New Term
New Challenges
New Opportunities

Putting **Children's Mental Health** at the Heart of Education

Believe in children

Barnardo's
Northern Ireland

August 2020

"

At Barnardo's Northern Ireland, we believe the system around children and young people is going to be more critical than ever if we are to help the next generation not just adapt to a post-lockdown reality, but to thrive.

"

Overview

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the world we live in. Most schools in Northern Ireland have been closed since March, with the vast majority of children learning at home, isolated from teachers, friends and a life they knew. With the new term on the horizon, schools are preparing to continue their learning in a changed environment and there is an opportunity to put children's mental health at the heart of education.

Barnardo's NI is Northern Ireland's largest children's charity. We work with approximately 12,000 children, young people and families annually across more than 40 different services and programmes. We believe that every child deserves the best possible start in life, and our service provision reflects that philosophy. You can read more about our work in schools at the end of this report.

At Barnardo's NI, we believe the support systems around children and young people will be more critical than ever if we are to help the next generation not just adapt to a post-lockdown reality, but to thrive.

We wanted to understand the challenges that schools are facing and what help schools will need to support the mental health and wellbeing of pupils as they return for the new school year. Over the course of two weeks in June 2020, we surveyed 167 education professionals in our partner schools across Northern Ireland to find out more about their experiences so far, and their thoughts and concerns about the return to the classroom.

In this briefing we highlight what we have learnt from school professionals about the impact of Covid-19 on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people. We will outline how schools are seeking to strengthen support for their pupils' mental health and wellbeing, and the challenges they anticipate when the new term starts.

The Headlines

IMPACT OF THE LOCKDOWN:
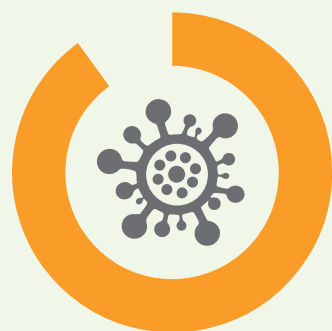
>90%

More than 90% of respondents agreed that Covid-19 has impacted on their school's ability to support pupils with their mental health and wellbeing.

>80%

More than 80% of respondents cited **a lack of direct or face-to-face contact** as the main impact on their school's ability to support pupils with their mental health and wellbeing.

~ 90%

Nearly 90% of respondents thought that the pandemic was likely to have an impact on the mental health and wellbeing of pupils.

THE RETURN TO SCHOOL:

>95%

Over 95% of respondents said they anticipated changes to the way their school will operate when pupils return.

The majority of schools said they would be **prioritising mental health and wellbeing** on the return to school.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE:

All participants indicated that they would welcome additional help to support pupils with their mental health and wellbeing.

Over 80% of participants indicated a need for **increased funding** to support mental health and wellbeing.

Schools and teachers said the best way to support them to return to school is to ensure clear guidance and direct communication from the Department of Education and the Education Authority.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT:

✓ **Prioritise mental health and wellbeing in the recovery curriculum**

✓ **Increase funding and investment in mental health and wellbeing services in school**

✓ **Child-centred guidance, developed in consultation with schools, must be communicated clearly and directly**

We recognise that the Executive is working hard to ensure a safe return to school. We believe that these recommendations must be progressed by government before the return to school, in order to give our children the best start in the new term.

We have an opportunity to make changes now to the wider education system so it prioritises wellbeing alongside academic attainment, improving outcomes for children and young people.

This will require the Government to take action now, not only in ensuring the health and safety of pupils and staff as they return, but also in supporting schools to put mental health and wellbeing at the heart of education for the long term.

> " This experience came out of the blue … There was a fear of the unknown. Children missed their teachers and friends … school will be different to what they have experienced before. "
>
> (Teacher, Primary)

Contents

Understanding the New Normal

The Covid-19 Context

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a traumatic experience for many people. A 'collective loss of the world we know'. Children and young people have experienced disruption to many aspects of their lives, not least the closure of schools. The UN highlights children as a group especially impacted by mental distress from coronavirus, and the recent Barnardo's report 'Mental Health and Covid-19: In Our Own Words' outlines how coronavirus has impacted the wide range of young people we support across the UK.

This pandemic will have the biggest impact upon those who were already the most vulnerable in society. For some children existing inequalities or trauma will be exacerbated, while others may be experiencing mental health challenges, domestic violence or poverty for the first time. We know from existing research that without early intervention, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and trauma can have a long term impact on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.

For many children, school is their lifeline, their safe space, and going back to school will offer vital support. Given the impact of the lockdown, the return to school cannot focus solely on academic achievement, especially given what we know about the importance of mental health and wellbeing to children's ability to learn. The impact of Covid-19 on our children's mental health and wellbeing – especially on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged – means we need to ensure that school is a place where wellbeing and pastoral care are the primary concern.

Recent research conducted by Barnardo's in both England and Wales calls on Government to support schools to prioritise pupil and staff wellbeing by affording schools flexibility with the curriculum as children return. The reports also call on Government to seize this opportunity to transform the education system by prioritising child welfare and wellbeing, so that it is on a par with academic achievement.

Schools cannot take on this challenge alone; support and guidance from Government will be crucial. We cannot place new requirements and challenges on an already stretched system and expect it to cope with increased demand. Quick fixes or a 'return to normality' without suitable support will fail our children. This is an opportunity to re-imagine the curriculum, and put wellbeing at the heart of the learning environment when children return to school.

The Northern Ireland Context

Children's mental health and wellbeing has begun to receive greater focus at a policy, research and service level in Northern Ireland in recent years, and a number of key policies, strategies and approaches have been developed. We've highlighted a few of these here to provide context.

'*Still Waiting*', produced by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People in 2018, is a rights-based review of mental health services for children and young people in Northern Ireland. The report finds that children and young people are waiting too long to ask for help, waiting too long to get the right support when they ask for it, and waiting too long for systems and services to change. The Department of Health published its <u>Interdepartmental Action Plan</u> in response to 'Still Waiting' in 2019.

