1. Title

Children researching their everyday lives, education & relationships during the coronavirus pandemic (CHEER) by Professor Helen Lomax and Dr Kate Smith, University of Huddersfield.

2. About the authors of the submission

Helen Lomax is Professor of Childhood Studies in the School of Education and Professional Development and Dr Kate Smith is a Senior Research Fellow in Child and Family Wellbeing in the School of Human and Heath Sciences. They developed the Corona Chronicles research project where children living in some of the most disadvantages wards in the UK chronicled their everyday lives, education and relationships during the coronavirus pandemic (CHEER).

3. Summary of submission evidence

This submission provides evidence from our longitudinal research with children aged 9-11, **including disadvantaged and vulnerable children,** about what is supportive of their menta**l health outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education.** The evidence on which this submission draws is an area of which there are almost no comparable studies that include the demographic (children, including disadvantaged and vulnerable children), age (aged 9-10), geographic area (primary schools in the North of England) and participatory qualitative methods.

Using participatory art-based research to 'chronicle' children's lived experiences during lockdown, as well as taking part in one-to-one in-depth photo-elicitation interviews, we researched with 16 children from the start of lockdown to date. Drawing on a dataset of seven data points that include over 100 visual and textual data and 20 hours of in-depth photo elicitation interviews with children aged 9-11, this submission also builds on our earlier submission of evidence to the Education Select Committee – September 2020 (ref KTC729667).

Children included in the research:

Children who are disadvantaged and vulnerable are included in the sample. This includes children who are disadvantaged economically, for example children who are in receipt of or are eligible for free school meals during the pandemic, and children living in families who are in receipt of low-income benefits/Tax Credits. Our sample also includes children who have been in the care of their local authority and have either lived with foster parents or are children who cannot be brought up within their birth family and have become full, permanent, and legal members of a new family. Children who are vulnerable are also included, for example those growing up with adversities that

could affect their lives, wellbeing and life chances, and are likely to be more at risk under lockdown (Andrew et. al., 2020; Armitage and Nellums, 2020). Children with special educational needs are also included, such as children whose needs and abilities affect their ability to learn and where their behaviour or ability to socialise, means, for example, they struggle to make friends. Some children's reading and writing is also affected, for example because they have dyslexia, and some of the children have difficulties with their concentration levels.

The findings:

The findings are organised around the following five areas which children told us were important – Children's voice, Relationships, Learning, Access to the outdoors, and Inequality.

3.1 Children's voices

'Confused' By Gemma

Children are experts in their own lives (UNCRC, 1989) and have a right to express their views about what is supportive of their mental and physical wellbeing during school closure outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education (Rowland and Cook, 2020). Children had clear ideas about what supports their wellbeing and expressed concern about the ways in which they have not been directly addressed or listened to during the pandemic. For example, children reported feeling anxious when required to self-isolate because of local outbreaks and not knowing why.

As the pandemic has continued, children report feeling increasingly anxious, uncertain and confused. Being able to communicate their own stories and share child-led messages about the impact of the pandemic was important to some children:

> *"Like when you look on the news, its mainly… scientists' ideas or big people ideas and I would want that to be a tiny bit more of what the children want to see. Like one percent or something should be what children want to see and that would make children happy"*
> *(Oscar[1]).*

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[1] These are pseudonyms and the team are currently working with the children to identify pseudonyms of their choice

3.2 Relationships

Children valued time spent with families they lived with during the first national lockdown and school closure. They cherished time to play board games, bake, eat lunch with their families and, particularly the opportunity to spend times with both parents (but not all children lived with both parents - **see 3.5 below**) for example with fathers who they recounted helping with bed-time routines (bath and story-time) for younger siblings when ordinarily these dads would still be at work prior to this period of national lockdown.

> *"… we couldn't go anywhere. Like on a night, usually like sometimes we go for sleepovers and stuff like that. But we couldn't do that in lockdown. So instead we started playing board game competitions and stuff like that" (Gemma).*

Gardening, walking and cycling were all important ways that children spent time with family members they lived with which made them feel happy.

As the pandemic has continued, children report feeling more anxious about their families. This is exacerbated for children in this sample who have been in more or less continuous lockdown (tier 3 and periods of school closure and self-isolation due to cases of Covid). So, while during the first lockdown children displayed great humour and resolve (making picnics and high tea to distribute and share with shielding grandparents, throwing a grandad's favourite chocolates through an open window to maintain social distancing) this has been displaced with an increasing sense of anxiety and concern about the impact of the pandemic on family members, particularly vulnerable and socially isolated older adults who don't live in the family home:

> *"My brother, I think I'm mostly worried about at the minute because if I get Coronavirus and give it to him, he's going to be very vulnerable because he doesn't have a very big immune system" (Colin)*

Quality time with family members also included using social media *as a family* to connect with individuals and family groups outside the immediate household. For example, playing Bingo with extended family to mark birthdays and celebrations. Sources of support which made children feel connected to others and to manage their feelings of isolation and anxiety also included time caring for pets – their own and other non-resident family members (e.g. grandparents' dogs, rabbits and guinea pigs).

