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Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's rights

Report[1]
Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development
Rapporteur: Baroness Doreen MASSEY, United Kingdom, Socialists, Democrats and Greens Group

Summary

Children have faced family bereavement, isolation, the spread of poverty, and decreased access to public services due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Their rights to life, health, development, social protection, education, protection against violence and discrimination have been affected. The pandemic has intensified socio-economic divides, and many children are suffering disproportionately. In poorer countries it has fuelled child and infant mortality, child labour, child marriage and child trafficking.

The Council of Europe member States should take urgent action to ensure that all children are protected in accordance with existing international standards, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

To counter the negative impact of the pandemic, the situation of parents and other carers needs to be improved. Enabling parents to be more involved in their children's lives is the most effective strategy for preventing and tackling mental health issues, violence against children or conflict with the law.

European and international institutions can play a useful role in providing impetus, setting priorities, and promoting synergies. Children are experts on their own lives, but they are all too often left out of discussions that deeply impact them and their communities. Integrating child participation in making decisions on the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath can help us develop a faster, fairer, and more sustainable recovery and a more humane society.

1. Reference to Committee: Doc. 15125, Reference 4525 of 15 September 2020.

Contents **Page**

A. Draft resolution 3
B. Draft recommendation 5
C. Explanatory memorandum by Baroness Doreen E. Massey, rapporteur 6
1. Introduction 6
2. Aim and scope of the report 7
3. Areas of particular concern 7
3.1. Physical and mental health and well-being 7
3.2. Protection from all forms of violence 8
3.3. Access to education and other services 9
3.4. Poverty and socio-economic inequality 10
3.5. Children in vulnerable situations 11
3.6. Children's participation in decision making 11
4. The Covid-19 pandemic as a child rights crisis and an opportunity for decisive action 11
5. Examples of initiatives to tackle the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's rights 12
6. Conclusions and recommendations 14

A. Draft resolution[2]

1. The Parliamentary Assembly is deeply concerned about the devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children (any person under the age of 18) who have faced family bereavement, isolation, the spread of poverty, and decreased access to public services (including health, education and social protection). Children's physical and mental health, as well as equal opportunities for learning and development, have been affected. Violence against children has risen, including domestic and sexual violence. The impact of the pandemic in poorer countries has raised serious concerns with respect to child and infant mortality, child labour, child marriage and child trafficking. The current generation of children, which is sometimes referred to as "Generation Covid", will face the consequences of this public health crisis for many years to come, unless adequate measures are taken.

2. The Assembly is convinced that, to improve the situation of children, first and foremost parents and other carers need to be supported, so that they, in turn, can help children. Children themselves need to be listened to. The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing problems with respect to social exclusion, inequality, and inadequate social protection systems. In many countries, the downsizing of public services over the past decades has resulted in a situation where resources are so thinly stretched that there is hardly any margin to meet the growing need for support created by the pandemic. Building robust public services for children and their families, that will be well-co-ordinated and not fall short when faced with major risk situations, should be a priority for the post-pandemic recovery strategies. Child poverty must be tackled with determination.

3. The gravity of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's rights varies considerably between and within countries, with the poorest groups of society and lower income countries being affected most. Solidarity should be the guiding principle for addressing this public health crisis and its consequences. It is only by meeting the basic needs of all children, ensuring children's safety and family support, that we can achieve high levels of well-being and prosperity in our societies.

4. The Council of Europe member States should take urgent action to address the impact of the pandemic on the rights of the child and to ensure that all children are protected in accordance with existing international standards, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the relevant Council of Europe instruments, such as the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5), the European Social Charter (ETS No. 163), the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (CETS No. 210, "Istanbul Convention"), the Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (CETS No. 201, "Lanzarote Convention"), the Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data (ETS No. 108), the Convention on Cybercrime (ETS No. 185, "Budapest Convention") and the Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (CETS No. 197).

5. The Assembly thus urges the member States of the Council of Europe:

5.1. with respect to building resilient social protection systems for children and their carers, to:

5.1.1. ensure a minimum level of income for parents and carers, regardless of their status and background, for example in the form of a basic income (sufficient to meet needs); such income should be easily accessible and relevant information should be disseminated to the public;

5.1.2. ensure that relevant resources are made available on a sustainable basis to the public services dealing with children, including social protection, health and education services; ensure that the professionals dealing with children receive adequate salaries, have a stable professional situation and opportunities for professional development;

5.1.3. pay special attention to children in vulnerable situations, including children living in poverty, children belonging to minorities, migrant and refugee children, children of labour migrants left behind in their countries of origin, children with disabilities, children with long-term or chronic illnesses, children deprived of liberty, children in care, young carers and street children;

5.2. with respect to ensuring effective protection of children's rights in times of crisis and with appropriate public health measures in place, to:

5.2.1. ensure that emergency and recovery plans, strategies and legislation undergo child impact assessment, and promote budgeting mechanisms for child rights;

2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 20 May 2021.

5.2.2. reduce the levels of stress within families by addressing socio-economic difficulties, supporting flexible working arrangements for parents and other carers, including a possibility of taking a "child in distress" special leave, and ensuring that the mental and physical well-being of children is as important as their academic achievement;

5.2.3. maintain functioning public services for children, including health, education and social protection services, by – providing guidance and health and safety protocols, including instructions for smooth interservice co-operation and communication, and monitor their implementation; raising awareness and building support for such measures; making full use of information and communication technologies when appropriate; ensuring that public officials are duly supported when dealing with critical situations such as children affected by family bereavement, incidents of intra-family violence, drastic decrease in family income, mental health issues or conflict with the law;

5.2.4. prioritise prevention of violence against children; strengthen reporting mechanisms for professionals; set up helplines and organise awareness raising campaigns on violence against children, in particular sexual violence (including in the digital realm);

