

Special schools' and colleges' experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic in May 2021: What they need now

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ASK Research is an independent research organisation who specialise in high quality, informed research aiming to influence policy and advise service provision, especially around issues concerning groups who face social disadvantage. The authors of this report each have over 20 years' experience of research into special educational needs for government and other organisations.

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Summary

The Government stated that all pupils with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) would be offered a place during educational lockdowns. However, this was not possible for special schools and colleges to provide (as ALL their pupils have EHCPs) and some families chose not to send their children in over these periods. These specialist settings are therefore only now beginning the 'return to normal' and this study, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, captures their experiences and thoughts on what needs to happen next to support them and their pupils. It is based on a survey of a representative sample of 192 special education providers in England, depth interviews with senior leaders from 40 of those settings and depth interviews with the parents/carers of 40 pupils who would normally attend them.

Headteachers reported substantial losses in both pupils' academic progress and their wider development. Headteachers reported that they thought pupils in special schools and colleges were on average around 4 months behind in their academic development. They rated pupils at special schools and colleges as, on average, 5 months behind with their emotional wellbeing and mental health, and around 4.5 months behind with their behaviour and self-regulation; social and communication skills; independence, self-care and life skills. In settings for pupils with health and physical conditions, Headteachers reported that pupils were on average over 5 months behind in their physical development.

The reasons for the types and levels of these losses include:

1. Pupils in special schools and colleges have had reduced time in school. One in four did not attend during the latest lockdown and 1 in ten had not returned by May 2021.
2. It is difficult to support pupils' learning when they are not at school, with noted challenges in delivering remote learning.
3. It is a legal requirement that these pupils receive health, therapy, and care input, but their access to this has been severely reduced during the pandemic. This has not only led to losses wider than academic progress but also resulted in families and staff being unsupported and exhausted.
4. Special settings are still having to restrict what they can offer pupils as they, and wider society, operate under safety restrictions. This has meant pupils not accessing all of the enrichment activities or their therapeutic and care support, which are vital to their development, wellbeing and independence.

There were wide concerns that the proposed Education Recovery Plan will not be sufficient to address the losses experienced over this period by pupils with EHCPs, their families and the special schools and colleges that support them. This paper sets out what these losses in progress mean for pupils and providers and suggestions for what appropriate support to recover from this period should look like.

Introduction

The Nuffield Foundation funded ASK Research with NFER to carry out this study on the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on pupils' return to their special schools and colleges from Autumn 2020. The study was conducted in April-June 2021. It involved:

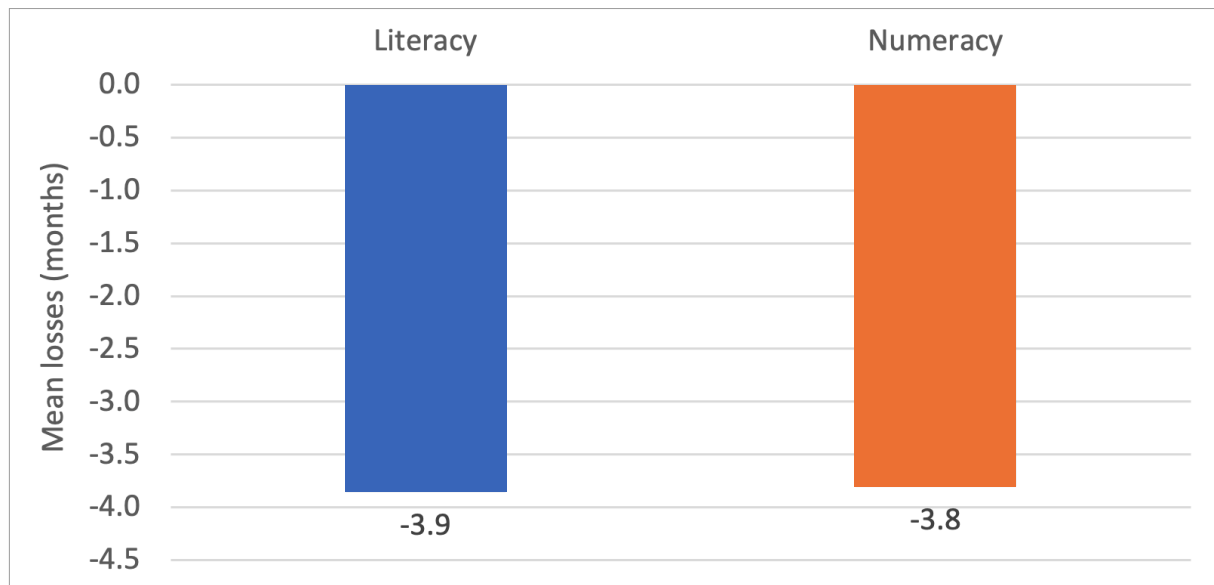
- A survey of a representative sample of 192 Headteachers from special schools and colleges in England¹
- Depth interviews with 40 specialist Headteachers
- Depth interviews with 40 families of children and young people who attend specialist settings.

