Home becomes School Survey

How did Central Bedfordshire cope?

Results

JULY 2020

Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire
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The Survey

Introduction

During the lockdown period, Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire conducted an anonymous survey to allow school children in the local area to voice their thoughts and opinions on how their schools had reacted to the Covid-19 crisis. The survey focused on schoolwork that was being set during lockdown, how the students felt they were coping and whether they thought they were receiving enough support. In total, 32 responses were received, and they provide a useful insight into the successes and failures of the education system's response to Covid-19 in Central Bedfordshire.

Question One

"How many hours a day are you spending on schoolwork?"

Hours Spent on Schoolwork

- 4 to 6
- 6 to 8
- 8 to 10

3%

25%

72%
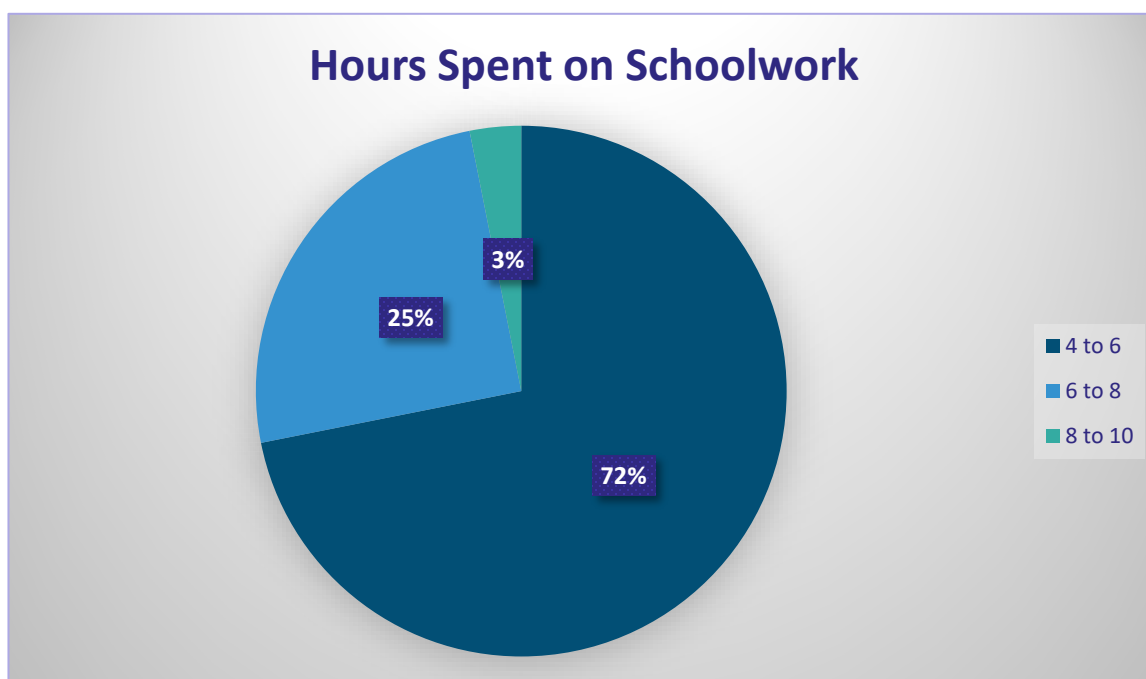
Thankfully, the vast majority of students told us that they spent 4 – 6 hours on schoolwork. Most schools around the country average at approximately 6-hour days, and so we would expect students to be spending no more than 6 hours on schoolwork during lockdown. It is very encouraging to see that pupils in Central Bedfordshire are still receiving full-time education during such a difficult time for students and teachers alike.

What is less encouraging however, is the quarter of students spending 6 – 8 hours on schoolwork. During a normal school day, students would not be spending all 6 hours of the day working – there would be breaks and chances for social interaction. When working from home however, students are confined to the house and so there is no chance for social interaction and teachers cannot be sure that students are having enough time to take a break and relax. Therefore, it is worrying that a quarter of pupils are spending more time on schoolwork than they usually would. This can have serious negative impacts on mental and physical health, as students are working from a computer all day in isolated environments.

The lack of social interaction from friends, teachers and often parents whilst completing schoolwork can have serious effects on mental health. Pupils may become depressed or anxious about completing schoolwork, whilst separation from friends may cause them to feel sad and lonely.

Also, prolonged screen time can have severe effects on physical health. A number of clinical studies have proven that there is a dangerous relationship between screen-time and obesity, and so it is vital that students should spend as much time away from their computers as possible. Clearly, a reduction of schoolwork can solve this issue – an issue made all the more important by the fact that obesity has been proven to increase Covid-19 mortality rates. Extended use of computers can also cause vision damage and Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI).

