

Implications of COVID for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in England

Monday 20 June
10am - 11.30am



The research questions

How is the pandemic affecting **children's and parents'** ECEC needs, use and experiences in different local contexts?

How are **ECEC services responding** to COVID and how are ECEC services changing in different local contexts?

Has **local support** mitigated the effects of the pandemic?

What can we learn from the pandemic about building a **better and more resilient ECEC system**?

What should the role of **local authorities** be, and what tools do they need to support the ECEC system in future?

The research design

Map of different component parts of the ECEC system and relationships between them

Review of UK literature, with selected examples from Germany, Ireland, Netherlands and Norway (Jan-Aug 21)

Survey of LAs to investigate how they supported ECEC services during the 1st year of the pandemic (Feb-April 21)

Case studies in 10 LAs to explore views & experiences of parents (40), providers (33), LA EY staff (43) and employer reps (19) (Apr-Oct 21)

Analysis of national data on attendance, provision and parental employment to investigate impacts in different local conditions (Feb 21-May 22)

Stakeholders: strategic interviews (Feb-Mar 21) to shape issues to explore and workshops (Jan-Feb & May 22) to discuss emerging findings and conclusions

Changes in ECEC use during COVID and implications for families

How COVID affected ECEC attendance

- Children aged 0-4 missed out ECEC, mainly during:
 - 1st lockdown (March-May 2020) when attendance was \approx 10% of expected
 - 3rd lockdown (Jan-Feb 2021) when attendance was \approx 50% of expected
- After these lockdowns attendance rose fairly quickly – parents' concerns about the impact on children of missing early education and the strain of providing FT childcare were strong drivers of decisions to send children back
- But for some children attendance was disrupted throughout 2020 and 2021 by self-isolation rules and temporary closures
- In autumn 2021 attendance was \approx 90% of expected levels
- All evidence points to lower ECEC attendance among disadvantaged children - COVID has widened inequalities in early education

Disruption in ECEC: implications for families

Implications for parents

- Pandemic parenting challenging for all at times, but in particular:
 - Mothers more likely to experience the strain of parenting without ECEC, with mental health negatively affected, while fathers more likely to report benefits of time with kids
 - Lone parents, and families with school-age and SEND children, found parenting without ECEC particularly challenging
- Some working parents (mainly mothers) experienced reduced income due to the disruption in ECEC arrangements

Implications for children

- Speech and language delays as fewer opportunities to develop communication skills at home
- Missed out on opportunities to socialise and develop self-regulation skills with increase in social, emotional and mental health needs
- Delayed physical development as children spent less time outdoors and more time in sedentary activities
- Development gap is widening as disadvantaged children more affected

Effects of COVID on ECEC provision and future risks

Effects developed over time

Initial COVID phase

- Settings stayed open to serve local families, even when it was not financially advantageous for them to do so
- Provision adapted to COVID restrictions
- Providers took on extended welfare, safeguarding and remote early learning roles

A year into COVID: spring-summer 2021

- For group settings, little overall change in opening hours and booked child hours, but declined considerably among childminders
- Average hourly fees rose faster than rate of inflation in most settings, in line with pre-pandemic trends
- Increase in weekly staff hours and hourly pay rose faster than average earnings, signs of staff shortages
- Costs continue to rise at a slightly higher rate than income, in line with pre-pandemic trends

Some providers reported falls in income and increased costs leading to significant financial pressure. However up to August 2021 little impact on trends in numbers of ECEC providers and places with falls in the number of providers continuing pre-pandemic trends

Financial pressures

- For some providers, financial impacts due to loss of income and increase in costs are significant, multiple and not offset by LA and central government support
- Scale of loss varies, but many providers had used reserves, personal savings, taken on debt, leaving them in a worse financial position
- Providers more vulnerable and less likely to be resilient to future shocks
- Beneath national picture of little change in levels of demand and use one year on, variety of experiences, some providers faced reduction in use and unpredictable demand
- Factors increasing vulnerability: small setting, less formal business model, greater COVID losses (e.g. due to low attendance), in areas with less labour demand and dependent on parent fees to cross-subsidise early entitlements