There are over 430,000 pupils in England with an Education, Health and Care plan (EHCP)². Around half of these are educated in specialist settings. These pupils have a diverse range of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), from Dyslexia or hearing impairment, through Autistic Spectrum Condition and moderate to profound and complex needs, which may mean the pupils are non-verbal and/or non-mobile, medically vulnerable, with challenging behaviours and, in some cases, life-limiting conditions. This report looks at how special schools and colleges in England were able to support these children and young people between January and May 2021. This period covers the second³ educational lockdown and subsequent re-opening of on site education provision.

Levels of learning loss⁴

In our survey Headteachers reported that they thought pupils in special schools and colleges were around 4 months behind in their academic development⁵ (Figure 1). This level of loss is greater than the 2.5 - 3 month loss of progress previously reported for pupils in mainstream settings (although methods and timings of these studies vary)⁶.

Figure 1: Mean reported learning loss for pupils in special schools and colleges (in months⁷)

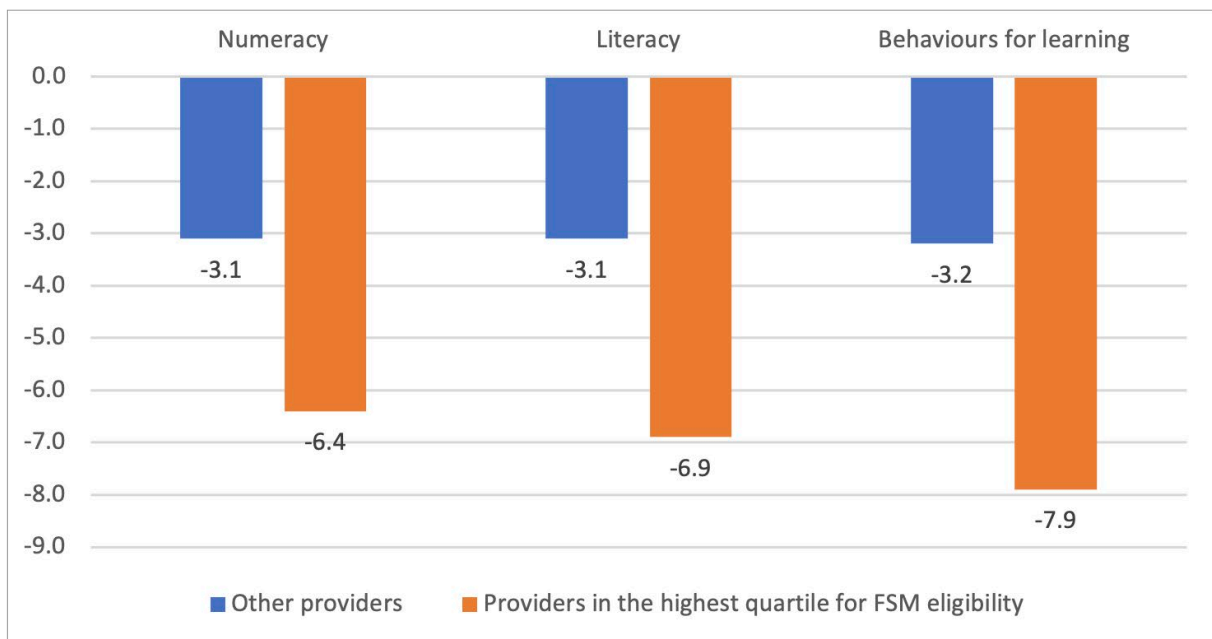


Source: ASK/NFER survey of special school Headteachers, 192 respondents

Additionally, Headteachers reported pupils were on average 4 months behind where they should be with their behaviours for learning (e.g. the emotional, social and cognitive skills required to engage in learning⁸).