The **_Children and Young People's Strategy 2019-2029_** is a cross-departmental strategic framework which aims to improve the wellbeing of all children and young people in Northern Ireland, delivering positive long lasting outcomes.

New Decade, New Approach (2020), the deal to restore devolved government in Northern Ireland, demonstrates a focus on mental health and wellbeing through a number of related commitments.

Post-Lockdown Planning

In May 2020, Health Minister Robin Swann published the ***Mental Health Action Plan***. The plan includes 38 actions including a commitment to produce a mental health strategy, which will include a comprehensive funding plan for mental health. A Covid-19 Mental Health Response Plan is included in Annex B which seeks to address the impact of the pandemic on mental health and wellbeing in Northern Ireland, including a dedicated strategic theme on Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) specific issues. The first post-Covid-19 work stream is the creation of a *Mental Health Champion* for Northern Ireland supported by all Executive Ministers to further the mental health agenda.

The ***Education Restart Programme*** established by Education Minister Peter Weir in June 2020, put in place the measures to enable a safe phased reopening of schools and identified the mental health and emotional wellbeing of the workforce and learners as a priority.

The Department of Education published '***New School Day***' guidance for re-opening schools, in June 2020. As not all children will be able to safely attend school at the same time given social distancing requirements, blended learning - a blend of face-to-face and distance learning - will be required. Guidance on curriculum and wellbeing had not yet been published by the Department at the time of this report.

A range of research has been carried out in Northern Ireland highlighting the impact of Covid-19 on the mental health and wellbeing of young people in Northern Ireland. This includes publications from: Northern Ireland Youth Forum on young people's experience and voices; Stranmillis University College on bridging the learning gap and the recovery curriculum; and, the Education and Training Inspectorate on the challenges of blended learning, including safeguarding concerns. At Barnardo's NI, we have highlighted concerns around safeguarding, poverty (including digital poverty) and access to mental health and wellbeing support for children and young people.

WHAT SCHOOLS SAID

In carrying out this survey we wanted to understand the challenges that schools are facing and what help schools will need to support the mental health and wellbeing of pupils as they return in the new school year.

Over the course of two weeks in June 2020, we surveyed 167 education professionals in our partner schools across Northern Ireland. Respondents included teachers, principals and Special Educational Needs Coordinators from primary, post-primary and special schools. Despite the broad range of respondents, the responses and overall feelings and concerns of school professionals were consistent, regardless of their role or school type.

The survey results are presented in three sections:

- **The Impact of Lockdown**
- **The Return to School**
- **Opportunities for Change**

The Impact of Lockdown

> " Children are resilient but these are uncharted waters."
> (Principal/Vice-Principal, Special School)

> " We can't speak to and see our students. For many of them, school is their safe and happy place."
> (Teacher, Post-primary)

> " For many, all of these issues will have caused massive anxieties and stresses which will no doubt have impacted on their mental health and wellbeing."
> (Teacher, Special School)

Summary

Schools are about much more than academic attainment, particularly for our most vulnerable children and young people.
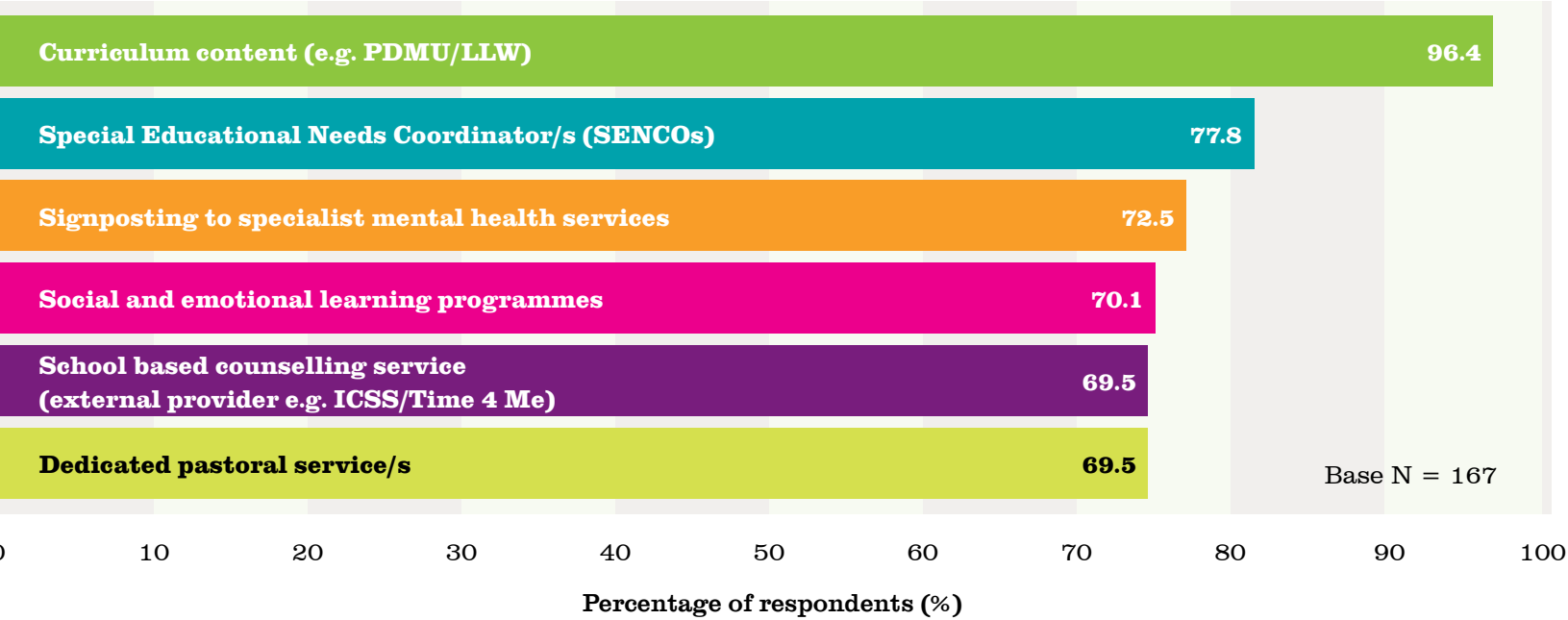

Prior to the Covid-19 outbreak, more than 96% of respondents were using curriculum content such as Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) or Learning for Life and Work (LLW) as one of the approaches to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of their pupils.