Friendships with other children were maintained through access to mobile phones, social media platforms and games consoles (Xbox, PlayStation etc.), but not all children had these (- **see 3.5 below**).

> "… one thing I missed was seeing my family (and) friends because they are always happy and I enjoy being with them … I was allowed to go on my Xbox and I would speak to them there and that was good because I don't know what I would do without speaking to my friends for six months " (Oscar).

Being able to connect with friends in this way was an important source of reassurance for children before they returned to school in September 2020 and experienced tier 3 restrictions, the second national lockdown and periodic school closures (year group/ key stage) due to local outbreaks of the virus. As lockdown has continued, some children report feeling very concerned about the wellbeing of their parent/guardian - a particular concern about mothers, who were home-schooling self-isolating children whilst also working and managing the home. Christmas was a particular concern for children as they look towards the future. Children worry that they will not be able to see their family members:

> "Worried about Christmas and not being able to be with my family… worried that because of this current lockdown, presents won't be available until January… Just looking forward to getting out of this lockdown" (Conner).

3.3 Learning

Children were initially pleased to be learning from home during the first national lockdown and shared examples of their school-led and wider learning and what resources supported this. They described how schoolwork was made accessible by their teachers and a variety of self-directed learning (including reading a range of fiction and non-fiction) as well as resources they had at home to support this ('the craft drawer'; access to IT) which enabled them to craft, develop digital skills, cook, garden and take care of nature. Some children were concerned that the lockdown and closure of school has had a negative impact on their school learning. One child described becoming overwhelmed by his initial attempts to emulate a full school day of lessons at home, a situation which he resolved after following advice from his close friend about how to balance study with leisure activities.

Most children continued to receive their schooling through online platforms, facilitated by the school. Use of Zoom, Class Dojo and WhatsApp groups helped with this, children preferring live

online lessons with their class teacher. Contact with other children during school closure was a vital source of support – for example as the previous example about how to manage study at home. For some children, the class WhatsApp group established during the first national lockdown is a continued important source of support (for example, help with remote learning, to find out 'what's going on' and to deal with anxiety when school closed due to local outbreak). Key concerns about school closure relate to a lack of socialisation and contact with their school friends and other children – children missed the learning they get from spending time studying with, playing and talking with their friends in school.

Children had different levels of parental support, one child (of a family of three siblings) reporting that mum set up the dining room as a classroom from day one of school closure, spending time supporting each child every morning of the school week during term time.

> *"Well my mum's a teacher, so she kind of turned the dining room into a classroom"*
> *(Gemma).*

Other children struggled with the levels of support parents could offer and sustain. Children managed school work best by doing set work in the mornings using the resources sent by schools and then doing non-school activities (playing with siblings, craft, baking, going for walks, connecting with friends online) in the afternoon.

Home education online started well for some children during lockdown, but learning, concentration and enthusiasm waned over time with children anxious that they had forgotten key skills – e.g. in maths.

Children also reported missing extracurricular clubs and afterschool activities (e.g. Girl Guides, football) which, in some cases, opened briefly in September only to be quickly closed as the region entered tiered restrictions. Some clubs did offer online meetings and children valued the opportunity to continue music lessons and attend clubs virtually. However, overwhelmingly children missed their clubs and club leaders and their friends. Thinking about returning to school after lockdown was a source of anxiety.

> *"I was very nervous to come back to school and seeing everyone" (Molly)*

Before returning to school in September, children were concerned that they would make mistakes with the rules, get in to trouble, make teachers angry, upset other pupils.

3.4 Access to the outdoors

Children valued access to green space and connections to nature and resources that support their physical activity and mental wellbeing. They described spending time outside in their gardens (those who had access to a garden) and going on family walks to the park, local beauty spots, woodlands and reservoirs.

> "… we went out quite a bit. We mostly went to the park and just went for a run around kind of and just played some games while we were walking.. and then other times we went through the woods, that we live right next to" (Daisy).

For some children, proximity to outdoor spaces enabled them to go cycling, scootering and to walk their own or family dogs. Connections to nature had a positive effect on children's mental health and wellbeing, seeing wild native animals and birds made many children feel happy. Children enjoyed trips to local parks where they fed and photographed ducklings and cygnets born in the spring as first lockdown eased. Some children had a parent/parents who had started growing vegetables and planting flowers with them; plants for pollinating insects was vitally important to children.

> "… we do things like we'd run around and our swing is a bit off limits right now, because we, it (be)came like a wildflower meadow … we'd have to take out all the moss which is in our garden and then we'd have to put the seeds in" (Betty).

3.4 Inequality

Disadvantages and access to material resources follow the social gradient (OECD, 2020). What children find supportive of their mental health outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education is contingent on the familiar and material resources available to them. Some of the most disadvantaged households and children who were most vulnerable to adversities had access to the least material resources. These inequalities undermined their mental health and wellbeing, which was compounded over time with the second lockdown. Education and learning was regarded by many of the children as having the potential to improve their lives and therefore the lockdown and school closure raised anxiety:

> *"When the schools closed… we tried to do home learning, but it was really hard for me and my younger brother. So we, we'd never really do it. So we did it for the first couple of days, then it got too much and we couldn't do it anymore. It was difficult because*

normally a teacher would be there and ..I'd have my classmates to be there with me to get through it with" (Betty).

