

## **Families and Children's Services Scrutiny Committee**

Date: 17<sup>th</sup> June 2021

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### **Summary of NCC approaches to meeting the needs of SEND learners during the COVID 19 Pandemic March 2020- March 2021**

Report of the Executive Director of Adult Social Care & Children's Services, Cath McEvoy-Carr

Cabinet Member for Children's Services: Cllr Guy Renner-Thompson

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#### **Purpose of report**

To inform the Scrutiny Committee about the response of Northumberland County Council to the COVID pandemic (March 2020-March 2021) in relation to children and young people with Special Educational Needs and/or Disability (SEND).

It offers an overview of the response over three distinct phases, corresponding to the different periods of school partial closures.

#### **Recommendations**

It is recommended that the Family and Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee:

1. Note the contents of the report.
2. Recognise the support provided over this period and identify any potential issues for further consideration if appropriate.

#### **Link to Corporate Plan**

This report is relevant to priority 3 in the NCC Corporate Plan 2020 (Living) and priority 6 (Learning).

It is also relevant to all priorities within the [Northumberland Children and Young Peoples Plan](#); ensuring that the needs of children and young people were met as

well as possible in extraordinary times, and minimising the impact of the pandemic as far as possible.

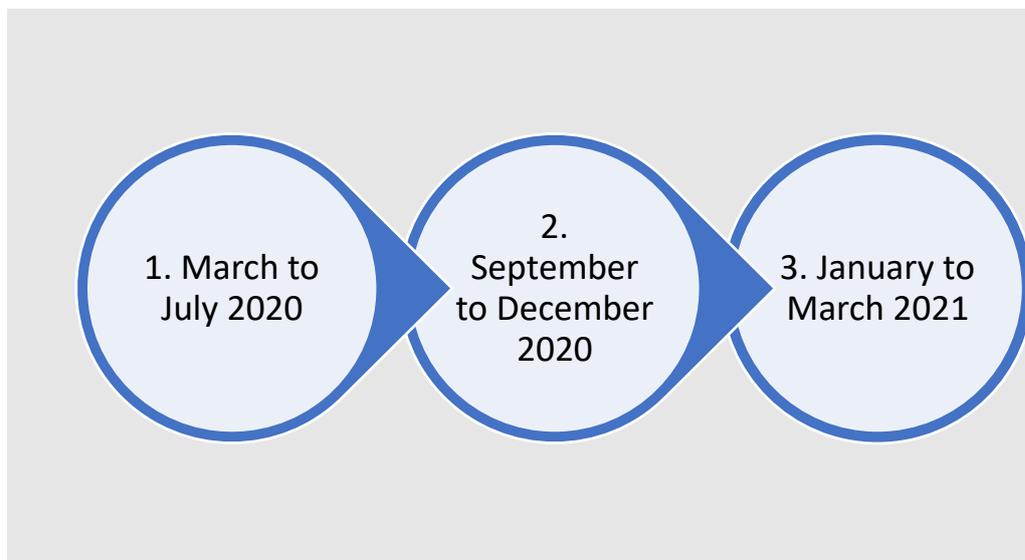
### **Key Issues**

1. Periods of school closure impacted on the lives of children and young people with SEND and their families, which were reported by schools and families. NCC Officers designed and published a survey for parents/carers in June 2020 to enable understanding of this impact and assist planning for the future
2. Easements in statutory processes were put in place, but NCC Services in this regard continued as far as possible which has meant that overall our families have not experienced undue time delays
3. An offer was provided to schools by specialist teams in order to support the attendance at school for pupils with SEND and other vulnerabilities. Schools were supported to conduct risk assessments for learners not attending, involving families and other professionals where necessary
4. Multiagency responses were put in place to meet emerging needs
5. The use of new technologies has supported ongoing delivery of training and support for families. Many of these are becoming part of business as usual

## BACKGROUND

### Introduction

The COVID 19 pandemic brought three discrete periods of time during which Northumberland County Council services for children and young people with SEND needed to respond in a dynamic way to changing circumstances and need. Many of the changes involved multiagency approaches. This paper summarises the actions taken.