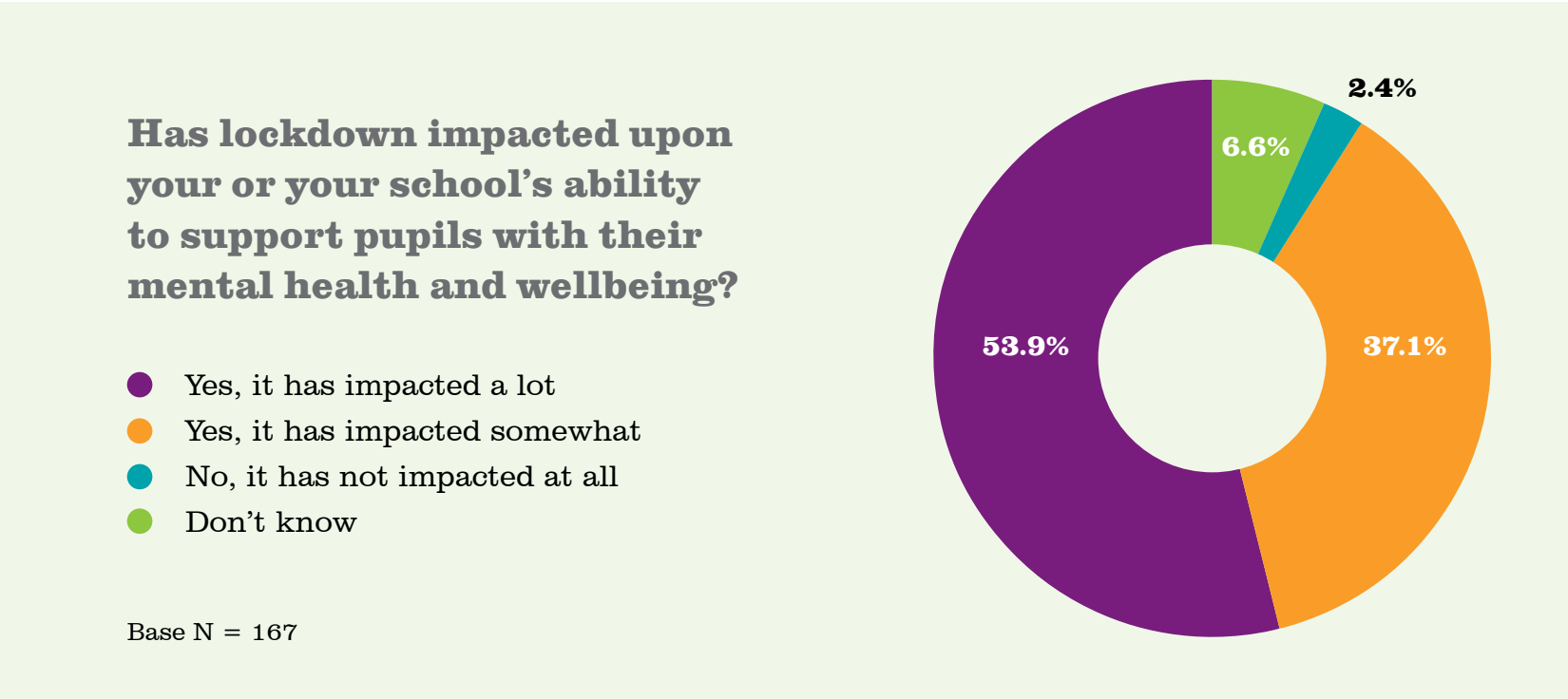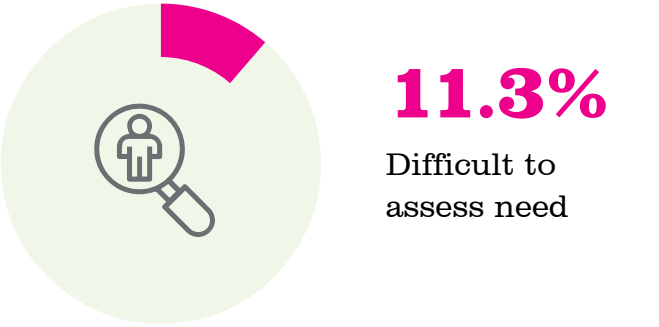When asked about the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people:

■ 91% of school professionals said that the pandemic had impacted upon their school's ability to support pupils with their mental health and wellbeing.

■ 82% identified that this was due to a lack of direct or face-to-face contact with children and young people.

■ 89.2% thought that there was likely to be an impact on their pupils' mental health and wellbeing.

■ 48.9% thought that pupils would be dealing with anxiety, fear and trauma as a result of the pandemic, and 45.1% identified disruption to children's routines and relationships as a key concern for their mental health and wellbeing.

Prior to the Covid-19 outbreak, in what ways did you/your school support the mental health and wellbeing of its pupils?

Curriculum content (e.g. PDMU/LLW)	96.4
Special Educational Needs Coordinator/s (SENCOs)	77.8
Signposting to specialist mental health services	72.5
Social and emotional learning programmes	70.1
School based counselling service (external provider e.g. ICSS/Time 4 Me)	69.5
Dedicated pastoral service/s	69.5

Base N = 167

Percentage of respondents (%)

Ways lockdown measures have impacted on schools' ability to support mental health and wellbeing of pupils

Base N = 133

82%
Lack of direct/ face to face contact with pupils.

16.5%
Difficult to support everyone online/remotely

11.3%
Difficult to assess need

Has lockdown impacted upon your or your school's ability to support pupils with their mental health and wellbeing?