The quality of the relationships that surround children are important to them, but this requires time (parent/guardian at home when the child is at home), resources (technology, board games) and space (home, garden, park, open space to walk/ play out). Access to green space, learning resources, and parental time (for example when a parent is fulfilling a keyworker role) varied widely with corresponding impacts on children's opportunities for learning and wellbeing.

Loneliness and isolation increased for many children during the pandemic over time as they have been cut off from friends and family. Some of the children's own tech could not be updated or was broken, and there was a disparity between who in the family had access to resources, which made learning and contact with others a challenge.

> "… we can't do that kind of stuff, that's just going to drain the account and I don't have much pocket money you know" (Colin).

Children were acutely aware that other children in their peer networks did not have equality of access to the technology needed to stay in touch with their friends.

> "… if no technology in their house, no, erm, if broken or the person that you want to face-time doesn't have a phone, so they can't speak to you, so that would be difficult" (Oscar).

The increase in loneliness for children is more apparent in the most disadvantaged households and where there are vulnerable family members (for example siblings with disabilities and/or grandparents).

4. Body of evidence

The evidence presented responds to the following areas requested by the Select Committee:

Support for pupils and families during closures, including:

- **Children's and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education.**
- **The effect on disadvantaged groups,** including the Department's approach to free school meals **and the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups (such as pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and children in need)**

4.1 Scope of the evidence

The evidence is drawn from phase 1-2 of our longitudinal research undertaken with children aged 9-11 (year 5-6) attending primary schools, including in disadvantaged localities in Yorkshire and Humber.

4.2 The research has three phases:
- **Phase 1** (July-August, 2020) Children used arts-based methods to chronicle their experiences of school closure and pandemic (complete and included here).
- **Phase 2** (Oct.- Nov. 2020) Photo-elicitation interviews with 16 children (complete and included here).
- **Phase 3** (Dec-March 2021) Art workshops in which children are generating key messages for parents, teachers and policy-makers about what has supported them and what has challenged their mental and physical health and learning is underway and will be shared using digital animation. Evidence is forthcoming and not included in this submission.

4.3 Phase 1 and 2 activity and data

During phase 1, 16 children (aged 9-10) researched with us, at a distance, using creative visual arts (animation, collage, comic strips, drawing, craft, model-making, digital photography, video and filmmaking) to 'chronicle' their experiences over a period of six weeks in England. During phase 2, the same 16 children (now aged 10-11) took part in in-depth photo-elicitation interviews.

4.4 Data-set

The data set comprises children's week-by-week reflections on: Things they had noticed, their relationships, learning, physical activity, the environment and 'giving' as important dimensions of wellbeing (The Children's Society, 2014; NHS). It consists of :
- Visual and textual data from children about what they experienced as supportive of their learning and wellbeing during school closure and pandemic.
- Photo elicitation interviews with children about their lived experiences of school closure, what supports their education and what resources they were able to draw upon (material, familial, personal) to support their learning and wellbeing during the pandemic.

5. Summary and some solutions

Children are experts in their own lives (UNCRC, 1989) and have a right to express their views about what is supportive of their menta**l health outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education**.

5.1 Involve and include children

Children need to be consulted about their mental health using methods appropriate to them. Schools and services need to create opportunities for children to express their views and be listened to during the pandemic so they can communicate their stories and messages to adults and other children. Methods for involving and including children in times of global crisis, for example through safe, online spaces, can serve to facilitate conversations between adults (researchers, policy-makers) so that children's voices can be included in policies designed to support their learning and wellbeing.

5.2 What children find supportive of their mental health is contingent on the familiar and material resources available to them.

Access to outdoor space and time with animals and wildlife, learning resources and parental time varies across childhood and follows the social gradient. Consultation with children, including those living with disadvantage is essential in order to understand and address these inequalities and their impacts on children's learning and wellbeing in the short and longer term.

5.3 Methods for involving and including children

In times of global crisis, creating safe, online spaces can serve to facilitate conversations between adults (researchers, policy-makers) so that children's voices can be included in policies designed to support their learning and wellbeing.

5.4 Addressing 'learning loss' for disadvantaged children

Children **outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education** feel better with live and online chat lessons with their teacher. Technology and access to technology is important for children's learning, as well as supporting their interaction with other pupils. Internet-enabled devices help access to online learning. Use of zoom, class dojo, online lessons and WhatsApp groups helped with wellbeing and learning.

5.5 Access to non-curriculum learning opportunities

After school clubs, special interest clubs, music, art and creative activities, **outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education**, play a vital part of children's mental health and wellbeing, and are a source of support.

5.6 Addressing long term negative impacts on disadvantaged children

Spending quality time with family members they live with is supportive of children's menta**l health outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education.** Access to social media to connect with individual and family groups outside the immediate household, as well as access to online platforms to connect with their friends, can reduce isolation and support children's wellbeing.

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