### Overall Impact on Statutory Processes

During the pandemic we have not noticed any significant changes in the demand for EHCPs and the Local Authority have endeavoured to ensure statutory timescales have been adhered to. We adapted our processes in order to try and operate as close to a "business as usual" approach as possible. Our advisory SEN Panel moved to being held weekly online, we advised schools very early on around the need to continue to hold annual reviews and provided guidance on this. Our 20-week completion rate for new EHCPs has improved during the pandemic. Some of the advice received from our Educational Psychologists has not been as comprehensive as we would have ideally preferred as this has been limited where they have been unable to carry out face to face assessment or observations in school settings.

Our Post 16 Panel continued to meet weekly online.

Our mediation with parents has continued as have our appeals as these have also moved online. Further information regarding First Tier Tribunals is contained in a separate briefing paper.

*'I can't thank the whole team enough for everything they have done. I have been really impressed that everything has kept going through lockdown, I have still been receiving phone calls and the process has happened much quicker than I thought it would!' (parent)*



## **1. March to July 2020**

Schools were open for vulnerable children and young people, and to the children of key workers. Government guidance was being issued on a daily basis. Most of our schools had only a small proportion of their learners attending and were supported by the Health and Safety Team and Education and Skills staff to ensure COVID safe environments.

Headteachers received daily updates from the Director of Education and Education and Skills SMT, and weekly Locality Headteacher meetings were held. In relation to SEND learners specifically, the following approaches were taken:

### **Monitoring Vulnerable Learners**

A system was put in place by week 2 of the 'lockdown' period which required the completion of monitoring forms by all schools and settings (including Out of Area) making provision for EHCP learners. This enabled officers to monitor the attendance of EHCP learners and understand the reasons behind non attendance. The work involved the data and performance team, strategic leaders of SEN and the Virtual School.

Weekly scrutiny of returns allowed support and challenge to schools and settings; where learners who had not had risk assessments (RAs) reviewed, where learners were not attending and no reason for absence was stated and, where schools had not had any contact with their vulnerable learners where there has been no contact.

School closures were monitored, with support and challenge provided where schools were not open for vulnerable learners including formal requests to the RSC to intervene where necessary.

SENCOs were issued with guidance on responsibilities as laid out in Government directives.

### **Risk Assessment Process**

Government guidance indicated that for all learners with EHCPs, a risk assessment (RA) should be undertaken with families and any other professionals involved. Our schools and settings (inside and outside Northumberland) were provided with guidance around this, and with a template to assist robust decision making. The template clearly indicated best practice, and the crucial aspects consulting with parents/carers and other agencies when determining eligibility for a school place.

Colleagues in social care were informed of this requirement of schools in order to help support discussions with families and ensure that they were aware of eligibility for a place.

Children's Services Briefings contained regular updates throughout this period.

### **Multi Agency responses to Risk Assessments**

An audit process was put in place whereby on a weekly basis RAs were sampled, requested and checked by NCC officers. Additionally, pathways were created to enable action taken with schools where families and/or social care teams reported that schools were not offering places to young people who were vulnerable to risk if not attending

school. Close working across Education teams and the Virtual School supported individual casework for Children Looked After, and for those where there was an active role for the Education Welfare Service.

### **Northumberland Inclusive Education Service (NIES) Direct Support Offer**

In order to support the attendance at school of vulnerable learners, risk assessments were created and signed off by Public Health and Trade Unions to allow staff from specialist teams into schools safely. This offer also applied to schools who required additional staff simply to remain open, in the case of their own staff being unable to attend. A process was put in place for schools to submit requests which were usually processed for the next working day. Specialist SEN teams supported the attendance of 22 learners with identified SEN who would otherwise not have been able to take up a school place. This helped to ensure additional disadvantage was minimised.