- Yes, it has impacted a lot
- Yes, it has impacted somewhat
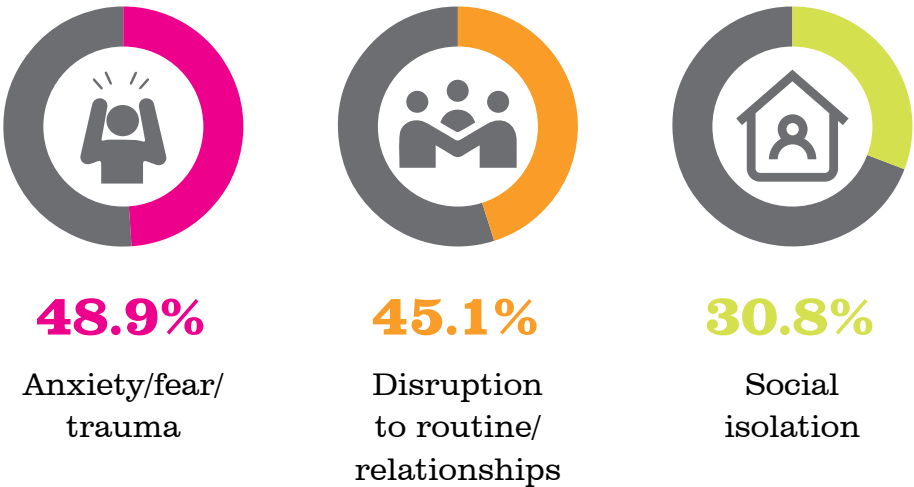- No, it has not impacted at all
- Don't know

Base N = 167

53.9%
37.1%
6.6%
2.4%
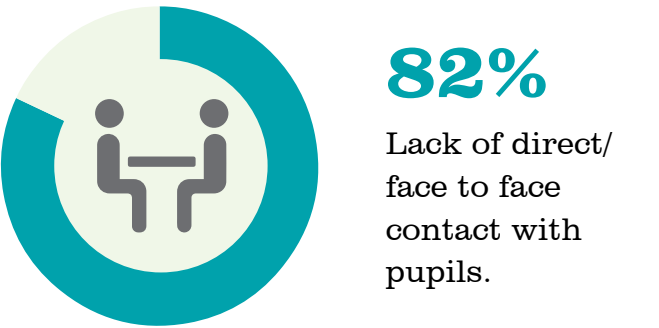
Is the Covid-19 outbreak likely to have an impact on the mental health and wellbeing of your pupils?

Base N = 157

YES 89.2%

DON'T KNOW 9.6%

NO 1.3%

Impact of Covid-19 on the mental health and wellbeing of pupils

48.9%
Anxiety/fear/trauma

45.1%
Disruption to routine/relationships
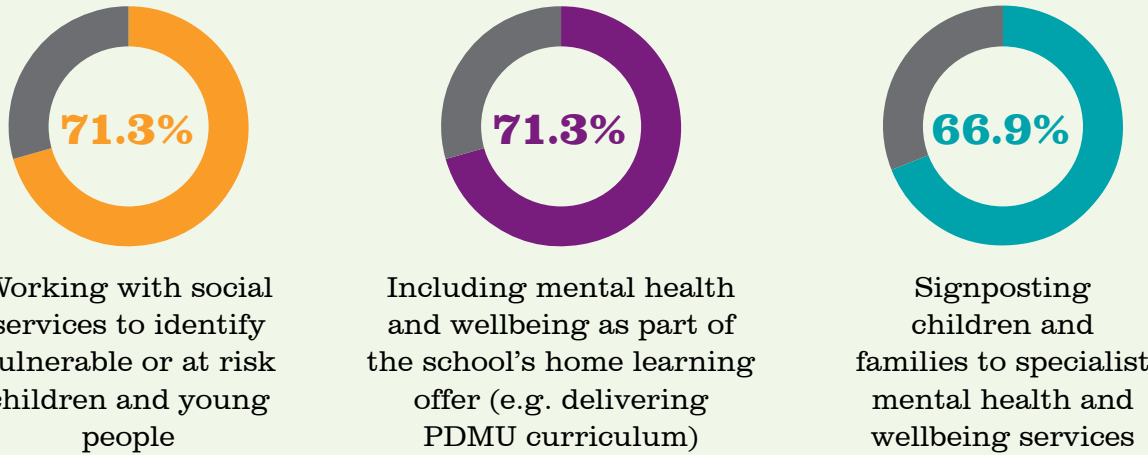
30.8%
Social isolation

Base N = 133

Many schools adopted a range of similar methods to support the mental health and wellbeing of pupils, parents and families while lockdown measures were in place:
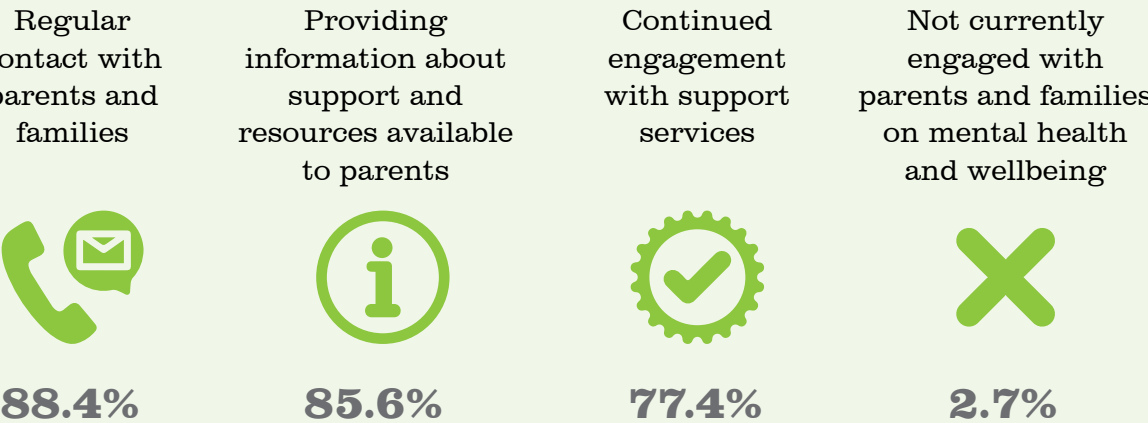
Ways schools are supporting the mental health and wellbeing needs of pupils during the lockdown

