

Hello

As part of Parenting Week 2020 (19th – 23rd October), Children in Northern Ireland has released the results of a survey we conducted to find out more about the impact lockdown and the continued restrictions have had on children and parents across the province since March.

The survey was carried out in two parts, the first during lockdown in May and June and the second as more restrictions were lifted during August and September, and was distributed via our networks including member organisations, the Children & Young People Strategic Partnership networks, Family Support Hubs and parents and carers directly from our database.

Of the 200 respondents, 93% expressed concern over their child's wellbeing and 91% about their child's future. 85% of parents surveyed are worried about their child's education and 79% are concerned over the behaviour experienced by their child.

86% of parents expressed concern about their finances with 62% worried about losing their jobs, this increased from 39% in the first survey. While 86% of those surveyed admitted that they have concerns regarding their own mental health with 52% of parents acknowledging that they are currently in a relationship which is causing them stress. The worry and anxiety of parents is further highlighted by statistics from CiNI's regional parenting helpline, Parentline NI, which received 2,430 calls and over 700 webchats from April to September.

If you would like further information on this or clarification please get in touch.

Kind regards

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Concerns of Parents during Covid-19 Lockdown

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Ellen Finlay, Policy Officer

About Children in Northern Ireland

Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) is the regional umbrella body for the children's sector in Northern Ireland.

CiNI represents the interests of its member organisations providing policy, information, training, participation support services as well as delivering the Regional Parenting Helpline "Parentine NI" which offers advice, guidance and support to parents throughout Northern Ireland

Covid-19 and Lockdown

Since the end of March 2020, the coronavirus (COVID-19) crisis has brought a lot of sudden changes for families with children. While parenting can be very rewarding, the sudden change in circumstances has been challenging with many parents feeling stressed as they try to balance work, childcare and self-care while dealing with an array of emotions and concerns, Children in Northern Ireland wanted to find out the current stressors and concerns of parents to assist Government in putting in place policies and services to help address these issues.

About the Survey

The first survey was promoted between 25th May 2020 and closed on 12th June 2020.

The second survey was launched on 27th August and closed on 30th September 2020.

It was distributed via the Children in Northern Ireland networks including member organisations, the Children & Young People Strategic Partnership networks, Family Support Hubs and parents and carers directly from our database.