5.2.5. support research on the impact of Covid-19 on children's rights and well-being, including longitudinal studies on educational attainment and well-being and longer term educational and career outcomes and inequalities to life chances;

5.2.6. ensure access to education programmes for all children, for example by the use of TV and radio channels or provision of necessary equipment to families with socio-economic difficulties, and by introducing catch-up programmes; ensure that children have access to outdoor and indoor play and sport when possible; ensure that the arts and culture are accessible to all children; ensure support for innovative approaches to socialisation, safe social networking, and identity building for children;

5.2.7. raise awareness of the importance of regular vaccination programmes for children;

5.2.8. ensure that the principles of child-friendly and restorative justice are applied in the context of the pandemic, for example in the cases of breaches of lockdown regulations;

5.3. with respect to the impact of Covid-19 on the rights of children in low-income countries, to:

5.3.1. provide emergency assistance and ensure that global development programmes address the situation of children, especially from vulnerable groups; and build public support for development programmes and humanitarian assistance by highlighting the human implications of the crisis and its potential consequences in the interconnected world;

5.3.2. with respect to Covid-19 vaccination for children, implement the recommendations made in Resolution 2361 (2021) "Covid-19 vaccines: ethical, legal and practical considerations".

6. The Assembly welcomes the adoption of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the EU Strategy to fight child sexual abuse both offline and online. It calls on the European institutions to ensure a well-co-ordinated support to their member States in the framework of the European Union and Council of Europe Strategies, making full use of the existing expertise and instruments, such as the Lanzarote Convention. Keeping in mind the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic will be crucial to being prepared to provide flexible policy responses to future crisis situations, for example under the upcoming Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027), which is currently in preparation.

7. Furthermore, the Assembly welcomes the launch of the proposed EU Child Guarantee and urges the EU bodies to take account of the European Social Charter and the findings of the European Committee of Social Rights in its roll-out and implementation. The European Union and the Council of Europe should work closely together in supporting member States in putting the EU Child Guarantee into practice.

8. The Assembly calls on national parliaments, the European Parliament, and the Inter-Parliamentary Union to join their efforts in building parliamentary support for addressing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the rights of the child.

9. The Assembly calls on national parliaments of member States to support the World Health Organisation and other aid programmes for children in order to guarantee financial stability in order to provide practical support for children

B. Draft recommendation[3]

1. The Parliamentary Assembly refers to its Resolution … (2021) "The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's rights".

2. The Assembly is convinced that considering the rights of the child in all measures taken to tackle the pandemic and its consequences is essential for the future of our societies. The Council of Europe should support its member States in building resilient social protection systems and promote equal opportunities within and solidarity between countries.

3. The Assembly notes that a solid foundation for addressing the impact of the pandemic on children is provided by Council of Europe instruments, such as the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5), the European Social Charter (ETS No. 163), the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (CETS No. 210, "Istanbul Convention"), the Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (CETS No. 201, "Lanzarote Convention"), the Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data (ETS No. 108), the Convention on Cybercrime (ETS No. 185, "Budapest Convention") and the Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (CETS No. 197).

4. The Assembly thus recommends that the Committee of Ministers:

4.1. consider a possible review of the post Covid-19 pandemic recovery programmes of Council of Europe member States from the perspective of the rights of the child, based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the legal standards agreed upon in the framework of the Council of Europe;

4.2. endorse the proposals of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe on reinforcing the European Social Charter system; convene the Conference of the Parties without delay; integrate a parliamentary dimension in this reform process, including with a view to making all of the provisions of the Turin Protocol (ETS No.142) applicable; and ensure that children's rights are duly taken into consideration in the process;

4.3. assess the application of the European Social Charter for improving the protection of children and their families in times of pandemic and in subsequent socio-economic recovery, and consider a possible additional protocol on effective social protection in situations of crisis;

4.4. examine possibilities of further extending participation of the non-member States of the Council of Europe in its co-operation programmes on the rights of the child, with special focus on low-income countries;

4.5. promote the use of child rights impact assessments, and child rights budgeting mechanisms for any national policies applied in response to future crisis situations, through the work of the Council of Europe, including under the upcoming Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027).

4.6. call a Pan-European seminar to actively promote collaboration and co-operation between the European Parliament, the European Commission and the Council of Europe with the aims of consolidating how they might support a strategy for pro-active and concrete suggestions for future action on the impact of Covid-19.

3. Draft recommendation adopted unanimously by the committee on 20 May 2021.

C. Explanatory memorandum by Baroness Doreen E. Massey, rapporteur

1. Introduction

Children thrive when they feel safe and protected, when family and community contacts are strong and when their basic needs are met. UNICEF[4]

1. On 6 July 2020, the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development tabled a motion for a resolution entitled "Impact of Covid-19 on children's rights." The motion was subsequently referred to our committee for report, and I was appointed rapporteur on 22 September 2020.

2. Although children are not among the high-risk groups that are directly affected by Covid-19 and they tend to experience milder forms of this disease, the pandemic has had a devastating impact on millions of children across the world. The current generation of children (sometimes referred to as "Generation Covid"[5]) will face the consequences of this public health crisis for many years to come in relation to health, in particular mental health, family problems, education, sport, culture and the arts, lack of social mixing and socio-economic difficulties. Their rights to life, survival and development; to the highest attainable standard of health; to social security; and to protection from violence have all too often been affected. Unless adequate measures are taken, their future is at great risk. The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic will disproportionately affect vulnerable children. Downturns in economies will continue to affect, in particular, poorer families, and families in poorer countries, and therefore children.

3. The Parliamentary Assembly should draw attention to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the rights of the child and demand stronger action from Council of Europe member States to ensure that children are protected in accordance with existing international standards, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)[6] and the relevant Council of Europe instruments such as the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5), the European Social Charter (ETS No. 163), the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (CETS No. 210, "Istanbul Convention"), the Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (CETS No. 201, "Lanzarote Convention"), the Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data (ETS No. 108), the Convention on Cybercrime (ETS No. 185, "Budapest Convention") and the Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (CETS No. 197). The Assembly should also draw attention to the recent EU Strategy on Children's rights and to the work of the Council of Europe Children's Rights Division and Youth Centre.