Base N = 157

71.3%
Working with social services to identify vulnerable or at risk children and young people

71.3%
Including mental health and wellbeing as part of the school's home learning offer (e.g. delivering PDMU curriculum)

66.9%
Signposting children and families to specialist mental health and wellbeing services

---

Ways schools are supporting the mental health and wellbeing needs of parents and vulnerable families

Base N = 146

Regular contact with parents and families

Providing information about support and resources available to parents

Continued engagement with support services

Not currently engaged with parents and families on mental health and wellbeing

88.4%

85.6%

77.4%

2.7%

The Return to School

> **"** It is extremely difficult to plan and try to provide support when we have so many unanswered questions."
> (Teacher, Special School)

> **"** We need to address the children's emotional wellbeing before looking at curriculum demands."
> (Principal/Vice-Principal, Primary)

> **"** There will be a huge spike in the number of pupils who wish to avail of the counselling service."
> (Principal/Vice-Principal, Primary)

Summary

We also wanted to understand how schools are preparing to support wellbeing when they return.

We asked participants about their plans for the post-lockdown return to school, their priorities and what changes they are anticipating:

- 70.6% highlighted mental health and wellbeing, and social and emotional learning as one of their top priorities; this was the top answer to this question by a clear margin.

- Nearly all respondents (96.1%) said they anticipated changes to the way their school will operate when pupils return.

- 46.7% mentioned smaller classes and reduced hours for children as a change they anticipated, and 45.3% mentioned social distancing and hygiene as measures that would have to be implemented.

- In terms of mental health and wellbeing of pupils, 61.5% anticipate changes in the way they support pupils.

- 55.3% of respondents said they would be prioritising mental health and wellbeing when school returns, while 23.5% anticipated a greater demand for support services, including counselling and early intervention.

- When asked about their confidence in the tools, skills and resources needed to support pupils when they return to school, 77.7% of participants felt confident or somewhat confident in their own capability, while only 69.6% were confident or somewhat confident that their school is equipped to support pupils.

Top priorities for the return of pupils to school

Base N = 153

70.6%

Mental health and wellbeing/Social and emotional learning

54.2%

Safe, secure environment

43.8%

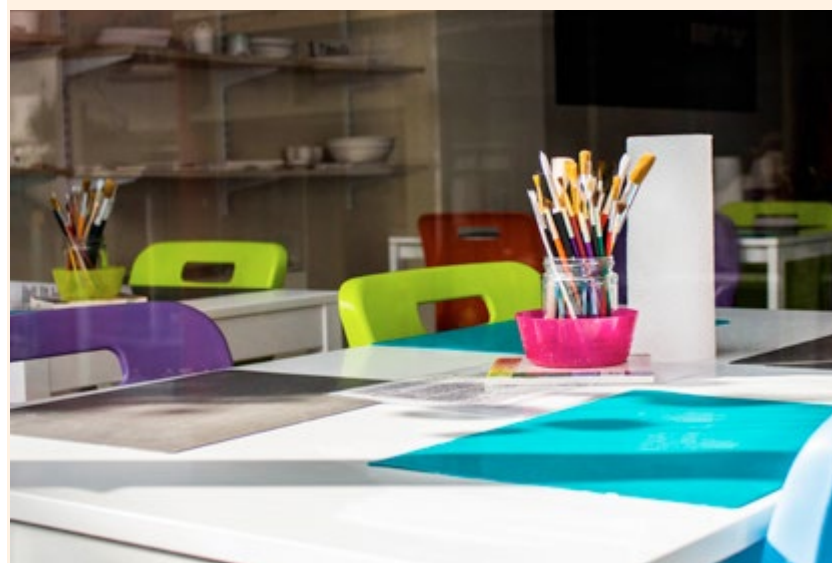**Focus on learning/recovery curriculum**

40.5%

Rebuilding relationships/ routine

Do you anticipate changes to the way in which your school will operate when pupils return, specifically in relation to adapting to meet the needs of pupils returning from 'lockdown' measures?

Base N = 153

YES 96.1%

DON'T KNOW 3.3%

NO 0.7%

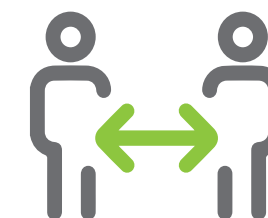## Changes anticipated to school after returning from lockdown