Staffing pressures

- Pre-COVID workforce challenges seemed to have been exacerbated by the pandemic
- Additional COVID pressures for staff: health risks, increased workload, children with greater needs – all took their toll on morale, exacerbated by the differential treatment of schools and ECEC settings
- This contributed to staff leaving the sector, with many providers reporting significant capacity issues and difficulties recruiting in a tight labour market

Implications for ECEC provision and families

- More expensive ECEC provision with above inflation rises in parent-paid fees and potentially more families unable to afford ECEC
- Some providers prioritising children based on financial factors, which means that some children more likely to get a place e.g.:
 - FT places, older kids, without SEND
 - families who can afford to 'top up' funded hours
- Continued decline in childminders and ongoing consolidation of group-based provision may reduce ECEC options for families
- Staff challenges pose a considerable risk to the quality of children's early education experiences, as well as ECEC sufficiency

Local authority support during COVID

LA support during the pandemic

Families

- Adapted FIS, provided brokering
- COVID arrangements for funded hours used to set expectations around home learning, SEND home support and settings' welfare and safeguarding role

- LAs concerned about meeting future needs

Providers

- Financial and business support
- COVID guidance, advice and support (e.g. with risk assessments and PPE)
- Training and staffing (limited)

- Providers' experiences of LA support varied and some were very critical
- Closer engagement, relationship becoming less transactional, openness to support

Links with LA COVID-related support

LA support did not consistently mitigate all effects, but **greater support** and/or perception of **more effective support** associated with:

During first lockdown

- higher % of settings open
- higher % of children in attendance

Spring – summer 2021

School-based providers

Childminders

- smaller reductions in booked child hours
- smaller increases in unit costs

Other group-based providers

- higher income growth
- smaller impacts on staff work hours

Lessons from the pandemic: our conclusions and recommendations

Changing attitudes and expectations

- Parents' expectations about ECEC may be changing, as many have realised that they cannot replace the learning and development opportunities that an ECEC setting can provide and that parenting without ECEC is a 'nightmare'
- A growing consensus that children should have a right to early education could mean that more parents:
 - ask why there are different 'rules' for accessing and regulating schools and ECEC settings
 - resent the fact that the early education entitlement is not always free
 - are frustrated by unregulated ECEC fees which mean that providers can make unreasonable demands to access an essential service

Building a better and more resilient ECEC system

National policy:

- More funding to support the three ECEC pillars: sufficiency, equity of access and the quality of children's experiences – ALL are important
- Funding linked to clear policy objectives and specific delivery /workforce conditions developed in consultation with stakeholders, and informed by evidence of what supports the three ECEC pillars

Local policy:

- A stronger LA role with new statutory responsibilities and dedicated funding to support greater and more consistent LA involvement in local ECEC system
- A named early years lead with responsibility for ensuring that, strategically and operationally, high quality and accessible ECEC is a key component of the local offer to families with young children

What an expanded LA role could look like

Support to families

- **Take-up among disadvantaged children:** more evidence-based approaches and brokering
- **More good quality LA provision:** to increase access amongst disadvantaged children
- **Improve equity of access:** genuine free entitlements, ensure families not excluded for cost-related reasons, support take-up of childcare subsidies
- **Stronger partnership with parents:** to support early learning at home
- **A stronger safeguarding role for ECEC:** to identify and support children in need

Support to providers

- **Sustainability and inclusivity:** support to balance the books while meeting local needs
- **Workforce:** help with staff recruitment and retention & ECEC workforce included in Local Skills Improvement Plans with providers involved local ECEC workforce strategy
- **Quality improvement:** more affordable/free training, tailored support, effective evidence-informed approaches

The ECEC system: key lessons from the pandemic

- The pandemic has shown that a stronger partnership between LAs and providers can build resilience in the ECEC system
- But building resilience also requires:
 - National policy objectives to tackle ECEC system weaknesses with dedicated funding to support their delivery
 - LA early years teams with more tools and resources to implement policy objectives locally and ensure that local children and their parents remain at the centre of decisions that shape the local ECEC system

Your questions and reflections