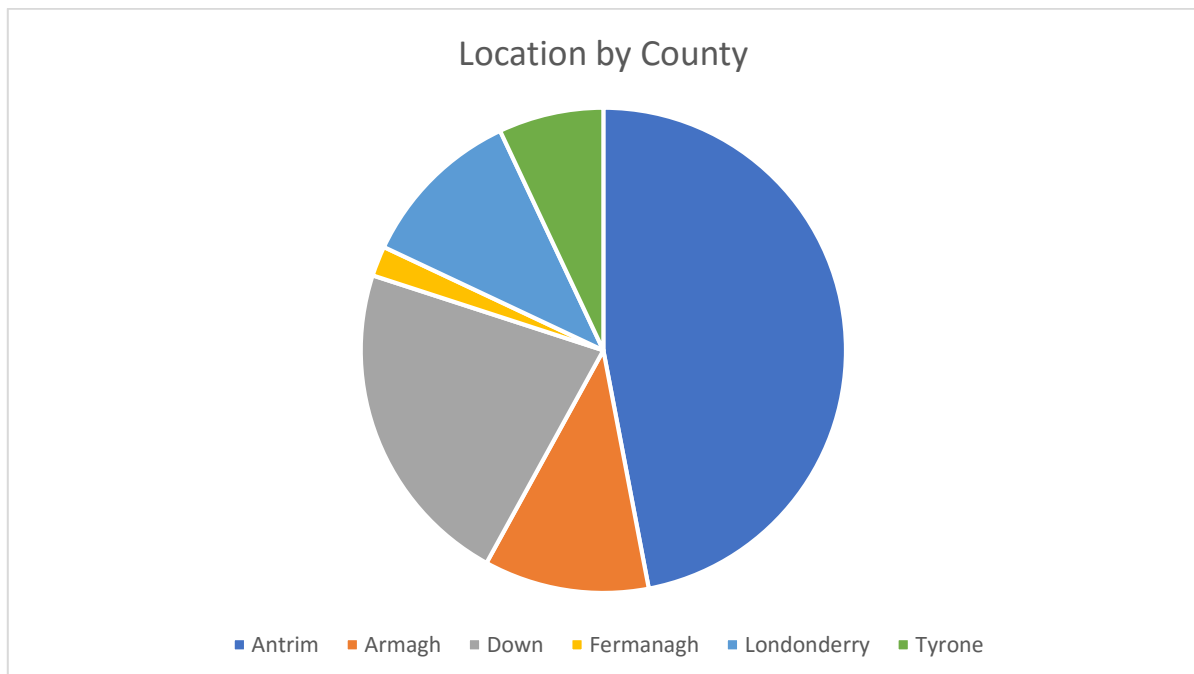
Findings

Number of Respondents & Demographics

We received a total of 201 responses to the survey with a 100% completion rate.

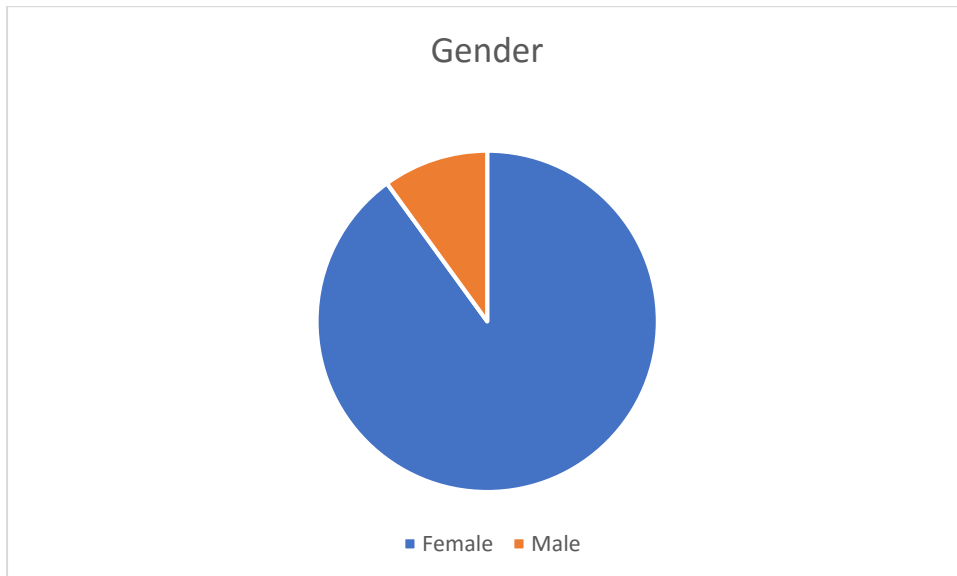
The breakdown by County was:

- 47% of responses from Co Antrim
- 22% responded from Co Down
- 11% from Co Londonderry/Derry
- 11% responded from Co Armagh
- 7% from Co Tyrone
- 2% from Co Fermanagh



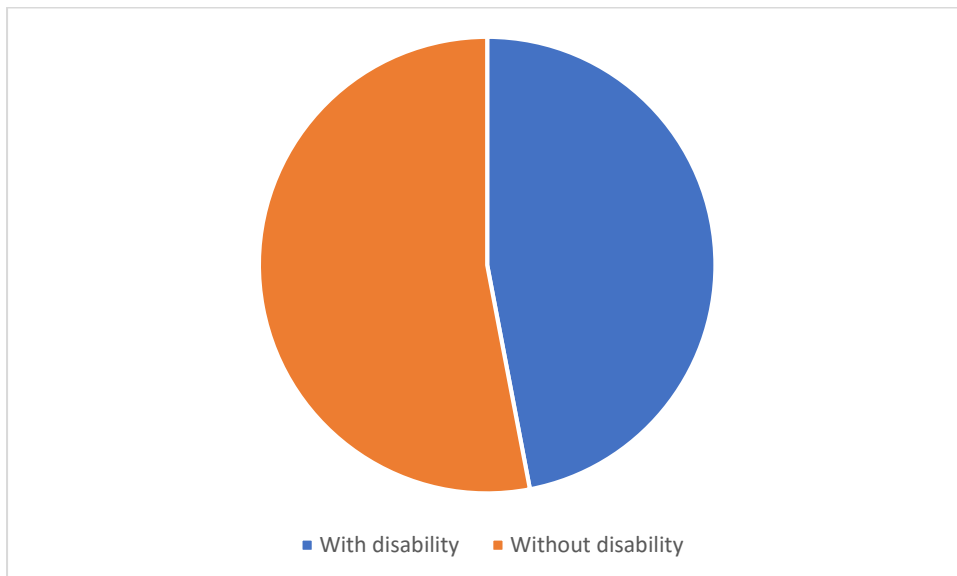
Gender

- 90% of respondents were from the mother in the family
- 10% were from the father within the family