*'At our school we have some really complex young people who have lots of needs, the current situation has intensified those needs making it really hard for school to manage their behaviours. I really appreciate your efforts in helping us to maintain a stable school placement when everything else in their lives is quite unstable. We couldn't have managed to sustain their education without your support so thank you.'* (school)

*'the organisation of the services has been brilliant during times of such uncertainty.'* (school)

*'The support throughout the academic year for pupils, staff, SENCO and families has been outstanding and this committed teamwork has continued through the challenges of 'lockdown'. I know that the support as these pupils transfer back into school will be paramount as we work together during 2020-2021.'* (school)

Pre school services such as Sensory Support and Portage offered virtual only support to families, creating innovative approaches to this work. Bespoke arrangements were made to continue to meet the needs of individual learners and families as far as possible.

A consultation line was set up by Psychological Services to provide guidance and support to residential children's home staff.

Families supported by the English as an Additional Language Team were provided with new ways of working. A consultation line was set up to provide advice and guidance around access to school work, and welfare calls were made to children and young people under the Voluntary Persons Resettlement Scheme.

### **Statutory Processes**

Despite easements laid out in statute for this period of time, the NCC SEN Monitoring and Assessment team continued to work to required timelines, adapting to working from home. Some challenges were experienced with the use of encrypted means of sharing documents with families. Limitations imposed by being unable to assess learners face to face and within educational settings had some impact on the timeliness of Educational Psychology advice. Data indicates that over this 5 month period, an average of 41% of requested advice was submitted beyond the requested deadline. This was also impacted upon by capacity issues within the team. However, overall timeliness figures through May, June and July were at around 90%, indicating that the delays were absorbed within the timeline set, having no impact on most children, young people and families going through the process.

The SEND Commissioning Panel continued throughout, operating virtually and ensuring the timely consideration of requests for EHC needs assessment and the issuing of EHCPs.

Good practice guidance on conducting Annual Reviews virtually was issued to schools, and Annual Reviews were monitored to ensure that those due took place, when parents/carers were happy for this to happen.

### **Virtual Offer/Resources**

NCC specialist teams including Psychological Services, High Incidence Needs Teams (HINT) and Low Incidence Needs Teams (LINT) created substantial and dynamic [padlets](#) providing resources for a range of relevant topics.

These included resources for parents and carers, which were made available on the NCC website via accessible links on the home page and via the Local Offer. Specific wellbeing resources were subject of a Communications exercise in July 2020, made available via NCC social media platforms. Parents and carers were telling us through our virtual outreach work that they needed resources to help them manage the wellbeing of their children with SEN, so a specific padlet was designed for this purpose.

Teams worked collaboratively with Health colleagues and established virtual offers of Cygnet and Earlybird for families of children and young people diagnosed with Autism. This ensured that this part of the Autism pathway was secure.

A SENCo conference was delivered virtually, along with SENCo network meetings, in order to maintain the community of practice.

### **Support for School SENCos and Sharing Good Practice**

SENCos received all Headteacher updates via the central mailing list, along with regular updates and summaries of changes to government guidance.

Ongoing advice and guidance was provided around individual learners, to enable access to school and remote learning.

Sharing good practice was facilitated, and a response was provided to the DfE national call for examples.

A whole area Virtual SENCo meeting was held in July covering a range of topics.

### **Voice of CYP and Families**

Over this period the Social Care First Contact team made 1000 calls to families who were recently closed to either Social Worker teams or Early Help Family Work Teams- to check in on family and children/young people's wellbeing. Where families or young people were experiencing particular challenges, referrals were made to relevant teams.

The COVID Survey was initiated in order for us to understand the experience of our learners and their families up to that point, and to inform future planning. It told us:

1. Some families reported that they had suffered significantly from the lack of provision of 'in person' interactions with support services and the lack of availability of therapies.
2. Many families were concerned about the impact of the pandemic on the wellbeing and emotional health of their young people. NCC and the CCG commissioned Kooth, an online platform for young people over the age of 11,

which was launched in July 2020 and has subsequently been widely advertised through schools and GP networks.