3% of students spent 8 – 10 hours every day on schoolwork. This equates to one of our responders and so is unlikely to be a fault of the respective school and should be considered as an individual case.

Question Two

"Please rate the following statements."

Rated Statements
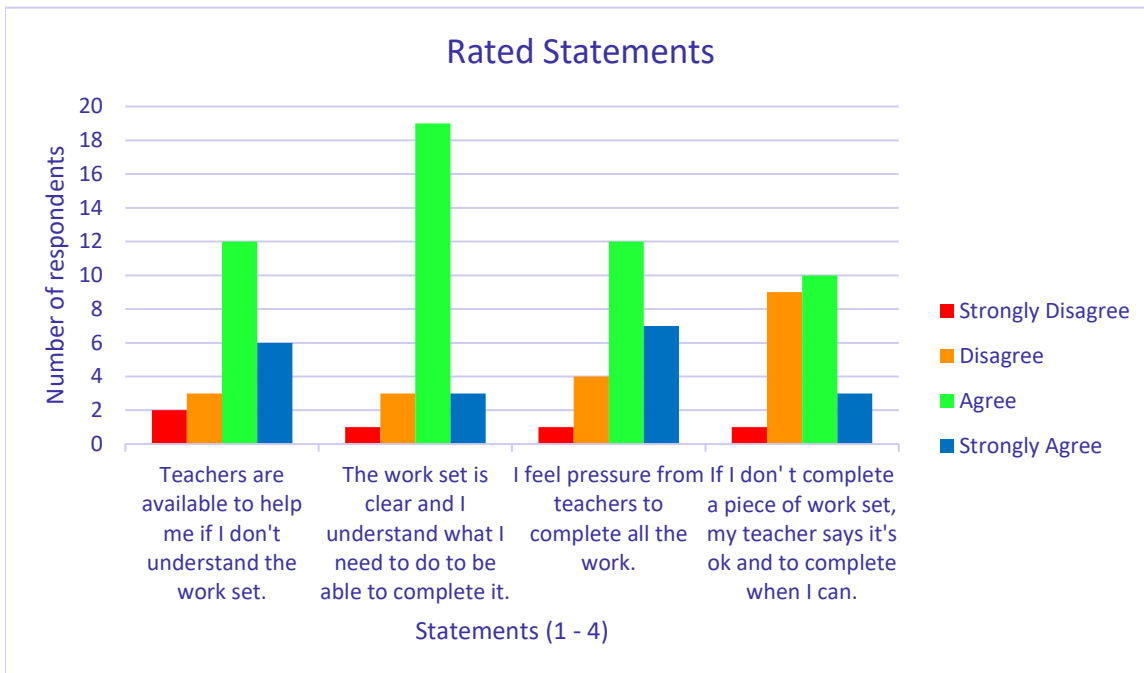
The 'neither agree nor disagree' option has been omitted in the following data to provide clarity.

Statement 1: Teachers are available to help me if I don't understand the work set.

This statement has yielded some positive results with the majority of students agreeing that teachers are available to help. This is an excellent achievement, considering the technical difficulties faced by teachers.

Statement 2: The work set is clear and I understand what I need to do to be able to complete it.

This results from this statement also show that teachers are providing support and clarity. However, it should be noted that understanding what to do is different to being comfortable with doing it.