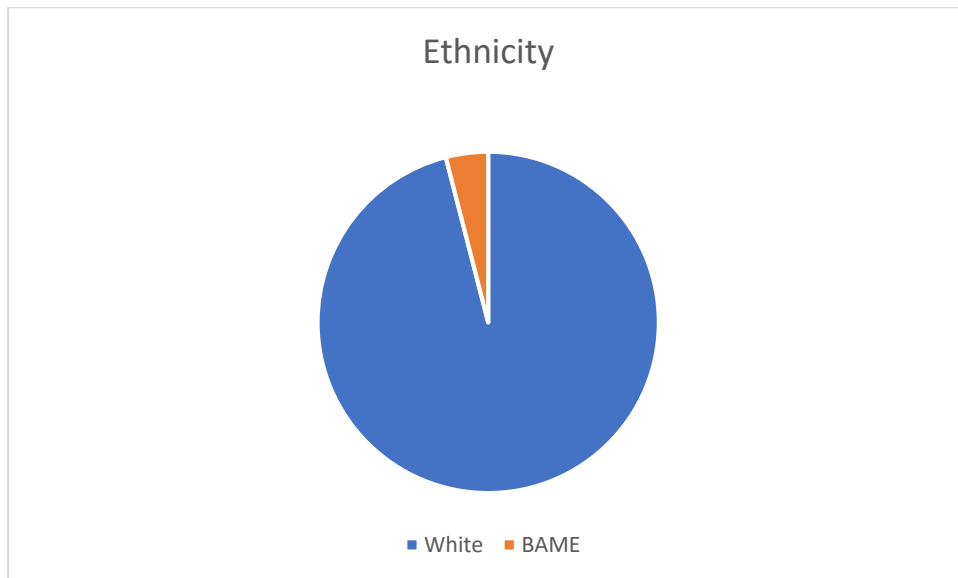
Children with Disabilities

- 42% of those who responded said their child(ren) had a disability



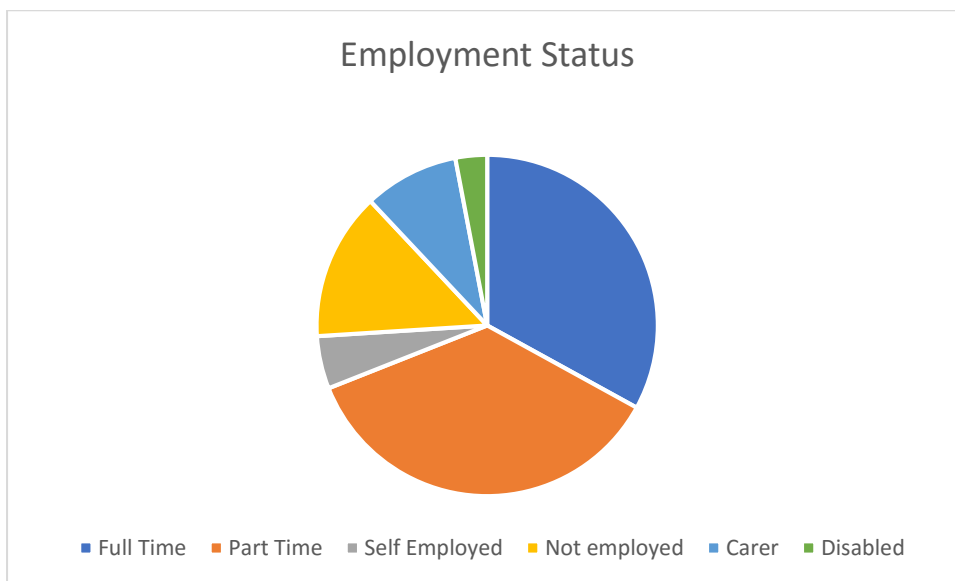
Ethnicity

- 96% of respondents were white
- 4% responded as BME (Chinese, Bangladeshi, Black African)