Headteachers from special schools and colleges with the highest proportions of pupils facing disadvantage reported greater academic losses⁹ (Figure 2). On average these pupils were thought to be around 7 months behind where they should have been in their literacy, 6.5 months behind with their numeracy skills and 8 months behind in their behaviours for learning (i.e. between 3 and 5 months further behind than schools with lower levels of disadvantage).

Figure 2 Mean reported learning loss for pupils in special schools and colleges (in months¹⁰)



Source: ASK/NFER survey of special school Headteachers, 192 respondents

Wider developmental losses

Academic progress is only one aspect of the developmental losses experienced by pupils with EHCPs over the course of the pandemic. Headteachers rated pupils at special schools and colleges as, on average, 5 months behind with their emotional wellbeing and mental health; around 4.5 months behind with their behaviour and self-regulation; social and communication skills; and independence, self-care and life skills; and 4 months behind in their health and physical development.

Tommy is 15¹¹ and attends a school that specialises in supporting pupils with Emotional and Mental Health issues. When a teaching assistant went to visit him at home during the lockdown she found him on the roof of his house. He said he was up there so that he could 'shoot the baddies (meaning the virus), so they couldn't kill his family'.

Danielle is 12 and has autism. She struggles being in school normally and mixing with her classmates. During the second lockdown she spent most of her time locked in the bathroom doing the work she had been set. She stopped talking to her family much and started to pick at her skin until it bled.

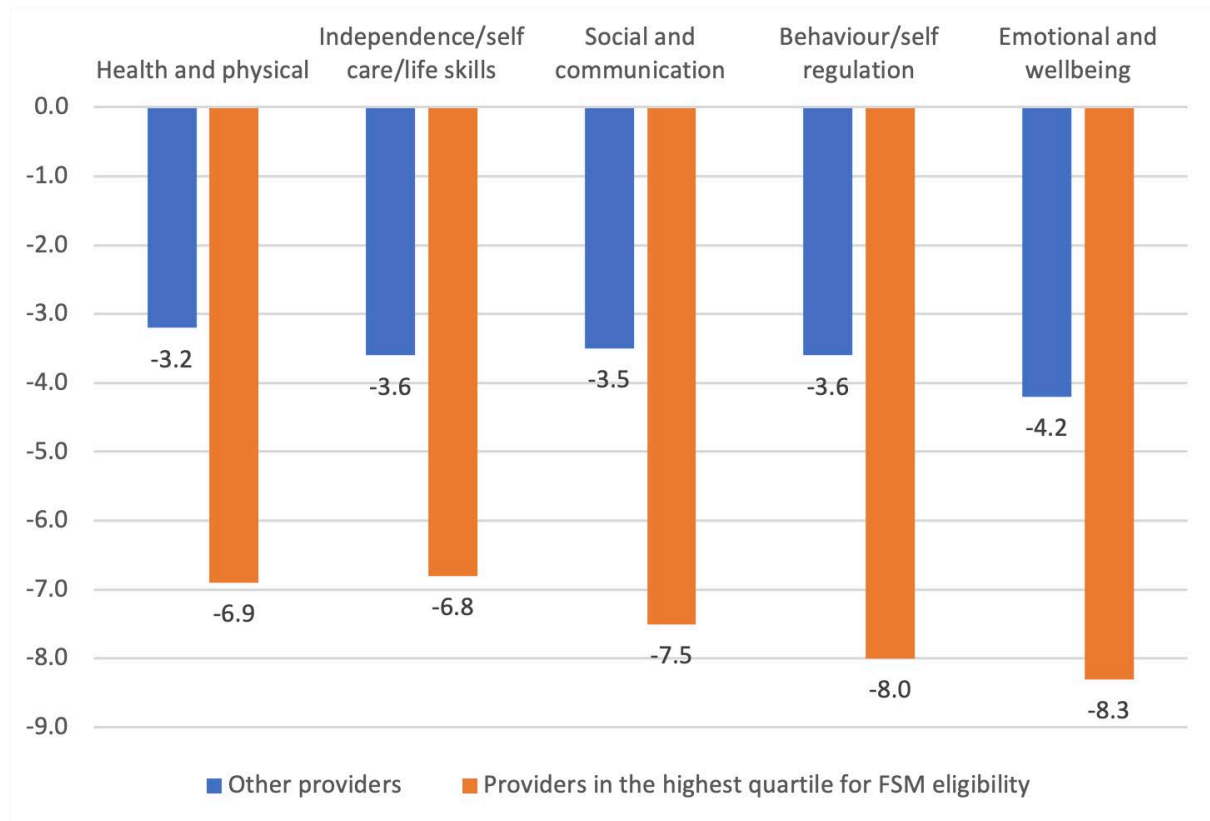
Mrs Hughes is Headteacher of a special school that caters for pupils aged 9 to 18. She described how during lockdown they had a small group of pupils who were in full-time. They had plenty of space and adult input and the school was very quiet. Since March when all of the pupils returned all of them seemed distraught, angry and unable to cope. "We had very few incidents of challenging behaviour before. Staff certainly did very little intervening with pupils. But in the last few months we have had multiple issues with children slapping, kicking, biting, hiding, refusing to engage and lashing out at others. They thrive on routine and structure and this chaos and constant changing over the last year has really affected them. We're having to strip down the curriculum to the real basics, and allowing so much more time for sensory support. We've had to set aside a classroom just for pupils to have a quiet space and to calm down so that they don't damage themselves, their friends or the staff."