3. Some families reported that home learning had been very difficult, with poor communication from schools and work being inaccessible for their children. This informed planning for the following period.
4. Whilst some families had good experiences of the statutory processes, two thirds of families going through EHC needs assessment reported communication not being optimal. This has informed the action plan of the relevant SEND workstream (Workforce Development and the Graduated Approach).

Recommendations emerged from the report, which were all included in the action plans underway for 20/21 within SEND workstreams.

The SEN Monitoring and Assessment Team, NIES staff, and Strategic SEND staff provided support and guidance directly to families about individual learners, and also via other NCC teams eg Education Service for Looked After Children (ESLAC), Early Help, Disabled Children Team, Childrens Social Care Locality Teams and Inclusion Team.

### **Planning for Reopening**

In readiness for September, information was gathered around reopening plans for Special Schools within and outside Northumberland, and advice provided to Northumberland mainstream Headteachers regarding meeting the needs of SEND learners on reopening. This included ensuring that schools communicated effectively with parents and carers about plans.

We understood that the return to school would be challenging for some learners, and that a new and different approach may be required to support this. Colleagues across Education, Health and Social Care Teams worked collaboratively to set up a new pathway for schools to use, 'Pop Up Hub', which was positioned securely within a graduated approach and communicated to schools in a timely way, ready for the start of term.



## **2. September to December 2020**

Schools were fully open for all learners.

### **Pop Up Hub**

The time limited Pop Up Hub operated throughout the Autumn term to meet the needs of children and young people who were struggling to return to school for COVID related reasons; their own or their families' circumstances and specific anxieties, and about whom schools/settings were most concerned.

The Hub complemented other pathways to services and received 90 referrals over the course of the term, all of which were directed to relevant teams. Numerous services offered support.

<b>Service</b>	<b>Number of children offered support</b>
Early Help Hub	24
Education Welfare Service	26
NIES High Incidence Needs Team	22
Education Psychology	2
Primary Mental Health Team	23
CYPS	8
Schools Inclusion Team	9
School Health Teams	22
Other	19

Interventions were arranged with the child/young person, family and school as appropriate. Through this work, 43 of the young people reached attendance over 75% from very low starting points (many not attending at all). Of the total number of 90, average attendance increased to 52%. Of note was that although many referrals were COVID specific, some were more about longer term mental health concerns which had become worse through the COVID situation.

### **Documentation and guidance issued to schools**

A 'Return to School Plan for Learners with SEN' template with guidance was issued to schools. RAs were adapted and promoted for use with learners who did not return, or who were struggling to return. This ensured that schools remained aware of the ongoing need to support learners not in school. In reality, schools were experiencing closure of 'bubbles' at this time, so were developing and improving their approaches to remote learning.

### **Training Offer**

The Training Offer for SENCOs was redesigned and delivered virtually in response to system need, via SENCO network meetings and centrally run events. This demonstrated the return to business as usual in relation to relevant workstreams and the identified ongoing need for workforce development. The impact of this was good, with attendance higher than would have been expected at face to face training.

### **NIES Support Offer**

On site visits resumed, where safe to do so, as determined by government guidance. Full risk assessments undertaken before each visit, and a virtual offer also available. Demand for services was high, and the new model of delivery increased access to specialist teaching teams to provide equity. This demonstrated a return to business as usual in respect of supporting the early identification of SEND in schools and enabling specialist interventions to help meet need, as well as meeting needs emerging specific to absence from and return to school.

Guidance was provided for families related to safe online learning practice when engaging with NIES teams.

## **School Improvement**

The School Improvement Partner Autumn Term proforma was changed to include scrutiny of the previous and ongoing offer for SEN learners, encouraging conversations between school leadership teams and SIPs about SEND provision. This meant that leaders were sighted on their responsibility to tackle additional disadvantage.