Employment Status

- 33% of respondents are employed full time
- 36% employed part time
- 14% not employed
- 5% self-employed
- 6% carer
- 3% disabled



Concerns & stresses of parents

This second survey was released shortly after the Covid-19 restrictions started to lift. Schools opened their doors again, life started to return to some sense of normality. Children in Northern Ireland wanted to compare the concerns and stresses of parents as these restrictions started to lift to ascertain if anything had changed.

The response to our survey follows. This offers an in-depth look at how parents are coping with life presently and whether the impact of restrictions is having a continued impact upon their life and the family unit.

The results of the survey are also reflected in the data from our Regional Parenting Helpline – Parentline NI.

Total number of calls to Parentline NI from April 2020 to September 2020: 2340

Total number of webchats from April to September: 724

Top 5 themes from parents throughout the pandemic have been:

Child Behaviour – parents experiencing challenging behaviour between the ages of 3-11 due to home schooling.

Low mood of child – increase in children's anxiety due to home schooling, lack of contact and communication with friends.

Separation and Contact - initially the guidance wasn't clear if children could travel between bubbles.

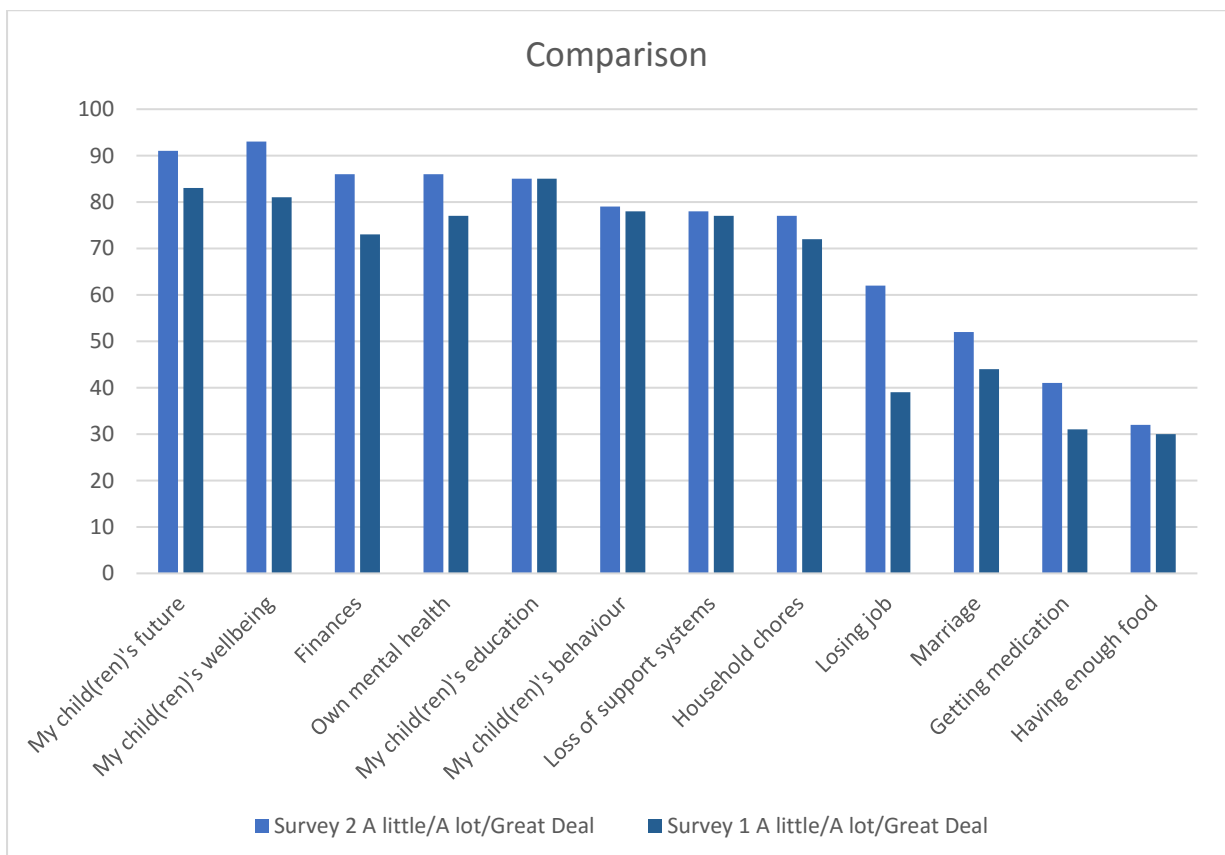
Teenage Behaviour – increase in parents finding their teenagers behaviour hard to manage. Including keeping them indoors and what to do if they breach the current restrictions.