In settings catering for pupils with health and physical conditions, Headteachers reported that pupils were on average over 5 months behind in their physical development.

Amira is 7 and has profound and multiple learning disabilities. She is non-verbal and has mobility issues. Amira loves going in the swimming pool but has not been able to do that since March 2020. Her mum has tried to do the stretching exercises staff would normally do with her in school, but she's worried she's not doing it right. Amira would normally spend time in a standing frame when she's at school. The school offered to bring the frame home but the family live in a flat with other young children and they couldn't fit such a large piece of equipment in anywhere. It also needs two adults to support Amira in the frame so this would be difficult at home because dad is out at work every day. Amira had been able to walk from the living room to her bedroom before the pandemic. Now she cannot manage to stand.

As with their academic progress, pupils in settings with the highest levels of disadvantage were rated to be an additional 3 to 4.5 months behind their peers in each of these areas (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Mean reported developmental losses for pupils in special schools and colleges (in months)



Source: ASK/NFER survey of special school Headteachers, 192 respondents

Reasons for losses

Headteachers and parents pointed to four key factors which they felt contributed to the scale of losses reported.

1. Pupils in special schools and colleges have had reduced time in school

Special schools and colleges were able to get more pupils into their settings in the second lockdown than during the first (January – March 2021 compared to March – June 2020). Around 74% of pupils had spent some time in their special school or college by the end of the latest lockdown. However, only around 50% were in full-time and despite Government stating that all pupils with an EHCP would get a place in their setting, 25% of pupils still did not attend at all.

Around three in ten special providers (29%) reported that demand for places was greater than they could accommodate during the latest lockdown. Special settings described why operating at full capacity during lockdowns was not possible, as:

- Not all of their staff were available (due to shielding/their own children being off school)
- They did not have space to allow for social distancing, and pupils were unable to adhere to it (due to their needs and behaviours)
- Staff and parents were not convinced that such high levels of mixing were advisable, especially for pupils with underlying conditions and medical vulnerabilities and when incidence of the virus was high.

Even in May 2021, when all educational settings were supposed to be fully open, some pupils were still not attending their specialist settings. Previous research¹² shows that after the full return to education in September 2020 attendance in special schools and colleges was around 75% (meaning 1 in 4 pupils had not returned). Our data suggests, as of May 2021, around 1 in 10 pupils had still not fully returned. This was attributed to the concerns of parents, staff and pupils about pupils with medical conditions, and general anxiety about mixing with so many others.

2. Supporting pupils when they are not in school is difficult

Remote learning was very difficult for families of pupils with EHCPs. Despite many specialist settings trying multiple methods of supporting learning at home, parents we interviewed identified that:

- They do not all have IT access (Headteachers reported around a third of families had limited IT access)
- They had competing demands on their time, including working and caring for and supporting home learning of other children.