Base N = 137

46.7%

Smaller class sizes & reduced hours

45.3%

Social distancing & hygiene measures

24.1%

Blended learning
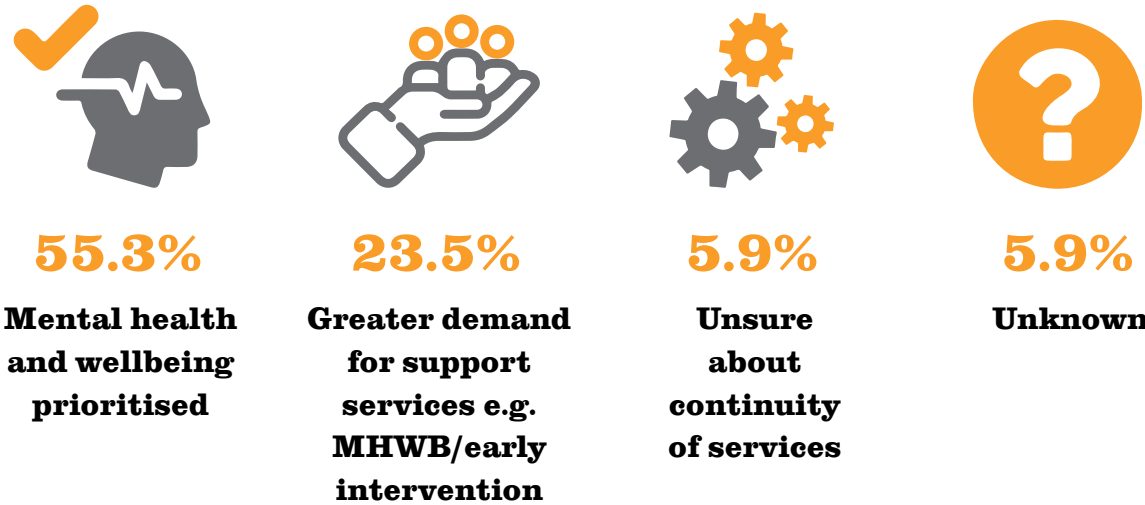
21.9%

Focus on mental health alongside learning

Do you anticipate changes to the way in which your school will support pupils with their mental health and wellbeing?
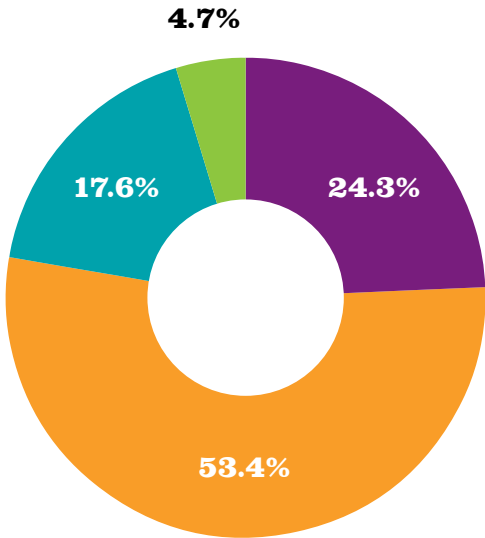
Base N = 148

YES 61.5%

DON'T KNOW 25.7%

NO 12.8%

Changes anticipated to support pupils with their mental health and wellbeing

55.3%
Mental health and wellbeing prioritised

23.5%
Greater demand for support services e.g. MHWB/early intervention

5.9%
Unsure about continuity of services

5.9%
Unknown

Base N = 85

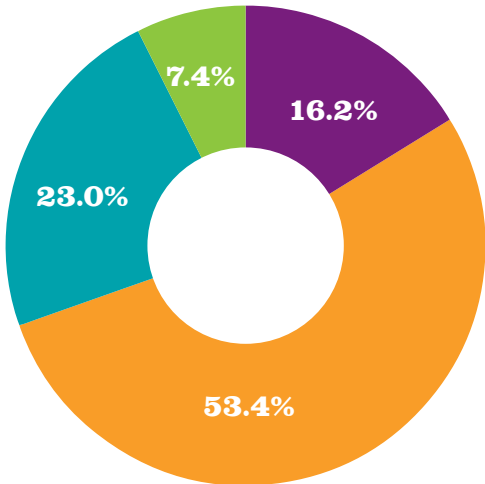**Are you confident that YOU have the tools/ skills/resources needed to support your pupils when they return to school?**

- Yes, I am confident
- Yes, I am somewhat confident
- No, I am not confident
- Don't know

4.7%
24.3%
17.6%
53.4%

Base N = 148

Are you confident that YOUR SCHOOL has the tools/skills/resources needed to support your pupils when they return to school?

- Yes, I am confident
- Yes, I am somewhat confident
- No, I am not confident
- Don't know

7.4%
16.2%
23.0%
53.4%

Base N = 148

Opportunities for Change

"I believe MHWB (mental health and wellbeing) needs to be prioritised for staff and pupils in the return to school after lockdown. More funding and support services will be needed right from the beginning."
(Teacher, Primary)

"Currently any child referred to CAMHS is simply on a list - early intervention is key and a list is not early intervention."
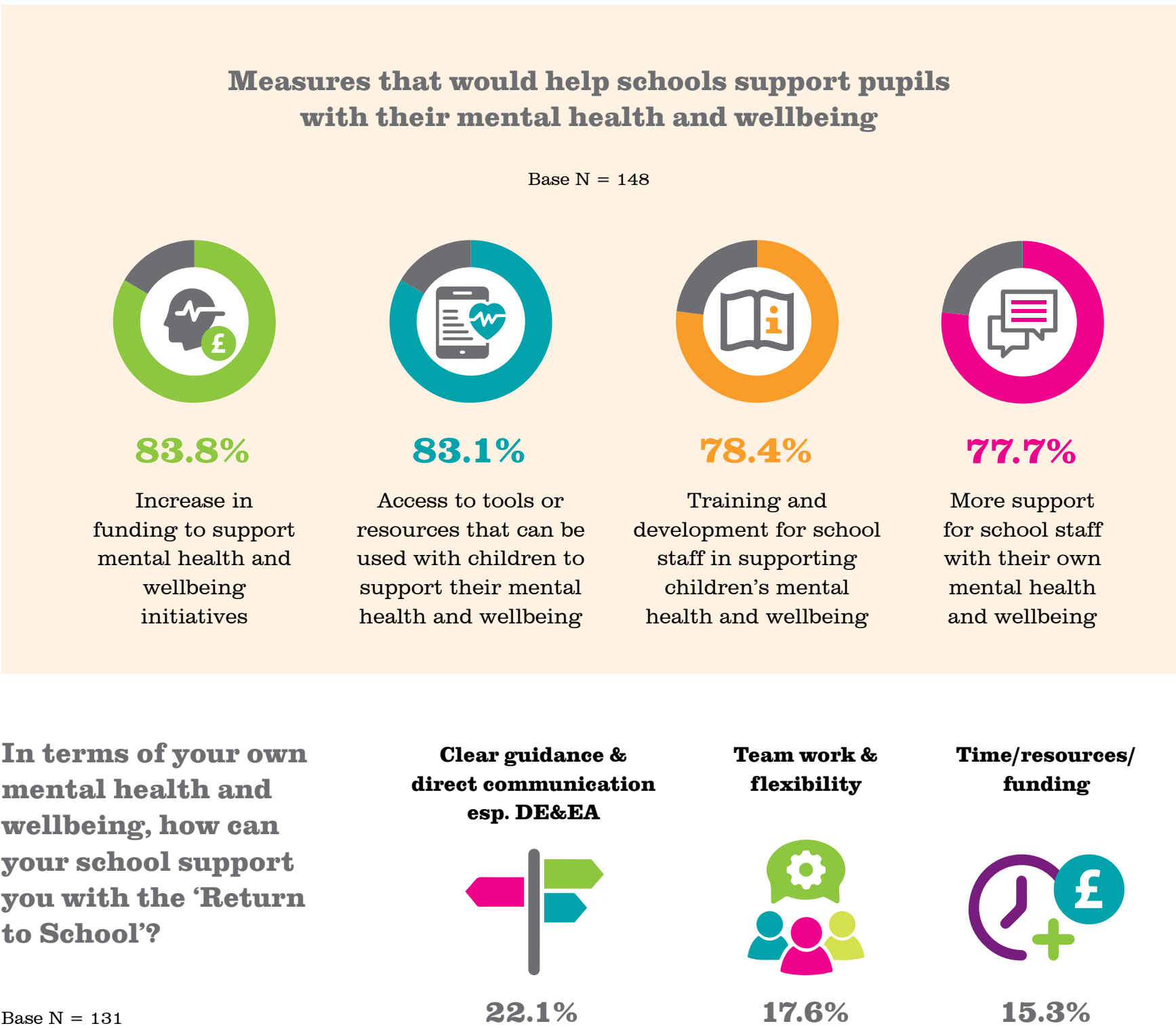(Principal/Vice-Principal, Primary)