4. During the course of preparing the report, I have looked for evidence of the impact of Covid-19 on children's lives from children themselves, from organisations working with children and from Commissioners for children, and national and international policy makers. Virtual meetings were held with: Mr David Nabarro, Special Envoy on Covid-19 for the World Health Organization; Ms Stella Kyriakides, EU Commissioner for Health and Food Safety; Ms Dubravka Šuica, Vice-President and EU Commissioner for Democracy and Demography; and Ms Ewa Kopacz, Vice-President and European Parliament Coordinator on Children's Rights. I am also grateful for contributions from Mr Emilio Puccio, Co-ordinator of the Intergroup on Children's Rights, European Parliament; Ms Mieke Schuurman, Senior Policy Officer on Children's Rights, Eurochild; Mr Bruce Anderson, Chair of the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC); Ms Dorothy Rozga, Director of Children's Rights, Centre for Sport and Human Rights; Ms Liz Twyford, Sport and Children's Rights, UNICEF UK; Ms Anne Tivas, Chair, Safe Sport International; and Ms Samantha Cairns from The Cultural Learning Alliance, United Kingdom. Mr Niall Muldoon, Ireland's Ombudsman for Children, took part in a public hearing on the impact of Covid-19 on the rights of the child in November 2020. I am very grateful for all these contributions to the present report.

5. Whilst this evidence has, of necessity, been constrained by the restricted length of the report, I hope that nevertheless a picture will emerge of what the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been, and is, on children's lives. These were rich and inspiring deliberations with much to inform and consider. A full record has been kept. I have attempted to consolidate the combined views, recognising that this may not do justice to the wisdom, experience, and enthusiasm of those taking part. It was heartening to hear, from all of those interviewed, a huge commitment to the rights of the child and a desire to collaborate across agencies to further that collaboration in tackling the aftermath of Covid-19.

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4. UNICEF (2020), Child Protection Learning Brief #2.
5. www.unicef.org.uk/policy/a-future-at-risk-report.
6. www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx.

6. I am also grateful for the much valued ongoing contributions of the Council of Europe Children's Rights Division, the European Youth Centre and the Lanzarote Committee, and also for the work of other committees of the Assembly which consider and support the rights of the child in their work.

2. Aim and scope of the report

7. The aim of this report is to assess how the pandemic affects children's rights, and to propose guidelines for action, based on international standards and examples of good practices from Council of Europe member States. I wish to explore the most effective ways of ensuring child protection, supporting victims of violence, and providing financial and economic measures to alleviate the negative effects of the pandemic on children's well-being. It is also important to focus on post-Covid-19 prospects and to envisage measures that will ensure effective protection in future crises and to empower children.

8. Children have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in many ways. I would propose that the following six areas need particular attention, drawing on international standards and recommendations: 1) physical and mental health and well-being; 2) protection from all forms of violence; 3) access to education and other public services; 4) poverty and socio-economic inequality; 5) children in vulnerable situations; 6) children's participation in decision making.

9. At times of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, it is easy to forget that children have certain rights, even when the right to life is predominant. Particular articles of the UN CRC and other international legal instruments apply to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on children, and I will refer to them in relevant chapters. It is also worth recalling that Article 1 defines everyone under the age of 18 years old as a child and that Article 3 states that the best interests of the child should be a top priority in all decisions and actions that affect children.

3. Areas of particular concern

3.1. Physical and mental health and well-being

10. The rights to life and health are the most important ones for us all, and a foundation for the enjoyment of all other rights. All countries that ratified the UN CRC have undertaken to guarantee the right to life, survival and development of all children (Article 6); the right to the highest attainable standard of health including nutritious food, a clean environment and education on health and well-being (Article 24); a right to a full and decent life with dignity for a child with disability (Article 23); the right to meet with other children and join groups and organisations so long as this does not deprive others of the enjoyment of their rights (Article 15). Articles 11 and 13 of the European Social Charter stress the rights to protection of health and to social and medical assistance that must be provided by the State in case of absence of adequate resources on the part of the individual. More specifically, the right of children and young persons to protection and health care is ensured by Article 7 paragraphs 9 and 10 and Article 17 paragraph 1 of the European Social Charter.[7]

11. The pandemic has caused disruptions in health services and continues to strain financial resources in the healthcare sector across the globe. In the light of this situation, experts have already raised the alert about the potentially devastating impact of the pandemic on maternal and infant mortality.[8] In the United Kingdom, up to one in five maternity posts are unfilled and more than a fifth of midwife-led units have been closed, raising concerns about risks for mothers and babies.[9] At the global level, it is estimated that an additional 1.2 million under-five deaths could occur in just six months.[10]

12. Interrupted supply chains of medicines, such as antibiotics and oxygen for treating pneumonia and oral rehydration solutions for treating diarrhoea, could further elevate child and infant death rates.[11] Essential vaccination programmes have been disrupted. Worldwide, up to 80 million children may miss vaccinations, and there is a high risk of resurgence of infectious and preventable diseases like measles, diphtheria, polio and cholera.[12] Children who are immuno-compromised or living with long-term or chronic respiratory

7. European Committee of Social Rights Statement of interpretation on the right to protection of health, April 2020.
8. www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(20)30229-1/fulltext.
9. www.unicef.org.uk/coronavirus-children-in-lockdown/.
10. www.unicef.org/press-releases/covid-19-devastates-already-fragile-health-systems-over-6000-additional-children.
11. www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(20)30229-1.
12. www.unicef.org.uk/policy/a-future-at-risk-report/.