Mental Health Parent- this links heavily to lack of childcare and over all self-care.

When asked about how stressed parents felt about different issues, they responded as follows:

	A little/A lot/Great Deal	Not at all
My child(ren)'s future	91	9
My child(ren)'s wellbeing	93	7
Finances	86	14
Own mental health	86	14
My child(ren)'s education	85	15
My child(ren)'s behaviour	79	21
Loss of support systems	78	22
Household chores	77	23
Losing job	62	38
Marriage	52	48
Getting medication	41	59
Having enough food	32	68

How does this differ from the first survey?



Overview

- 91% of parents are concerned about their child's future, an increase from 83% during June/July.
- 93% have a concern over their child's wellbeing, an increase from 81%.
- 86% of parents are now concerned about their finances, compared to 73% in June/July.
- 86% of parents have concerns regarding their own mental health, rising from 77%.
- 85% of parents still have concerns over their child's education, this remains unchanged from June.
- 79% of parents have a concern over the behaviour experienced by their child, a slight rise of 1% on the June response.
- 78% are still concerned over the loss of usual support systems, a 1% increase from June.
- 77% are stressed regarding household chores compared to 72% from the previous survey.
- 62% of parents are now concerned about losing their jobs, this is an increase from 39%.
- 52% of parents are in relationship which are causing stress, this is up from 44% in June.
- 41% have concerns regarding the availability of medication, an increase from 31%.
- 32% are now concerned about having enough food, an slight increase from 30%.

Children's Future & Education

The top stressor for parents with 91% of respondents saying they were a little stressed to greatly stressed was in relation to their child's future. 85% are stressed about their child's education, a percentage that remains static from the previous survey. Parents continue to be concerned about the learning loss of their children and what their future will look like.

"I worry constantly about my son's education and future. He has finally got in to a school that is so kind and supportive of his needs and encouraging but I am worried. Three months of home-schooling was horrendous and difficult to keep him focused. If schools close again I have to try and teach him while trying to work myself. I know I won't cope."

"My child will have no chance if home schooling continues. My 8 year old was in school for 4 days when someone in his class tested positive. 14 day isolation and homeschooling. I absolutely dread the thought of this winter."

"My worry is mainly related to the provision of SEN in terms of protecting them in mainstream settings. This makes me anxious and I worry that my son could be infected."

Children's Well-being & Mental Health

Parents who responded to the survey were concerned about their child's mental health and wellbeing with 93% saying they are a little or a great deal stressed about this issue, this is an increase from 81%.

Our Regional Parent Helpline – Parentline NI – continues to see a rise in calls from parents about this issue.

“I have a teenager with behaviour difficulties threatening suicide. Very difficult to live with. There is very little if any support or practical help now.”

“My twin sister has lost everything due to depression and I'm worried for her wellbeing, her kids and the people she is involved with. It puts a lot of pressure on me also as I don't want to lose anyone else.”

Parents are worried about the financial impact

The 2018/19 figures from the Northern Ireland Poverty Bulletin suggest that 16% of individuals were in absolute poverty, representing approximately 303,000 individuals. This is an increase on the 2017/18 estimate of 14%. This is a statistically significant increase. 21% of children were in absolute poverty, representing approximately 92,000 children. This is an increase on the 2017/18 estimate of 16%. This is a statistically significant increase. Our first survey showed that 73% of parents were concerned about finances that has now risen to 86% being worried about their financial situation.

The economic and financial impact of Covid-19 is likely to see a whole new level of poverty and related issues especially for those parents who are already vulnerable or struggling financially.

“I’m expecting my third child and the fact that I don’t get any help now with a 3rd child financially terrifies me.”