The School Improvement Leader for SEND oversaw actions arising from these reports, providing support and challenge to schools where necessary.

## **Voice of CYP and Families**

In response to concerns from families about wellbeing and the impact of the pandemic and school absence, actions were taken to promote whole school approaches to mental health via the activity of the WellBeing for Education Return team and the Senior Mental Health Lead Coordinator, working closely with the Educational Psychologists and the Primary Mental Health Work team. The training package released by the DfE/DHSC was successfully delivered to representatives of 53% of Northumberland schools and settings via a conference in November. Further work through the Spring Term has ensured all schools have the training materials and have received support to deliver the package to their staff.



### **3. January to March 2021**

Schools were closed to most learners during this period in response to rising infection rates. Again, guidance indicated that places should be available for vulnerable learners, including those with EHCPs.

#### **Attendance of learners with EHCPs**

School attendance (at schools within geographical boundaries of Northumberland) was monitored via daily returns to the Local Authority which enabled clearer insight regarding % EHCP learners taking up a school place. Attendance exceeded national benchmarks in all but one week and showed an upward trend during the period overall.

The degree to which the Special Schools within Northumberland were open was monitored on a weekly basis. NCC Officers worked with Headteachers to ensure that places were available for the most vulnerable and responded to individual requests that were made by parents/carers directly to Local Authority teams eg SEN Monitoring and Assessment team, Social Care teams, ESLAC. The impact of this on individual learners and their families was high.

#### **Monitoring EHCP learners**

SENCOs and nominated leads in OOC settings were asked to complete a weekly return indicating confidence levels in providing remote learning, which was accessible and in line with national expectations, engagement of learners in that remote delivery, and the levels of communication with parents and carers. This was a direct response to the concerns raised by the COVID survey in July 2020.

Multi agency group scrutinised returns on a weekly basis and actioned matters arising; contacting families where schools alerted to lack of engagement, a concern about non-attendance when additional vulnerabilities indicated it would be beneficial, contacting schools where required hours of teaching were not being delivered, or where parents/carers were not being contacted on an at least weekly basis.

The impact of this was that in some cases, individual learners were supported to increase attendance, schools were brought together to share best practice around remote learning, and there were overall increases in the levels of communication with parents reported. Where schools expressed concerns about individual learners, these were followed up by the relevant teams. This applied to within and out of county settings.

### **Advice and Guidance to Schools**

Guidance was issued on requirements for remote learning and for meeting the needs of learners with SEND, with challenge provided by NCC officers when required.

In addition, in the Spring term the Education Mental Health Practitioners usually working into Trailblazer partnership schools worked county wide with schools to support the prevention and early intervention agenda.

### **Monitoring of learners referred into Pop Up Hub**

The 90 learners referred into the Pop Up Hub have been tracked and reviewed through the course of the Spring term. Of these, 65 had successfully returned to school by the end of the term, with an average attendance of 75%. The remaining children and young people have services involved with plans around them. The impact of this work has been that two thirds of these young people were, by the end of the Spring term, accessing their statutory entitlement to school, following interventions centred around them as individuals, together with their families and schools.