conditions are particularly vulnerable to Covid-19. Children with physical and mental disabilities are disproportionately affected by lack of access to health services. The impact of lockdowns and shutdowns on health, such as malnutrition and the lack of a variety of human contacts are also of serious concern.[13]

13. Whether it is due to family bereavement, decline or loss of family income, lack of contact with friends and family members, lack of "normal" education, the pandemic creates a highly stressful and destabilising environment for children. Children's mental health has significantly deteriorated during lockdowns. The results of a UNICEF-UK poll conducted among children aged 6-16 showed that more than two-thirds of children (62%) were worried about the impact of Covid-19 on their lives, and 46% reported experiencing anxiety. One in four (27%) parents said they worried about their children's mental health every day during lockdown and 29% were struggling to reassure their children.[14] More than half (57%) of the children also felt that home-schooling was stressful.[15] With suicide among children being a significant preventable public health problem across the world, and the second leading cause of death among younger people aged 10-24, serious concerns have been raised with respect to the increase in suicides among children and young people during the pandemic.[16]

14. It is also worth pointing out that some children report positive impacts of the pandemic on their lives, such as greater time to reflect and to get closer to parents, although these reactions are by no means common. Other noted positive effects have been the improvements to our environment, of great concern to many children. Less travel and fewer emissions have had their impact. Such impacts may be analysed and promoted in schools, and generally, in order to enhance awareness of climate change.

15. Our colleague Mr Simon Moutquin (Belgium, SOC) is currently working on a report entitled "Taking into consideration the impact of the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic on the mental health of minors and young adults"[17] and will provide further insights on these issues. Our colleague, Ms Jennifer de Temmerman (France, ALDE) is working on a report and on initiatives to draw awareness to climate change and to involve children.[18]

3.2. Protection from all forms of violence

16. Violence against children is a major human rights issue, which I have raised in my previous reports on "Ending violence against children: a Council of Europe contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals"[19] and "Addressing sexual violence against children: stepping up action and co-operation in Europe."[20] The UN CRC requires that governments protect children from violence, abuse and neglect (Article 19) and from all forms of sexual abuse and exploitation (Article 34). The Lanzarote Convention is specifically designed to fight sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children, both through prevention and helping victims finding justice. Article 13, 14 and the whole Chapters V and VI focus on practical assistance to victims, underlining the necessity for the States to create effective measures to address children's needs. Moreover, Article 17 paragraph 1 of the European Social Charter requires States Parties to prohibit all forms of violence against children (including all forms of corporal punishment). States must act with due diligence to ensure that violence is eliminated in practice. Article 7 paragraph 10 of the European Social Charter guarantees protection against sexual and other exploitation of children as well as protection against the misuse of information technology and social media (for the purposes of online bullying, child pornography, grooming, harassment, etc.), which is particularly pertinent in view of the acceleration of digitalisation and online activity brought about by the pandemic.[21]

17. The levels of violence against children – both at home and online – have increased dramatically during the pandemic. Tensions within households, long-term confinement in limited space, lack of access to support structures and to social services create an environment prone to violence, abuse and neglect, and fewer opportunities to detect it. The situation of children is further aggravated in cases where pre-existing substance abuse or mental health conditions within families are involved.[22]

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13. Concerns have also been expressed with respect to possible negative impact on babies' emotional development when the caregivers or members of extended families wear masks.
14. UNICEF UK Submission, The Government's Response to Covid-19: Human Rights Implications.
15. UNICEF UK Submission, Education Select Committee Inquiry, The Impact of Covid-19 on Education and Children's Services.
16. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0253717620982514.
17. Doc. 15223.
18. Doc. 14947.
19. Doc. 14894.
20. Doc. 15109.
21. European Committee of Social Rights, Statement on Covid-19 and Social Rights, March 2021:

18. As children's screen time has risen during lockdowns and supervision has decreased, the presence of child sexual abuse images has dramatically increased on the Internet. The Internet Watch Foundation has noted a 50% increase in reports of child sexual abuse material from members of the public during lockdown.[23] Sexual images produced by children themselves for personal use have ended up on pornographic websites, with predators seeking to maximise the unprecedented access to such material. In some cases, children have had to stay with their abusers, either at home or in institutions, with no access to support services. These children are particularly vulnerable and are in dire need of protection and support.

19. The problem of addictive behaviours among children, such as those related to online gaming, social networking, gambling, watching pornography and compulsive shopping, have also been amplified during the pandemic. Our colleague Mr Joseph O'Reilly (Ireland, EPP/CD) will be looking into these issues in his report on "Preventing addictive behaviours in children."[24]

3.3. Access to education and other services

20. Education does not begin in schools. The foundations, such as language and sociability, are built in the early years of a child's life. The interaction of a baby with parents (often the mother) is vital to this. If deficits develop, the child is more likely to lack basic skills and to have poorer speech and language. Evidence shows that poor speech development can have long term effects on learning.[25] Yet some parents (especially mothers of young children) have felt isolated during lockdowns and babies have not had contacts with a variety of other adults, including grandparents, thus cutting down on the opportunities for social and vocabulary development.

21. Access to services is essential for the child's well-being and development. The UN CRC requires the governments to ensure the right to education which must develop every child's personality, talents and abilities (Article 28) and the right to play, leisure and culture (Article 31). The European Social Charter protects the right to education from multiple perspectives, for example through Article 17 paragraph 2 (primary and secondary education for children), Article 7 paragraph 3 (protection of children in compulsory education), Article 10 (vocational education and training, including for adults) and Article 15 paragraph 1 (right to education and training for persons with disabilities, see below in more detail). Article 14 of the European Social Charter enshrines the right to benefit from social welfare services.