Statement 3: I feel pressure from teachers to complete all the work.
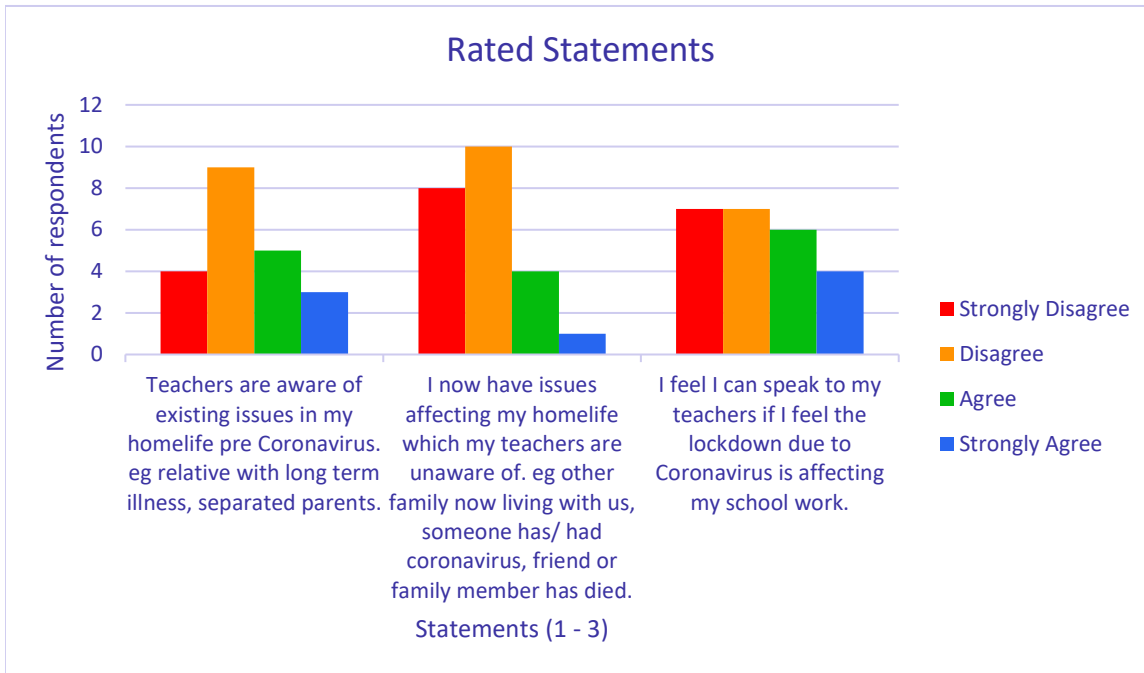
This statement has identified a serious issue that has been created during remote learning. It is extremely concerning to see quite clearly that the majority of respondents either agree or strongly agree with the statement. Pressure is a normal and arguably useful part of school life, but the abnormal levels seen from the responses to this statement is extremely unhealthy. This is an area that definitely needs reviewing should a crisis like this occur again.

Statement 4: If I don't complete a piece of work set, my teacher says it's OK and to complete when I can.

The result from this statement are varied and so don't result in a clear conclusion. We can see that most respondents agreed with the statement, but an almost equal amount disagreed. One could say that the results are therefore inconclusive, but the fact that half of the students disagree is still a problem that needs addressing. All students should feel comfortable working at their own pace and ability, however the results from this statement suggest that that is not the case.

Question 3

"Please rate the following statements."

Rated Statements

Chart: "Rated Statements"

Y-axis: Number of respondents (0–12)
X-axis: Statements (1 - 3)

Statement 1: Teachers are aware of existing issues in my homelife pre Coronavirus. eg relative with long term illness, separated parents.
- Strongly Disagree: 4
- Disagree: 9
- Agree: 5
- Strongly Agree: 3

Statement 2: I now have issues affecting my homelife which my teachers are unaware of. eg other family now living with us, someone has/ had coronavirus, friend or family member has died.
- Strongly Disagree: 8
- Disagree: 10
- Agree: 4
- Strongly Agree: 1

Statement 3: I feel I can speak to my teachers if I feel the lockdown due to Coronavirus is affecting my school work.
- Strongly Disagree: 7
- Disagree: 7
- Agree: 6
- Strongly Agree: 4

Legend:
- Strongly Disagree (red)
- Disagree (orange)
- Agree (green)
- Strongly Agree (blue)

Statement 1: Teachers are aware of existing issues in my homelife pre Coronavirus e.g. relative with long term illness, separated parents.

It is concerning to see that a significantly large proportion of respondents disagree with the statement. It is important to note that the 'neither agree nor disagree' option has been omitted in this dataset as the statements do not apply to all respondents, and so inclusion would only serve to dilute the accuracy and clarity of the data, therefore hindering our ability to reach a clear and accurate conclusion. With this in mind, the graph makes it quite clear that, for those students to whom it applies, teachers have – in the majority of instances – failed to recognise existing issues in students' homelife. Being an important problem normally, the Covid-19 outbreak will only have exacerbated the issues students face at home (as more time is being spent there), and so it is vital that a solution is found to mitigate these difficulties should we face the same experience again. It is paramount that pupils do not feel alone, vulnerable and unnoticed when working from home.

Statement 2: I now have issues affecting my homelife that my teachers are unaware of e.g. other family now living with us, someone has/had coronavirus, friend or family member has died.

A disagreement with this statement represents a positive result, and so we can see from the graph that most respondents do not have issues which teachers are not aware of. This could however mean two things: either students do not have any extra issues, or teachers are aware of any issues they might have. Considering the shortcomings exposed in Statement 1, it is therefore logical to conclude that the former must be the more likely of explanations. This is a welcome result but, as this report is centred around the education system, it is unnecessary to delve any deeper into the implications of this.