### **Voice of CYP and Families**

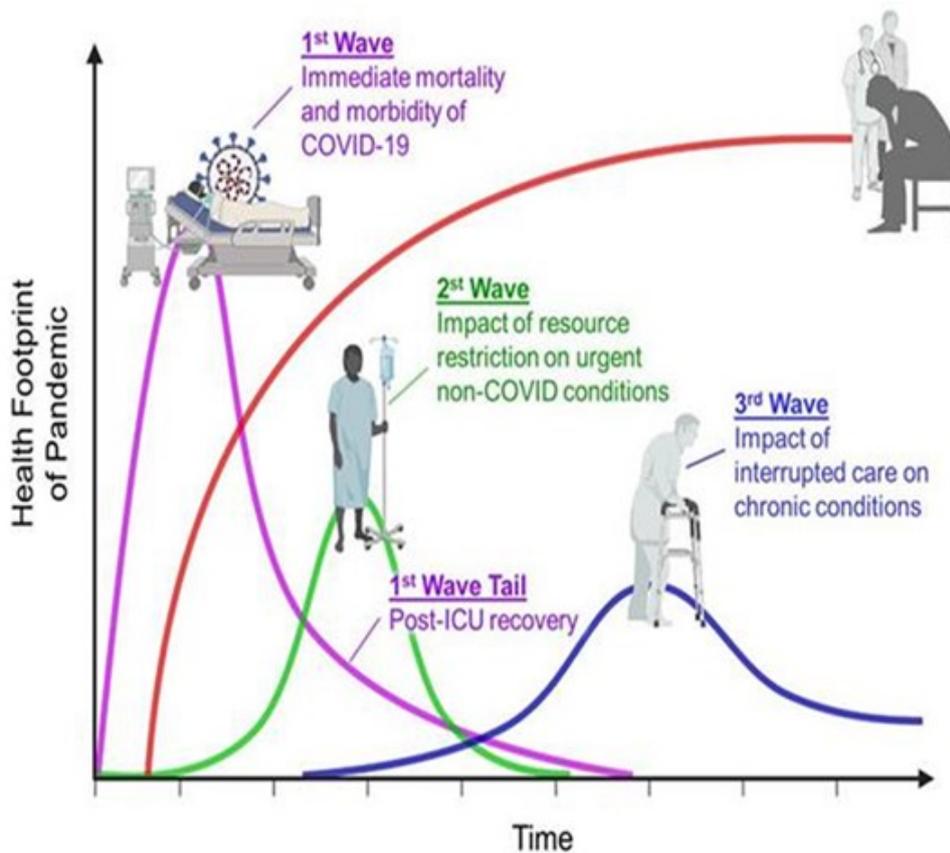
Wellbeing for Education return training packages are now available to all schools, and work is ongoing to ensure that all staff have received the training, responding to the concerns arising from the Survey.

The Be You website was launched in January which describes the Northumberland graduated approach to social and emotional health, with portals for parents/carers, young people and professionals. This marks a significant development in the information easily available to residents about available support.

The Education Welfare Service supported 708 requests from Designated Safeguarding Leads and other professionals over this period. Staff contacted families where schools had been unable to do so to understand the family context and work with them, and schools, to support attendance. This ensured that individual stories were heard and understood.

### **Impact of COVID –19 on Health Activity and Outcomes**

Health providers responded to changing needs of children and young people across the local area throughout the whole period, taking account of the health footprint:



A surge in mental health service demand due to the COVID19 pandemic is well recognised and monitoring demand across a large geographical area with multiple providers has been important. Addressing the wider inequality impact factors in communities and investing in community resilience is necessary to flatten the demand curve in the longer term.

Rates of probable mental disorders have increased since 2017. In 2020, one in six (16.0%) children aged 5 to 16 years were identified as having a probable mental disorder, increasing from one in nine (10.8%) in 2017. The increase was evident in both boys and girls.

The likelihood of a probable mental disorder increased with age with a noticeable difference in gender for the older age group (17 to 22 years); 27.2% of young women and 13.3% of young men were identified as having a probable mental disorder

Among 11 to 16 year old girls, 63.8% with a probable mental disorder had seen or heard an argument among adults in the household, compared with 46.8% of those unlikely to have a mental disorder.

