly consistent in content. However, a few respondents expressed doubts about the ability of government to do much to help:

- *The government is fairly powerless because the problems are within each of us. It can strive to support the economy. But at an individual level it is local people relating to local people that is needed*

### **Providing holistic support for families**

There was considerable agreement about a number of issues that families and households need help with, and suggestions that the government should be offering holistic support for children and for families:

- *Government needs a holistic recovery strategy for babies, children, young people and their families which provides support to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic and also helps public services to address the backlog of need, and to return to offering high-quality services*
- *Government should support with 1) access to counselling sources for mental health, domestic abuse, relationship breakdown; 2) financial support to those whose income is impacted; 3) policies to allow flexibility in work days and hours; 4) investment in building essential relationship habits to support the increased pressure on relationships at work and home*
- *The government should ... invest in social housing, supported living, the NHS and travel infrastructures that help people. The north in particular needs money and time investing in the people and places; education and opportunities given and developed to actually support people. Internet provision for all households would be helpful.*



*Mental health services and the NHS need serious investment and support to help aid the recovery of individuals and communities ... Schools need investment in their chaplaincy and pastoral support alongside the teams who assess and support young people for additional needs*

- *There is an urgent need to improve help for families struggling to feed their children. There is a desperate need for mental health services to be improved, especially for young people. Domestic/child abuse need to be taken seriously and victims offered support*
- *Counselling and mental health support is desperately needed; more financial support; creation of jobs which are well paid*

### **Targeting support for those most in need**

While many people argued for holistic support others were of the view that support should be targeted to those most in need. Respondents referred especially to the poorest in society, parents in conflict, children who had missed schooling, and families with a disabled member:

- *The government needs to look at support for the poorest (e.g. Universal Credit); increased support for mental health services*
- *Sort out the benefits system so that people can have their basic needs met*
- *Programmes to support the more vulnerable and help with family functioning such as the Reducing Parental Conflict programme*
- *More educational support for children who have missed so much education*
- *The government in particular need to support families with children with special educational needs and disabilities as they were hardest hit*
- *The system is so broken, especially for families with a disabled person ... We are clinging on by our fingernails. No respite for families, everything is a fight and requires hours of emails, letters, admin and determination to be able to navigate the system at all*

Many people referred specifically to the £20 uplift in Universal Credit during the pandemic:





- *Those on benefits have felt a big impact of reduction in £20/week Universal Credit uplift, at a time when prices are rising considerably especially for energy and food. The price rises have also impacted those on low wages and many cannot make ends meet and need to use foodbanks ... Government needs to do more about levelling up the difference in wage disparity, the pandemic showed us how much we rely on our front line services and without them our communities cannot run well and safely*
- *We need central government to make changes so that adequate benefit payments and fair wages exist for all – that social security payments must be adequate, accessible and timely and that wages need to match the cost of living*

### **Establishing Family hubs**

A few people mentioned Family Hubs as key to recovery for families.

- *We need to see a far clearer support of family life, and as Family Hubs continue to be rolled out an increasing invitation to churches to be involved with their development in localities*
- *Family Hub Networks, a great place for gathering services under one name*

### **Strengthening community cohesion**

Some respondents referred to the ways in which people had rallied round to support neighbours during lockdowns, enhancing a sense of community which they feel should be strengthened:

- *Government support through funding for programmes that strengthen community cohesion*
- *Work to enhance, promote and improve community and family cohesion*

Some people linked this to partnership working:

- *Government ... support for families in crisis, support for the elderly living alone ... a more joined up support network that allows statutory and voluntary services to talk to each other far more readily as part of everyday practice*



## Summary

The vast majority of responses to the question about support for families highlighted a number of things that churches and faith groups could do to ensure that those badly impacted by the pandemic could begin to rebuild their lives. The suggestions focused on the provision of pastoral support and care which prioritises families, those who have been bereaved, and those struggling to recover from the impacts of the pandemic. Churches and faith groups had been instrumental in setting up food banks for those unable to make ends meet and the responses indicated that this provision should continue.

In order to be most effective there was recognition that churches need to understand and respond to the needs in their local communities:

- *Awareness of the needs of congregations and in the local communities. Visiting, encouraging interaction, providing safe spaces, supporting foodbanks, the homeless and those in need of extra assistance. Showing care by their actions*

The responses also emphasised the impacts of the pandemic on mental health, education and incomes, and urged the government to take measures to address these. There is a key theme running throughout the answers that families need to be prioritised and that churches, faith groups, government and statutory and voluntary organisations need to work together in partnership to meet the needs of families and households. This sentiment is heightened by the rise in the cost of living. The following response sums up the holistic approach respondents call for from government:

- *Government really need to address the poverty gap. Education needs to be overhauled and focussed properly on basic skills and closing the gap. Funding for schools needs addressing. SEN provision is woeful. Care staff need paying properly ... Housing inequality is terrible ... social housing needs to be a priority .... Without a stable home, education, health and self-development cannot happen. Safety is paramount ... We need to end the cycle of Adverse Childhood experiences to improve society. Care of our elderly should not be hidden or be a crushing issue for families. Elderly people are part of our communities and should be cared for with dignity and respect. This will need to be funded of course but should be a priority. All children should have the best start in life and the state should support people in achieving this. This too needs funding as speech and language and communication is so important in the early years as well as nurture. Genuine rehabilitation of offenders is so important*



The call is for greater understanding of some of the most detrimental impacts of the coronavirus pandemic and sufficient funding put in place to deal with these:

- *The government needs to understand how the pandemic has impacted child development and in particular young children's physical, social and emotional development. The government needs to understand that these gaps are not just automatically filled and if we are to prevent a catastrophic wave of future mental health and wellbeing issues, it needs to withdraw the pressures placed on schools by Ofsted which undo much of what schools want to put in place. Schools need to be able to respond to individual children's needs whatever they are.*

The Responses to the Call for Evidence have shone a spotlight on the ways in which the coronavirus pandemic has dominated the lives of families and households for some two years and which continue to cause concern. The following submission sums these up:

- *Many individuals have become very isolated which has exacerbated mental health difficulties. Young people reliant on friends to support them through family difficulties or other challenges have been left with nowhere to go for support. Domestic abuse and child abuse have increased. Threatening and manipulative behaviour have increased. There has been no help for those struggling with mental health conditions as services have stopped or not had resources to cope with demand. Some have been bereaved with very little support, and without access to funerals. Families and Households: Families have been overstretched trying to cope with home-schooling as well as work, causing stress for parents which can be taken out on children. Children have sometimes struggled with the demands of home-schooling, as they are not used to having to work independently. Difficulties in relationships have been exacerbated, increasing relationship breakdowns Families have had concerns about job insecurity or financial worries*

While there have been positive impacts for those who have been able to enjoy greater family time, take up new hobbies and rethink their priorities, there is little doubt that COVID-19 has brought with it some difficult challenges which respondents to our Call for Evidence believe churches and government need to address.

Professor Janet Walker OBE

July 2022