Statement 3: I feel I can speak to my teachers if I feel the lockdown, due to coronavirus, is affecting my school work.

The results from the final statement do seem, at first glance, inconclusive. However, we can see that more respondents disagree than agree with the statement, and so this raises questions about the availability of teachers and the ease at which they can be contacted. This could be a technical problem and is certainly something that needs to be looked and addressed so that students can ask for help and support when they need it.

Question 4

"Do you feel you were/are supported by your school in relation to resources?"

Yes/No

Legend:
- Yes (green)
- No (red)
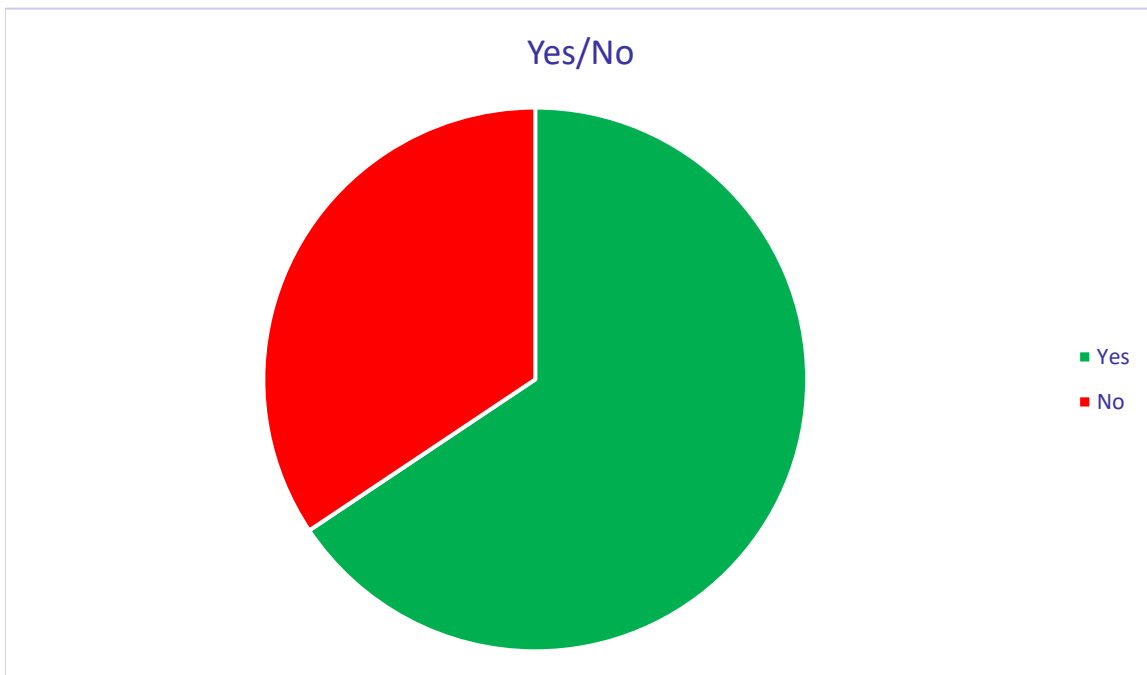
The chart clearly represents a very encouraging result – most students feel they were supported by their respective schools. $\frac{1}{3}$ of respondents still felt that they were not supported. The entire survey was entirely anonymous however comments were allowed to be left for this question:

Comment	School
"I haven't found a need to ask for this kind of extra support"	Samuel Whitbread Academy
"I do feel like I am supported to complete my work I have a laptop where I can access show my homework and can complete the work that is attached."	Manshead Academy
"Even if you do have a printer and laptop there is no support in solving small technical issues."	Samuel Whitbread Academy
"Haven't need extra resources so I'm not sure"	Harlington Upper School
"People who didn't have computers were allowed to borrow school computers before it closed."	Bedford Modern School
"School have given me a computer"	Queensbury Academy
"At the beginning it was terrible but it's slightly better now."	Queensbury academy
"The school printed off some of the work for me."	Queensbury academy

It can be seen that the majority of students were already well-supplied with resources, but for those who weren't, critical resources (such as computers) were supplied by the schools. There seem to be conflicting opinions about the performance of *Queensbury Academy* but on the whole the comments seem to be positive. The 3rd comment raises an interesting point about technical issues with the way lessons are held – it seems the format of lessons needs to be carefully considered and prepared for, should we find ourselves in a situation like this again.

