

IN OUR SHOES

Director of Public Health Annual Report 2022

A summary for children and young people



Why we made this report

The COVID-19 pandemic affected all our lives. For a long time, it was the main item on the news.

But people mainly talked about how the pandemic affected adults.

Children were less likely to become ill with COVID-19 than adults. They weren't the focus of lockdown measures. But their lives were still deeply affected – and for some, the effects are still carrying on.

Some children:

- ☹️ **Are still catching up on learning they missed out on.**
- ☹️ **Have struggled to get the support they need.**
- ☹️ **Have missed out on developing basic skills.**

Victoria Eaton is our Director of Public Health in Leeds. She thinks it's unfair that some children were affected more than others. She wants this to change.

How we made this report

The team who made In Our Shoes:

- ☹️ **Read lots of studies.**
- ☹️ **Shared a survey with people who work with families in Leeds.**
- ☹️ **Talked to children, young people, and families to hear how things had been for them.**
- ☹️ **Asked for artwork or poetry about children's experiences.**
- ☹️ **Worked with families to make a film, also called In Our Shoes.**



Why we made this report

We found the COVID-19 pandemic affected the lives of children in Leeds in many ways:

Children's mental health has worsened.

Referrals to children's mental health services went up between 2020 and 2022.

Children's happiness levels have been falling for 10 years. During the pandemic, happiness levels went down even more.

Better mental health links to better academic outcomes, relationships, and physical health.

Parental mental health was affected.

Many parents found the pandemic stressful. Parents needed to support their children with less help from family, friends, schools, and services.

If parents' mental health is not well supported, their children's mental health and development can be affected.

Disrupted routines affected children's health.

Lockdown disrupted children's lives. Things like sleep, eating habits, activities and play were affected. Families without a garden, or money for healthy food, faced more challenges. Screen-time went up by 50%. Returning to normal was hard for many families.

It became even harder for children to stay a healthy weight - more so when families had less money. Lots of screen time can also affect children's health.

The impact was unequal and unfair.

The pandemic impacted families differently. Families with less money were more likely to:

- ☹️ Live in damp, cold, overcrowded, or unstable housing.

- ☹️ Breathe polluted air.
- ☹️ Feel stressed or anxious.
- ☹️ Lose a loved one to COVID-19.

The COVID-19 lockdown was tougher for these families, and led to more long term impacts. People from some ethnic groups were also more affected. This is unfair.

Many families were made poorer during the pandemic. This is getting worse because basic things like food and energy cost more money than ever. One-third of families in Leeds now live in poverty.

Living in poverty affects children's life expectancy, academic prospects, and health.

Life behind closed doors made some children less safe.

It was harder to access safe spaces outside home in lockdown. Some children were more unsafe at home. This might be because someone hurt them, or they weren't well looked after. Services weren't running as normal, so chances to help might have been missed. Some children also saw upsetting or harmful content online.

If help isn't there when needed and children feel unsafe, this can cause trauma. Trauma impacts children's life outcomes.

Young children's development was affected.

When children are young, their brain develops a lot. This is helped by playing actively and interacting with people. But the pandemic meant we didn't mix with many people.

Teachers, nursery workers and children's centre staff said many young children came out of the pandemic:

- ☹️ Unsure of adults and children they didn't know.
- ☹️ Less able to share and with fewer basic skills.

- ☹️ Struggling to communicate.
- ☹️ Experiencing behaviour problems.

These issues may affect children as they grow older. This could mean more children need help from services or do less well at school.

Lost learning was experienced unequally

Lots of children lost learning from not being in school during the pandemic. Some families found it more difficult to home-school well:

- ☹️ When parents had conflicting work demands.
- ☹️ Where families were facing illness, safeguarding issues, or poverty.
- ☹️ Where children had additional needs.
- ☹️ Where access to laptops or WiFi was a problem.

Catching up on this lost learning will be hard. More children are absent from school than before the pandemic, which makes it harder still to catch up. But teachers are working to address the problem. Leeds' GCSE results were better in 2022 than 2019.

Education is one of the most important routes to health and wealth in adulthood. So the impact of this could be lifelong. There was already a difference in learning between richer and poorer parts of Leeds. This could get bigger.

It is still difficult to access some services.

Families found it hard to access services (like dentists) during the pandemic.

So, some children developed problems which are now more difficult to put right. There are long waiting lists for lots of services. These include dentists, mental health support and speech & language therapy.

This might mean children are absent from school more. Some children might need emergency care, which is more expensive.

Action is needed to tackle childhood infections.

More children had common illnesses in winter 2022/23 than before the pandemic. This was because children could mix again. Children had spent a lot of time not seeing other people in lockdown. Illnesses might have spread that children weren't used to or immune to. Vaccinations for more serious diseases have gone down since the pandemic. This could mean that more children get seriously ill.

Reduced vaccinations could lead to outbreaks of serious illnesses like measles.

Some things did change for the better.

Many children got to spend more time with their families. Children got to see their dads more. Services and work meetings moved online.

More flexible working for parents and more online access to healthcare are long-term changes that make life easier for some families.



What happens next?

The Director of Public Health made lots of suggestions for change in the report. She thinks that children and young people should be at the heart of all the work that affects them.

Leeds City Council and its partners should continue to:

- Focus on how to keep children safe;
- Prioritise work to improve and protect children's mental health;
- Build on existing work to support parental mental health and wellbeing;
- Focus on supporting children's health. This can be done through:
 - increasing access to healthy food;
 - creating more chances to be active and play;
 - making sure that as many people as possible can access green space;
 - continuing a plan to support children's healthy weight.
- Focus on how to make life fairer for families in poverty in Leeds;
- Work in partnership to help all children catch up on lost education.

The Leeds Office of the West Yorkshire Integrated Care Board makes decisions about health services in Leeds. It should make sure all children's healthcare is accessible, especially:

- Dentistry;
- Mental health services;
- Speech and language therapy.

NHS England and the Leeds Health Protection Board should increase the coverage of childhood immunisations.

Next year, the Director of Public Health will report back on progress.

The report and short film are on our website. Visit: www.leeds.gov.uk/PublicHealthAnnualReport22

Thank you to all the children and families who helped to make this report happen.

“ I used to be on my computer for 12 hours a day for school and basic socialising ”
- Bruce, 15, Whinmoor

“ I felt sad during lockdown because I couldn't go outside and play. ”
- Child, 8, Leeds