"Children [need to be] met where they are at emotionally and are supported to get them back to a place where they are safe and secure."
(Principal/Vice-Principal, Primary)

Summary

Finally, we asked professionals what would help schools support pupils with their mental health and wellbeing on the return to the classroom:

- When asked what would help schools support pupils with their mental health and wellbeing, no respondents selected the option of 'no further help needed', indicating that all would welcome further help and support.

- 83.4% of respondents said that an increase in funding to support mental health and wellbeing initiatives would help schools, with access to tools or resources highlighted by 83.1% of respondents.

- School professionals identified clear guidance and communication from the Department of Education and the Education Authority as a key means of supporting professionals with their own wellbeing with the return to school (22.1%).

Measures that would help schools support pupils with their mental health and wellbeing

Base N = 148

83.8%

Increase in funding to support mental health and wellbeing initiatives

83.1%

Access to tools or resources that can be used with children to support their mental health and wellbeing

78.4%

Training and development for school staff in supporting children's mental health and wellbeing

77.7%

More support for school staff with their own mental health and wellbeing

In terms of your own mental health and wellbeing, how can your school support you with the 'Return to School'?

Base N = 131

Clear guidance & direct communication esp. DE&EA

22.1%

Team work & flexibility

17.6%

Time/resources/ funding

15.3%

Key Findings
& Recommendations

Key findings

- The overwhelming majority of schools agreed that the pandemic impacted on their ability to provide mental health and wellbeing support to pupils. **A lack of direct, face-to-face contact** with children and young people was identified as a key barrier to providing this support.

- Nearly all respondents (96.1%) said they anticipate changes to the way their school will operate when pupils return, and the majority of respondents said that they would be **prioritising mental health and wellbeing** on the return to school.

- *All* participants indicated that they would welcome additional help to support pupils with their mental health and wellbeing. Over 80% of participants sought an **increase in funding to support mental health and wellbeing**.

- Respondents said the best way to support them on the return to school is to ensure **clear guidance and direct communication** from the Department of Education and the Education Authority.

> " Mental health is at crisis point in NI …
> The impact of parental mental health on our children and young people is untold and unmeasured. Add Covid-19 into the mix and we have families where the parents are in crisis and the children's social & emotional needs cannot be met. "

(Principal/Vice-Principal, Primary)

Recommendations for government

Prioritise mental health and wellbeing in the recovery curriculum.

Whilst we recognise that school closures have impacted upon children's academic progress, children cannot learn while they are anxious, scared or dealing with trauma. The impact of the pandemic and lockdown on the mental health and wellbeing of children cannot be overestimated, and addressing this must be the first priority on the return to school. We believe this should reflect a trauma-informed, whole school approach and a range of methods, including formal curriculum, pastoral care and counselling provision.

Increase funding and investment in mental health and wellbeing services in school.

Prior to lockdown, school budgets were stretched. The impact of the pandemic and lockdown has exacerbated existing challenges and teachers are now anticipating even greater demand for services. It is critical that the Department of Education increases funding and investment in mental health and wellbeing so schools can meet this demand. We believe this should include extending statutory schools-based counselling provision to primary schools.

Child-centred guidance, developed in consultation with schools, must be communicated clearly and directly.

The response to the pandemic and return to school is a new challenge for everyone, including teachers and schools. Schools recognise the challenge the Department is facing, however there is a need for clear, child-centred, flexible guidance which can help them prepare for re-opening and the challenges they may face. Ongoing, direct communication and consultation with schools on those guidelines will support teachers in their return to school.

Top Tips for Schools

Barnardo's Youth Colleagues, based in England and Wales, have developed some top tips for schools. Barnardo's youth colleagues, Louise and Rebecca, spoke to young people aged 15 - 19 about how schools can support children and young people on their return.

* I.e. Recognising the psychological importance of graduation ceremonies.
** I.e. Coping with multiple disadvantages and/or lacking adequate protection.

1 Be clear with children and young people about what will happen when they return to school and listen to their concerns.

2 Adopt a phased approach to returning to school, so that children and young people are not overwhelmed with a sudden change in their routine.