22. In the education sector, the situation has been unstable, due to the opening and closing of facilities (often at short notice) and the difficulty of putting in place effective sanitary procedures. More generally, the risks of infection associated with the gathering of children in enclosed places are obvious and not easy to address. While the presence of children in education facilities increases risks of infection, alternative solutions such as distance learning have their own pitfalls, including unequal access to online services often referred to as the "digital divide", either due to the lack of required hardwire or lack of relevant digital infrastructure, especially in rural areas and to the lack of parental skills in dealing with technology. Poorer families may not have adequate computer access at home, especially in families with more than one child. There has been uneven quality of online content and excessive screen time.[26] Those children who rely on school services for health care, nutrition and other social support systems are left unprotected when schooling is interrupted due to lockdowns.[27]

23. Schools provide far more than academic encouragement. Socialising with friends, sport and other physical activities, the creative arts and learning to live in democratic structures are all important. The interface between schools and communities is vital. Outside school, playgrounds, community facilities such as youth clubs, and cultural venues such as museums, art galleries, and theatres have been closed. The closing down of cultural facilities has been an immense loss, and its implications may well have long-term effects in relation to not only knowledge and enjoyment but also to a sense of cultural identity for children.

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22. https://data.unicef.org/resources/research-on-violence-against-children-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-guidance/.
23. www.iwf.org.uk/news/%E2%80%98definite-jump%E2%80%99-as-hotline-sees-50-increase-public-reports-of-online-child-sexual-abuse-during.
24. Doc. 15269.
25. Law, Charlton, Dockrell, Gascoigne, McKean and Theakston (2017), "Early Language Development: Needs, provision and intervention for preschool children from socio-economically disadvantage backgrounds".
26. www.cam.ac.uk/stories/digitaldivide.
27. www.unicef.org.uk/coronavirus-children-in-lockdown.

24. The identity of children and their place in supportive communities has been put at risk. Organisations working in the arts and cultural sections in the United Kingdom are combining forces to protect the rights of children to access in these fields. Many children pay tribute to taking part in the arts as enhancing life skills. As one report has said "essential life skills such as confidence, motivation, resilience and communication are associated with better academic performance" as well as being valuable in their own right.[28]

25. The severity of the situation in the areas of education and culture has been duly acknowledged in the Assembly, and a report on "The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on education and culture" is currently under preparation in the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media.[29]

26. Sports activities, which are essential for children's well-being, are a particularly important area.[30] When sport is taken away, children's physical and mental health is affected. For children taking part in organised sport, including elite athletes, part of their identity is lost and a "safe haven" is taken away. Lack of routine, structure and discipline is hard to manage. Motivation plummets and self-respect is undermined. With many children moving to e-sport, concerns have been raised with respect to very few standards in child protection in this context. At school, emphasis is often put primarily on academic achievement, with not enough attention being given to sports and the arts. Socio-economic problems related to the pandemic imply that many parents can no longer afford to pay for paid sports and art activities.

27. Social services struggled even before lockdown to ensure badly needed child protection, with limited resources and inadequate regulations. The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified this problem. Too often, social workers have been put in situations where their job requirements, safety issues and concern for the well-being of the children were in conflict. Many have continued to visit families, despite the risks, driven by their professionalism.

28. Mental health services for children, already inadequate before lockdowns, are now at breaking point. Such services need more funding, more training and increased capacity to help children, particularly those at risk.[31]

3.4. Poverty and socio-economic inequality

29. Poverty and socio-economic inequality severely undermine children's opportunities in life and make them vulnerable to the violation of their rights. Article 26 of the UN CRC states that every child has the right to benefit from social security. The European Social Charter guarantees the rights of a child in two different manners: first, many of the rights guaranteed by the Charter have a specific relevance to children; for example Article 16 (right of the family to social, legal and economic protection) which protects the rights of children as family members. Second, the Charter contains specific rights relating exclusively to children, such as Article 17 (right of children and young persons to social, legal and economic protection). More broadly, Article 30 of the Charter obliges States Parties to implement an overall and co-ordinated approach to combating poverty and social exclusion.

30. Children living in poverty are a group of special concern. On average, one in seven children is poor across the OECD countries.[32] While their situation was difficult prior to the pandemic, it has considerably worsened over the past year. The widening gap between the rich and the poor is nothing new. It has been on the rise since the financial crisis of 2008 in most parts of the world. Even in Europe, inequality has been growing throughout the past two decades. This has been clearly signalled by the Council of Europe Development Bank, in a thematic series of reports on inequalities in Europe including income inequality, housing inequality, as well as inequalities in access to public services.[33] Despite governmental efforts for financial recovery after 2008, the potential for economic growth and economic pie as a whole have suddenly shrunk again and the bottom-income quintiles have been hit the hardest.

31. In the context of the pandemic, many people have lost their jobs and household income has been reduced, with families struggling to ensure the necessities for their children. These children are now facing greater risks of inequality and social injustice. Income inequality increases the vulnerability of disadvantaged

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28. C. Cullinane, Carl and R. Mankute (2017) "Life lessons: improving essential life skills for young people".
29. Doc. 15119.
30. Centre for Sport and Human Rights (2020), "An Overview of the Sport-Related Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Children".
31. www.theguardian.com/society/2020/nov/11/social-workers-efforts-to-protect-children-in-lockdown-have-gone-unnoticed.
32. www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/combatting-covid-19-s-effect-on-children-2e1f3b2f/.
33. https://coebank.org/en/news-and-publications/news/ceb-publishes-thematic-series-papers-inequality-europe.

groups in two ways: 1) the bottom-income quintiles face constraints in meeting basic needs and financial expenditure during economic downfalls; 2) rising inequalities further hamper these groups' access to equal opportunities including employment, housing, education and healthcare. Children from these families are therefore more susceptible to being affected by the negative impacts of the pandemic and their basic rights being neglected.