Question 5

Further Comments

Comment 1

"My general thought is that although teachers are being supportive, they are setting way too much and not informing us on important info. which we need to know."

- **Samuel Whitbread Academy**

This comment builds upon what was discovered in Question One. This validates the fact that students are spending too much time in front of a computer screen and are feeling anxious about completing work. This can lead to a variety of issues, as has already been explained. The respondent is also concerned about not being informed on 'important info.'. The student doesn't specify what this information is, but it does touch on a broader topic of the clarity and usefulness of schools' messages and information. The student may feel frustrated at the apparent lack of information from schools, such as when schools might return, and what classes will look like in the future.

Comment 2

"I feel they set too much. There don't seem to realise that other teachers are setting lots of work as well. I feel it piles up and I spend my weekends trying to catchup."

- **Samuel Whitbread Academy**

This comment is yet another comment about the amount of schoolwork being set. It is very worrying that this student is spending weekends catching up: the need for relaxation, fresh air and (if possible) socialising is so important during lockdown. Constantly working can put serious strains on physical and mental health (see Question One). The student also notes that teachers don't realise what their colleagues are doing. This highlights what seems to be a lack of communication between teaching staff themselves, something that could be a significant problem.

Comment 3

"I think the teachers need to be clearer on what is happening and to actually give advice on the work. Some teachers are failing to mark the work."

- **Queensbury academy**

This comment underlines communication issues between students and staff. This could be a technical issue, but it is also a similar problem to Comment 1: schools are not being clear about what is happening. Considering the two pupils were from different schools, it is fair to say that this problem isn't limited to just one school. Of course, it is wrong that teachers aren't marking work, and is something that should be picked up by Queensbury Academy.

Comment 4

"Every teacher sets multiple pieces of homework and they seem to not realise that we have other classes to do work for. It gets very overwhelming sometimes and some teachers don't understand that"

- **Redborne Upper School**

This comment is similar to Comment 2. There is a recurring theme across different schools that too much work is being set, and that it is 'overwhelming' (again, see Question One). This is obviously something that needs close attention should something like this happen again.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the survey that has been conducted has raised many important issues. Perhaps most important, is the amount of work being set by teachers which can have serious implications for mental and physical health (see Question One).

Another issue that has been raised is that of communication. The fact that it can be seen across many schools makes it doubtful that it is a technology issue, there has clearly been a problem in all schools about communicating vital and important information.

Schools should have clear, concise and appropriate information communicated to students such that they do not feel they have been left in the dark. Sadly, this has not been the case, and is a serious issue that must be addressed in preparation should we experience another pandemic.

In conjunction with communication issues, there is a problem about students contacting teachers for support with work and home. Teachers have failed to recognise existing homelife issues during lockdown, and students do not find it easy to contact teachers for support about schoolwork (see Question Three). At a time where students will be feeling more alone than ever, it so important to make sure that they can access the support they need.

There have been some successes in the way schools have responded. Most students agree that they were provided with the resources they needed (such as computers to work on) and that work set was clear (see Question Two). However, a worrying number of pupils felt pressure from teachers to complete work (Question 2) and, with too much work being set (Question 1), might therefore have felt anxious and worried to complete it (see Comment 1, 2, 4).

Unfortunately, there have been more failures than successes with regard to the education system's response to Covid-19. A lot of time therefore needs to be spent in preparation should we experience another outbreak. The survey has provided clear and definitive problems, and so by extension clear and definitive improvements that should be made to help protect and nurture the students of Central Bedfordshire even in these strange times.

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Matthew Decesare
Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire Volunteer

Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire exists to make health and social care services work for the people that use them, especially young people.

Our role is to ensure that local decision makers and health and care services put the experiences of young people at the heart of their work.

We believe no one should be afraid to speak up .... because our opinion is as good as anyone else's.

Our volunteers have received appropriate 'Enter & View' training and are keen to put their learning into practice by visiting health and social care services such as hospital wards, surgeries and care homes. The young people will then be able to report their findings from their unique perspective. If you would like a group of young Healthwatch volunteers to visit your service please contact Amy.Eymor@healthwatchcentralbedfordshire.org.uk.

There is a lot more information on the Young Healthwatch website, https://healthwatch-centralbedfordshire.org.uk/young-healthwatch, including the great achievement of one of our volunteers who has secured a fantastic apprenticeship with Cancer Research UK.

If you are under 25, why not consider becoming a member of Young Healthwatch Central Bedfordshire? Get in touch for more information, email Amy.Eymor@healthwatchcentralbedfordshire.org.uk or call 0300 303 8554.

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