3 Talk to them about the impact the coronavirus outbreak has had and use the school's platforms and networks to raise awareness of the issues affecting them.

4 Tell them where they can access support services.

5 Facilitate social events for them, so they can rebuild their friendships and support each other.

6 For those who are transitioning to a new school or college give opportunities to have "closure"*. For example, hold leaving events like proms, even if they have to be delayed.

7 Ensure that there is a place in school where they can access one-to-one support and raise their concerns.

8 Work with local partners to support them to access specialist mental health support when they need it.

9 Think about their whole family and consider the support the school can provide to families who may be struggling, financially or otherwise.

10 Know which pupils are vulnerable** and keep in contact with them to ensure they can get the support they need.

About
Barnardo's NI
& our Services

Barnardo's NI is Northern Ireland's largest children's charity. We work with approximately 12,000 children, young people and families annually across more than 40 different services and programmes. We believe that every child deserves the best possible start in life, and our service provision reflects that philosophy.

We are also a leading provider of schools-based support, reaching more than 25,000 children in schools across the UK and Ireland through our NI-managed social and emotional literacy programmes. We deliver a wide range of services across Northern Ireland, from providing family support and early intervention, to working directly with children and families who have experienced adversity and need our support. We have long promoted a 'whole school approach' to promoting wellbeing, which places the child at the centre.

12,000
We work with approximately 12,000 children, young people and families annually

40
Working across more than 40 different services and programmes

SCHOOL-BASED COUNSELLING SERVICES

Barnardo's NI School-based Counselling Services support pupils in primary, post-primary and special schools, both through delivery of the Independent Counselling Service for Schools and through our primary school counselling service Time 4 Me.

School-based counselling aims to promote the emotional wellbeing of pupils, thereby supporting their learning potential. Support includes: resilience building workshops, drop-in services, individual counselling, and parent and staff consultation and training.

# THE PATHS® PROGRAMME FOR SCHOOLS (UK/NI VERSION)

The PATHS® Programme is a universal schools programme for 4-11 year olds which empowers all children to develop the fundamental social and emotional learning skills which will enable them to make positive choices throughout life.

The _PATHS® Programme_ promotes positive mental health and emotional wellbeing in schools and is delivered through support from Barnardo's in primary schools across the UK.

PATHS™
The PATHS™ Programme for Schools (UK Version)
Promoting Alternative THinking Strategies

FAMILY LEARNING & INTEGRATION PROJECT (FLIP)
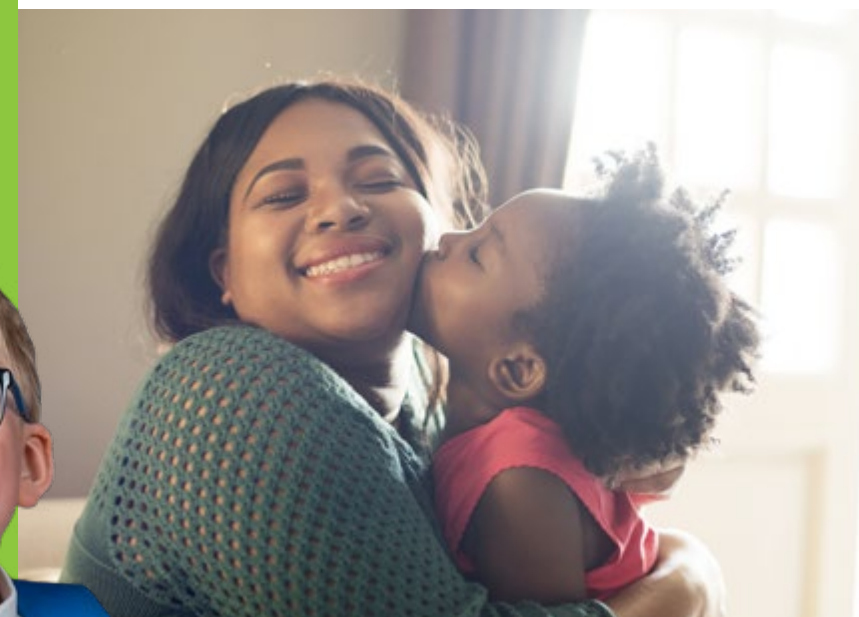
The Family Learning & Integration Project (FLIP) supports Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic parents with children aged 0-11 attending or planning to attend partner primary schools in South Belfast. Using holistic approaches, it builds the capacity of families to gain skills and become more confident members of their communities, whilst celebrating their own language and cultural heritage.

JIGSAW

Jigsaw is a family support service developed as part of the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme in South Ballymena. It aims to support children and families as they journey through primary school. The service addresses the barriers to educational achievement and aims to improve social, emotional and educational outcomes for children.

Jigsaw is delivered in three partner schools:
Harryville Primary,
Camphill Primary,
and Ballykeel Primary.

FAMILY CONNECTIONS

Family Connections offers a range of support services for children and families in schools and communities across South and East Belfast and Newtownabbey, including: early years play and learning, parenting programmes, transition support, family support, parent engagement, family learning and community links.

THRIVE

The Family Connections team also co-ordinates the THRiVE collaboration, a group of local parents, schools, community and voluntary organisations and statutory partners, working together to improve outcomes for children and young people. THRiVE's campaign 'WE CAN' promotes aspirational messages across the community, and local Parent Champions are active in engaging other parents.

THRiVE

LIFESKILLS

READY TO LEARN

Ready to Learn **is an evidence based after school programme for children.** The programme has a specific focus on nurturing children's literacy skills with the long term outcome of raising their achievement.

COLLECTIVE IMPACT

The Collective Impact Project works collaboratively with schools and other partners in North Belfast and Antrim to promote community resilience, achievement and family learning.

LifeSkills **is an effective evidence based prevention programme for children aged 8-14 within a school or community setting.** It promotes resilience through the development of emotional literacy, critical thinking, problem solving, healthy relationships and strategies to prevent risk taking behaviours. LifeSkills is a UK and Ireland wide programme.