32. Worldwide, the number of people living in extreme poverty has risen by 37 million since the beginning of the pandemic, and the current forecast is that it will rise by another 25 million next year. Hunger and malnutrition are of growing concern.[34] Today there are 152 million children in child labour and 72 million of them are in hazardous work. These numbers are expected to soar.[35]

33. The socio-economic consequences of the crisis are yet to be fully understood and grasped While governments attempt to prepare for future problems and put in place protective measures, many people "fall through the cracks", and their families and children suffer from the economic hardship and acute anxiety that this entails. Two reports are being prepared for the Assembly on this subject. Our colleague Mr Andrej Hunko (Germany, UEL) is working on a report on "Overcoming the socio-economic crisis sparked by the Covid-19 pandemic", while our colleague Mr Pierre-Alain Fridez (Switzerland, SOC) is addressing extreme child poverty in his report on "Eradicating extreme child poverty in Europe: an international obligation and a moral duty".

3.5. Children in vulnerable situations

34. Some children are especially vulnerable to violations of their rights because of an aspect of their identity or circumstances. The UN CRC requires States to guarantee that all children in their jurisdiction enjoy the rights of the Convention without discrimination (Article 2); that refugee children are provided with assistance and help and the right to be reunited with parents (Article 21); that a child with a disability has the right to a full and decent life with dignity (Article 23) and that every child in care has the right to regular review of their treatment (Article 25).

35. Children in vulnerable situations, including children belonging to minorities, migrant and refugee children, children of labour migrants left behind in their countries of origin, children with disabilities, children deprived of liberty, children in care institutions and street children, need to be given special attention. While it is not possible to analyse in-depth the impact of Covid-19 on each of these groups in this report, we will need to consider their specific circumstances when designing policy responses to the crisis, including encouraging the expression of the views of children themselves.

3.6. Children's participation in decision making

36. Being able to influence the decisions that concern us is an essential pre-condition for our well-being, autonomy and self-respect. The UN CRC states that all children have the right to express their views and wishes in all matters which affect them (Article 12) and requires that a child has the right to reliable information from a variety of sources including from the media (Article 17).

37. The top priority for governments is understandably on saving lives and responding effectively to the public health and socio-economic challenges of the pandemic. However, the responses to the crisis will not be effective unless they take into account the views of the people that they target. Any measures on improving child protection during the pandemic need to consider the needs and views of children. Children gain in confidence by being consulted and decision makers also testify to the benefits of listening to the views of children.

38. I will address the issue of child participation more in-depth in my report on "Giving a voice to every child: promoting child participation as a foundation for democratic societies", which will build on a pilot initiative on involving children in the work of the Assembly.[36]

4. The Covid-19 pandemic as a child rights crisis and an opportunity for decisive action

39. The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the vulnerabilities of public services to potential disruptions, even in the most advanced economies worldwide. In the past, we have had life threatening pandemics in many parts of the world including HIV/AIDs, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East

34. www.nytimes.com/2020/09/16/opinion/coronavirus-hunger-disease.html?referringSource=articleShare.
35. www.ilo.org/ipec/Campaignandadvocacy/wdacl/2020/lang--en/index.htm.
36. Doc. 14806.

Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). We have seen that no part of the world has ever been adequately prepared, and we have seen this clearly with the advent of Covid-19, as well. With regard to children, we have had to try to develop, and are still developing, strategies to minimise disruption and threats to their well-being.

40. UNICEF-UK has suggested that the G7 presidency in 2021 is a key opportunity for making new and ambitious commitments to child health, for ending preventable child deaths by 2030 and for ensuring that future generations develop their full potential.[37] The G7 and similar events and international summits are important fora for raising awareness of the impact of the pandemic on children and for strengthening commitment to child rights protection in times of crisis.

41. Local action in communities has often, despite lack of adequate funding and slow responses by governments, been dynamic and inclusive in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic. The work and dedication of NGOs has been outstanding in supporting child rights during the Covid-19 crisis. Children' Commissioners have been active in pointing out impacts of the pandemic on children's rights in all areas, including the long term impact on children's lives, especially the vulnerable, and on abuse and criminal justice with some criminalisation of young people for breaches of Covid-19 restrictions.[38]

5. Examples of initiatives to tackle the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's rights

42. There is evidence now that awareness of children's rights and action for children during the Covid-19 pandemic have increased globally over the last year, including voluntary sector action, school initiatives, local authority initiatives and parliamentary awareness. Support has come from the European Parliament and the European Commission, NGOs, commissioners/ombudspersons, teachers, national and local governments and individual members of parliament. Such initiatives are welcome, and it is to be hoped that such positive energy in attending to the welfare of children and encouraging participation will provide a focus for future work.

43. Many organisations, apart from the statutory services such as education, health and local government across Europe, work with children and on behalf of children. These include NGOs and the voluntary sector, volunteers and also, in some countries, parliamentary education units. Such organisations provide invaluable research, support and advocacy for children. I have relied on reports, briefing notes, and conversations with many of such organisations to enhance both the information and suggestions in this report, and to help with conclusions and recommendations. What follows is a selection of highlights that illustrate a broad range of initiatives undertaken at national, European and international levels to tackle the impact of Covid-19 on children's rights.

44. In May 2020, UNICEF launched *#Reimagine*, a global campaign to prevent the pandemic from becoming a lasting crisis for children. The aim of the campaign is to encourage governments, the public, donors and the private sector to "respond, recover and re-imagine a world currently besieged by the coronavirus."[39] UNICEF is mandated by the UN General Assembly to uphold the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. There are 36 national committees raising money and advocating for children's rights across the world. In the UK, UNICEF works with two million children through work with local authorities, hospitals and nearly 5 000 children in the Rights Respecting Schools Award. They make submissions to government and specialist committees. In doing so, the views of children, through direct consultation are included.

45. The World Health Organization (WHO) regularly provides information on the situation of children in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, such as a podcast on "Children and Covid-19"[40], a webpage with resources on care for young children[41] and "Questions and Answers" pages on "Children and masks" and on "Covid-19, pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding". Regular briefings are organised on various aspects of the pandemic and are accessible on the WHO website.