“Lock down took away so many services and as a single parent it has been awful as I’ve little money to get food. It’s not in nature to ask for help so I’ve closed myself off more.”

“Worried about partner’s mental health and employment more so than my own. Worried about changes to benefit system and being transferred over to Universal Credit which would result in a significant loss of income.”

“All the new strange rules that the school has brought about is stressing me out and all the things we have to send it is costing me a fortune.”

“After being made redundant, I’m worried about finding another job.”

Parent's Mental Health

A total of 86% of parents who responded to the survey said they were stressed about their own mental health. That is an increase from 77% from the previous survey.

The mental health of parents has been adversely affected by the lockdown and the subsequent problems associated with opening up services. This concern may well be over and above any pre-existing mental health problems. The problems associated with the mental health of parents illustrates how the pandemic and lockdowns has amplified existing inequalities.

Changes to the mental health and wellbeing of parents can sometimes affect the health and wellbeing of their children. They may pick up on a parent's anxiety or low mood. It is therefore important that parental mental health is considered.

It is also extremely important that the community and voluntary sector continue to be facilitated /trained to understand the impact of mental health on families and to recognise the need to promote the and implement the Think Family Strategy particularly through the continued funding of The Family Model training for the sector.

“Lockdown was the hardest situation I have ever had to face. My husband worked through the pandemic and it was hard. I was broken several times. Society closed the doors on our kids, especially those with disabilities. The lack of support was stressful. I have never been as grateful to have children back at school. However, I worry about having to isolate if kids come in contact with someone infected.”

“As a disabled mother of 4 children with special needs life is very, very tough.”

“Uncertainty is the worst feeling in my opinion.”

“As a single working parent it’s very difficult and worrying. I’ve already had to self isolate due to case in child’s nursery and school. I have been unwell.”

“As a single parent with 2 kids, one of whom we were shielding during lockdown. Kids did seem to adapt well but it’s very isolating for me.”

“I have attended GP for physical symptoms which I suspect may be emotionally/psychologically associated, mostly due to Covid situation.”

“If the situation was to change again and childcare became unavailable it would be very difficult for me to continue to work from home and manage my emotional and physical well-being while caring for our child.”

“I’ve been feeling anxious lately, worried about things getting worse and sometimes I can’t sleep. I feel terrible.”

“My biggest concern is that working parents are not well supported. The pandemic exposed horrific inequalities in society. I’m left angry and totally exhausted.”

Loss of Support Systems

The loss of support systems remains a constant worry for parents with 78% saying they have stressed about this over the past week. While some support systems started up again, there are some parents who are yet to receive the same level of support provided before lockdown.

“My children who have disabilities are being forgotten or treated with disdain. The emotional cost to me is catastrophic but again, will probably be ignored.”

“Nothing really opened up for us again. I’ve no help. My therapy was cancelled and I have no family, no money coming in. Not one minute to breathe. Child has been good but now I see her behaviour change.”

“The lack of support from the health system with illnesses outside Covid is awful. I understand the pressure the system is under but I would hope to be able to see the normal epilepsy specialists for my daughter.”

“My daughter is on an urgent list to see many consultants, this has been put on hold due to Covid. Meanwhile she is housebound and ill. I have had to pay £900 just to see some of these consultants privately.”

Concerns over marriage or romantic relationships

It is worth noting that 52% of parents are concerned about their relationships. That is a rise of 8% from our previous survey. What is clear is that the strain of negotiating relationships during this pandemic is adding to the strains within family relationships.

“Additional pressure on family as husband’s illness has worsened during lockdown.”

“This is a tough time and it’s tough on our relationship.”

“Concerned about the division of labour within the family, it has been very unequal in recent times with me doing the majority of the work as my work is viewed as more flexible.”

Conclusion

Concerns from parents during lockdown and subsequent easing of restrictions continues to raise many issues. Issues that continue to be exacerbated by a lack of return to normal life or support services.

Our Regional Parenting Helpline Parentline NI and our policy work continues to bring us in to contact with parents, each sharing heart-breaking stories and gaping flaws in policy issues and services.

This survey shows that parents continue to struggle – even as services eased. Government must do more to address these gaping flaws in recent policy decisions to ensure that families, children and young people fully recover from the crises.