While this was quite common for parents of all children, there were additional challenges, specifically for parents with a child with an EHCP at home:

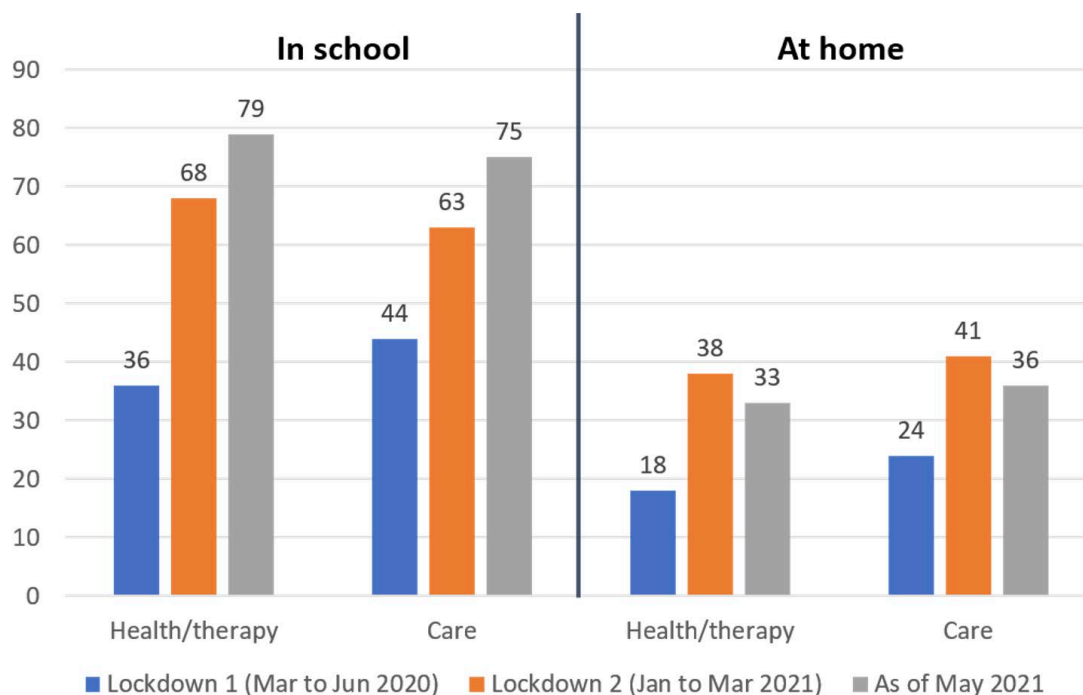
- They were unable to help their children to learn or provide the specialist support children would receive in school
- Some children and young people cannot engage with a screen due to their Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND)
- Due to the changes and disruptions to normality many children's needs and behaviours worsened, and families had little support with this. Supporting their wellbeing and happiness had to become more of a priority than learning

Headteachers and parents reported that many pupils, therefore, accessed very little learning when they were not in their special school or college.

3. It is a legal requirement that these pupils receive health, therapy, and care input, but their access to this has been severely reduced during the pandemic

Non-educational input was severely restricted during lockdown periods. Health and care professionals were often redeployed, working from home and advised not to carry out face-to-face work. Our survey shows around 7 in 10 pupils received their full legally required support whilst in school during the latest lockdown (January to March 2021¹³). Around 1 in 10 received little or no input at all. The situation was worse for pupils not able to be in school – only around 4 in 10 of these pupils received the support they were entitled to from either health or care services, with just under a quarter getting little or no support at all (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Percentage of EHCP health and care input fully delivered across different periods of the pandemic



Source: ASK/NFER survey of special school Headteachers, 192 respondents

These issues have persisted. In May 2021, Headteachers reported that around 2 in 10 pupils attending school were still not receiving their full health and therapeutic input or their social care support. Around two thirds of pupils at home were not receiving the full health or care input they should be. In addition families were struggling to manage with reduced or no access to respite services.

This lack of input was seen as leading to regression in pupils' skills, a lack of social support for parents caring for children with SEND and families in crisis being unable to access help.

4. Special settings are still having to restrict what they can offer pupils as they, and wider society, operate under safety restrictions

Due to guidance¹⁴ determining how schools and colleges should now be operating, as well as the wider social restrictions in place, Headteachers detailed how they are still unable to provide the full package of support, vital to supporting their pupils' development.

On site activities, including therapies and social events, are either severely limited or cancelled. Over half of Headteachers (52%) reported they were having to limit their in-school activities.