46. In July 2020, the European Commission launched a Strategy to fight child sexual abuse both offline and online.[42] In March 2021, it launched the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, and proposed a European Child Guarantee, which have been informed by extensive consultations with citizens, stakeholders and, most

37. www.unicef.org.uk/campaign-with-us/child-health-report/.
38. ENOC, UNICEF (2020) "Report on Ombudspersons and Commissioners for Children Challenges and Responses to Covid-19".
39. www.unicef.ie/2020/05/13/covid-19-over-6000-children-could-die-a-day/.
40. www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/media-resources/science-in-5/episode-22---children-covid-19.
41. www.who.int/teams/maternal-newborn-child-adolescent-health-and-ageing/covid-19/care-for-young-children.
42. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_1380.

importantly, more than 10 000 children.[43] Many activities of the European Parliament also address the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children. For example, the European Parliament's resolution "on the future of European education in the context of Covid-19"[44] and the resolution on "children's rights in view of the EU Strategy on the rights of the child"[45] tackle many issues and areas affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The impact of the pandemic on children's rights was also a key focus for the 60 young participants in the EU Forum on the Rights of the Child.[46] Among concerns raised around education, mental health and child participation, children considered addressing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's rights to be a top priority for the European Union. The European Commission was called upon to ensure that all children, including those in the most vulnerable situations, were better supported and heard.

47. The Council of Europe Steering Committee for the Rights of the Child (CDENF), which provides a platform for exchange and co-operation among the Council of Europe member States on the rights of the child, has produced a review of the measures taken by different countries to manage the Covid-19 pandemic and provided advice on how to mitigate the negative impact they may have on children generally and the children in vulnerable situations in particular.[47] The Committee has also organised a series of webinars on aspects of Covid-19, including access to education, addressing violence against children and the situation of children with separated parents. The Council of Europe Conference of Ministers Responsible for Sport is paying increased attention to child athletes and is considering the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children. The Lanzarote Committee published a statement on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and abuse in times of the Covid-19 pandemic.[48]

48. As the CDENF survey has shown, the Council of Europe member States have undertaken a broad range of measures to improve the situation of children. In England, Hungary and Malta, children who were receiving free meals in school, were still receiving food in their homes during closure of schools. In Hungary, despite the pandemic, the service for victims of domestic violence was operating with full capacity every single day and space was immediately available for victims. Divorced parents in Cyprus were granted exemptions from restrictions on movement, to ensure the right of both parents to have contact with their child during this period. In Belgium and Croatia, government funding schemes have been set up to provide laptops or other technological devices for children who were otherwise unable to access online learning. In Cyprus and Italy, measures were introduced to allow working parents to stay at home with their children following school closures while receiving a significant percentage of their salary. In Belgium, the TV network RTBF has developed a series of programmes for children, including child-friendly talk show episodes (*Les Niouzz*) and adapted questions and answers sessions (*Matière grise*) on the Covid-19 crisis.[49]

49. Throughout the Covid-19 crisis the Eurochild network has worked closely with civil society partners to gather the views of children on the impact the pandemic has had on their rights. At the start of 2020, Eurochild worked with members in 10 European countries to consult with more than 200 children as part of a European Commission study[50] on child participation in political and democratic life. One of the topics explored in the focus groups, was the impact of Covid-19 on their lives. Towards the end of 2020, Eurochild, collected the views of more than 10,000 children and young people, in collaboration with UNICEF, Save the Children, World Vision and Child Fund Alliance. The findings of these consultations have been collated in the "Our Europe; Our Rights; Our Future" report[51] and have influenced the content and priorities of the EU Child Rights Strategy and Child Guarantee. Concerns around the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic were evident throughout the consultation with many children reporting feeling anxious, lonely, or worried about their futures as a result of the pandemic. Some children also reported increased financial instability for their families. One point was raised by children repeatedly in the consultations: they want to be involved in decisions that affect them, both within the context of the pandemic and more broadly.

50. The Centre for Children and Young People's Participation, University of Central Lancashire, has a vast number of contacts across Europe and globally with organisations that work on child participation. In 2020, the centre published the rapid evidence Report on "Building on Rainbows: Supporting Children's Participation in

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43. https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child/eu-strategy-rights-child-and-european-child-guarantee_en.
44. www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0282_EN.html.
45. www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0090_EN.html.
46. EU Forum on the Rights of the Child.
47. https://rm.coe.int/final-summary-report-covid-19-pandemic-responses/16809f8032.
48. Stepping up protection of children against sexual exploitation and abuse in times of the Covid-19: statement by the Lanzarote Committee Chair and Vice-Chairperson.
49. CDENF: Factsheet: "The Covid-19 pandemic and children: Challenges, responses and policy implication".
50. https://ec.europa.eu/info/study-child-participation-bibliography_en.
51. www.eurochild.org/news/children-speak-up-about-the-future-and-rights-they-want/.

Shaping Responses to Covid-19". The report points out that challenges exist in all countries and that the participation of children is a right as set out in Article 12 of the UN CRC. Yet, amongst the Centre's network, 70% of colleagues who responded to a survey could not identify a single related children's participation initiative locally or nationally. The other 30% indicated that such activities were underway but had not yet influenced government action. Recommendations included the need for recognition and commitment to participation; support for individual children to participate; support for collective action for children to share ideas, inform decisions and highlight concerns, and hold decision-makers to account; create digital participation; promote inclusion, attending to the rights of marginalised children such as those with disabilities, in care, migrants and refugees and those from vulnerable families; co-ordinate digital and offline solutions; share internet safety information and support peer-to-peer learning.