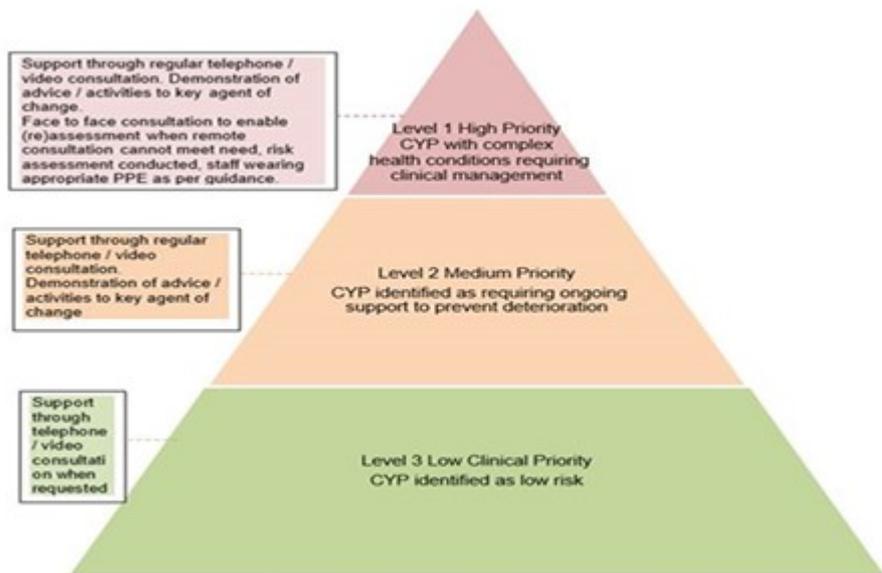
Among those aged 5 to 22 years, 58.9% with a probable mental disorder reported having sleep problems. Young people aged 17 to 22 years with a probable mental disorder were more likely to report sleep problems (69.6%), than those aged 11 to 16 (50.5%) and 5 to 10 (52.5%).

About six in ten (62.6%) children aged 5 to 16 years with a probable mental disorder had regular support from their school or college, compared with 76.4% of children unlikely to have a mental disorder.

Children aged 5 to 16 years with a probable mental disorder were more than twice as likely to live in a household that had fallen behind with payments (16.3%), than children unlikely to have a mental disorder (6.4%).

Children and young people with a probable mental disorder were more likely to say that lockdown had made their life worse (54.1% of 11 to 16 year olds, and 59.0% of 17 to 22 year olds), than those unlikely to have a mental disorder (39.2% and 37.3% respectively).

Services have responded in the following ways, in addition to contributing to the multiagency activity described in earlier sections of this report. They adopted new ways of working, skill mix, and an integrated approach in order to meet need:



- Special school nursing service developed and implemented a needs led audit tool for Special Schools to complete resulting in better access to nursing support.
- Integration and collaboration improved via new digital approaches, improving access, triage and MDT working - which have been well received by parents and teachers.
- In development are a core set of principles which we will use to co-design new ways of working – focusing on OT and Speech and Language.

## IMPLICATIONS ARISING OUT OF THE REPORT

<b>Policy:</b>	N/A
<b>Finance and value for money:</b>	N/A
<b>Legal:</b>	N/A
<b>Procurement:</b>	N/A
<b>Human Resources:</b>	N/A
<b>Property:</b>	N/A
<b>Equalities:</b> (Impact Assessment attached)  Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	
<b>Risk Assessment:</b>	N/A
<b>Crime &amp; Disorder:</b>	N/A
<b>Customer Considerations:</b>	The response has been concerned with meeting the needs of residents (children and young people with SEND and their families).
<b>Carbon Reduction:</b>	The use of digital technology will have an ongoing positive impact on carbon reduction.
<b>Wards:</b>	All

## CONSULTATION

Consultation with families conducted (June/July 2020) in order to understand the impact of the pandemic on their lives.

## BACKGROUND PAPERS

Links to FACS Report on Mental Health Support in Northumberland Schools, April 2021.

## **Report sign off**

Finance Officer	
Monitoring Officer/Legal	
Human Resources	
Procurement	
I.T.	
Executive Director of Children's Services	Cath McEvoy-Carr
Portfolio Holder(s)	

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Report Author: Nicola Taylor