51. Ecorys and the University of Huddersfield have developed a project "To Lockdown and Back" funded by the Nuffield Foundation. This is a collaboration between adult researchers and 70 young people aged 14-18 from Italy, Lebanon, England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and Singapore, set up to create a platform for young people from diverse backgrounds to share their experiences of living during the pandemic. It combines youth-led participatory action research, group discussion, observation notes, interviews and collaborative analysis with young people. A research summary was published in 2020 and a webinar took place in February 2021 to present the key findings. Some of these were: Covid-19 has had a polarising effect on young people – some had used the time of isolation in lockdown to reflect and re-connect with self-care, well-being and relationships; others had found it traumatic and isolating; Covid-19 has been particularly challenging for those with mental health problems and family conflict; children reported problems with access to services and expressed a sense of not being heard and having their experiences sufficiently understood. Based on these views, recommendations have been made for governments, local authorities and agencies dealing with children.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

52. As the Council of Europe member States are working hard to address the multiple challenges related to the current pandemic, the Assembly should voice its concern about the situation of children and remind governments of the importance of the human rights-based approach and the principle of the best interest of the child when developing relevant policies and putting them into practice. The Assembly should provide guidance on how this can be best achieved in the context of a public health crisis. From the discussions and research done during the preparation of this report, three key messages have emerged.

53. First, to improve the situation of children, and to counter the negative impact of the pandemic on their well-being, we need to improve the situation of parents and other carers. This implies steering our social and economic reforms in a way that creates more safety and stability for all, but especially for those who take care of our future generations. Job insecurity, in-work poverty and overtime work create excessive levels of pressure and stress and deprive children of the care and support that they need during vital stages of their life and development. Enabling parents to be more present, serene, and involved in their children's life is the best strategy for child protection and for alleviating the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Be it mental health issues, violence against children or conflict with law, prevention of negative consequences is always considerably less costly than addressing negative effects after they occur.

54. Second, the Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the inadequacies of our social protection systems. If we are serious about our commitment to respect children's rights, we must invest in robust public services, which are not overstretched to the breaking point. They must be accessible to all, of high quality and sustainable regardless of volatile political agendas. They must have a margin that allows them to make an extra effort in times of crisis, without putting in danger the health and well-being of the professionals working in this sector. This is not wishful thinking, but a matter of changing our priorities. If we fail to achieve this, we will also fail our children, and our societies will not be fit to face future crises. It can and must be done.

55. Third, this public health crisis has demonstrated that societies built on competition and striving for individual profit are ill-equipped for dealing with a pandemic. Deep inequalities in society existed before the pandemic. Covid-19 has intensified these divides, and many people are suffering disproportionately. Regions, even individual towns in some countries are badly affected, others not. Those badly affected tend to have worse general health outcomes and little has changed over many years. Data to show inequalities in health affecting Black and Minority Ethnicity (BME) communities, the poor, disabled people and some women are striking and have come to the fore during Covid-19. Whilst the pandemic has had dramatic consequences on children's lives in all countries across the world, the scale and gravity of this impact is not shared equally. In

the aftermath of the pandemic, as social and economic consequences come to the fore, tensions and frustrations between and within countries will continue to build up. There are lessons to be learned and acted upon and the notion of solidarity must guide our decisions to a much greater extent than before.

56. While policy making and implementation on child protection is in the hands of national governments, European and international institutions can play a useful role in providing impetus, setting priorities, and promoting synergies in this area. Excellent co-operation is being developed between the European Commission, the European Parliament, and the Council of Europe. The adoption of the first ever EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child in 2021 and the proposal for the European Child Guarantee are major milestones in strengthening protection of the rights of the child. We need to make sure that practical implementation of the European Union and Council of Europe strategies in their respective member States is supported by the European institutions, based on a co-ordinated approach and making use of their respective strengths and competencies, for the benefit of all children. Stronger co-operation needs to be developed between the European Parliament and the Assembly, to make the best possible use of our common experiences and outreach capacities involving parliamentarians. All my contacts with high level EU officials have been extremely positive and fruitful. There is clearly a momentum for joining forces in these difficult times, and we must build on this. The positive role of the voluntary sector, Children's Commissioners and other organisations related to children's rights and social change is well recognised.

57. Fortunately, when it comes to the protection of children's rights, we do not have to start from scratch. Today, we have a wealth of useful tools in the form of internationally agreed standards on what governments must do to protect every child. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)[52] and the relevant Council of Europe instruments such as the European Convention on Human Rights, the European Social Charter, the Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention), the Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Convention), the Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data, the Convention on Cybercrime (Budapest Convention), and the Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, need to be fully applied and better used in our countries. The UN Agenda for Sustainable Development has set ambitious goals on children's rights. Let us make sure that we reach 2030 with tangible results.

58. Research and data are essential in order for analyses to be made of problems and directions for change to be made. Academic institutions, governments, local authorities, and the voluntary sector are amongst those providing this backdrop. Longitudinal studies on the impact of Covid-19 on children (such as that being launched in the UK[53]) would be useful in such analyses and could not only reflect on what has gone wrong, but build on good practice and develop new strategies for the future well-being of children.

59. I would like to conclude with an appeal to my colleagues – parliamentarians in the Council of Europe Member States – to actively engage children in making decisions on the responses to this public health crisis and subsequent recovery plans, and to share good practice.[54] As pointed out by Eurochild, children are experts on their own lives, but all too often are left out of discussions that deeply impact them and their communities. Children around the world are making a clear call for this to change and for their right to participate to be promoted and respected. The current pandemic has the potential of promoting fast change in the areas that have been deemed difficult or impossible to tackle until now such as massive use of teleworking and reduced fuel consumption. I am convinced that integrating child participation in making decisions on the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath can help us develop a faster, fairer, and more sustainable recovery and a more humane society.

52. www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx.
53. www.suttontrust.com/news-opinion/all-news-opinion/the-challenges-of-covid-19-for-young-people-need-a-new-cohort-study/.
54. Valuable information on child participation can be found at the website of The Centre for Children and Young People's Participation of the University of Central Lancashire and at its "U Can Make Change 2" website.