Off site activities (e.g. swimming, travel training, work experience) are also not able to take place in most settings. Seven out of ten Headteachers (70%) said they were having to restrict their usual out of school activities. Headteachers and parents said that these activities were integral to pupils' lives, as well as a way to deliver some of the care and support pupils with EHCPs need, and that not being able to access them was negatively impacting on their development, wellbeing and behaviour.

College A takes students to a local riding centre three times a week. They learn to care for the horses and take them out for a ride which improves pupils' core strength and mobility, as well as their mental wellbeing. The centre is staffed by volunteers who are all older and so have not been working throughout the pandemic, meaning visits to the riding centre have had to stop.

School B go to their local swimming pool with a group of eight pupils weekly. Since the pool has reopened, to adhere to safety guidance, they have implemented lane swimming only. The pupils cannot adhere to this, so they have not been attending throughout the pandemic.

School C runs a breakfast club where pupils get ready for school, have a shower and get dressed. This was an ideal opportunity for them to develop their independence skills but has not been able to happen since March 2020.

School D takes pupils to the local supermarket every day to buy their lunch. The supermarket has insisted all customers wear face masks and adhere to social distancing, which these pupils cannot do, so they have been asked not to visit.

School E is keeping each bubble in the school separate. They cannot afford to clean their food preparation areas after each bubble goes in, so only one bubble a day can now do cookery. For the older students this means they are not getting practice in preparing their own meals.

Repercussion of losses – adverse effects on parents and specialist education providers

The negative effects of this period were not just limited to pupils. Families, staff and school leaders were also reported to have been adversely affected. Many are exhausted – physically and emotionally – from dealing with the constant changes and increased support needs of children, including dealing with more challenging behaviours and circumstances.

Parents reported serious impacts on their own mental wellbeing and ability to cope. They were concerned about how well they would be able to manage over the Summer holidays if they did not receive more help soon and services did not reopen.

“I’m emotionally scarred, exhausted and cannot see how I’ll ever recover. As parents we just cannot go on. The strain has just been too great. I had Covid at Christmas but just but had to carry on caring. I’m so exhausted. It’s just been an uphill climb. I was completely exhausted after Lockdown 1, then had to find strength from somewhere for Lockdown 2. I can’t do this again” Parent

Parents also reported effects on their other children (with no SEND) and on the relationship between parents.

“It’s just been too much for his little brother. He’s seen things he should never have seen. He’s struggled with his home learning because we’ve not had time for him, we’ve been busy with [our son with SEND]. He’s not had any fun, he’s just been stuck here with us in chaos.” Parent

Headteachers often reported staff burn-out, anxiety, poor mental health and loss of resilience. Some of their staff had already left the profession and many more were said to be considering doing so.

***“I would say my staff are broken. Their mental health is dreadful. There has been a distinct lack of value for us over this time, with no textbook on how to manage what’s been going on... So we have had a high number of leavers.”
Headteacher***

Parents and schools alike felt that they had not been adequately supported and considered throughout this whole period and that they now need a break and extra support to recover.

Addressing losses – the Recovery Plan

The Government has said it will address the effects of the lockdown and associated disruptions through an Educational Recovery Plan¹⁵. However, the Headteachers of special schools and colleges felt that the suggestions made to date for this plan were unsuitable for the special sector because they did not provide what they and their pupils needed.

The survey demonstrated that:

- While 65% of Headteachers had accessed, or considered accessing, catch up funding, many felt they were ineligible or it was inadequate to cover the types and levels of additional costs they had incurred (such as specialist mental health support, pool cleaning, residential area sanitation, etc).
- Only 8% of Heads had applied for, or would consider applying for, National Tutoring Programme funding. Interviews revealed that this is because they believe their pupils will not benefit from academic input from a tutor not known to them and who is not experienced in supporting pupils at special schools and colleges.

“The NTP? Ridiculous.... It smacks of a government who has no idea and no idea of the needs of our children and families.” Headteacher

- 31% of Headteachers said they would consider running Summer schools. However, during interviews they identified that these would be to provide opportunities for fun for pupils and a break for families, rather than extra learning. Headteachers were concerned about how Summer schools could be staffed appropriately, given the need for specialist support coupled with the need for their own staff to take a break before the start of the new academic year.
- 21% of Headteachers were considering extending the school day. However the interviews showed that this was primarily to provide more opportunities for social interactions and engagement activities rather than additional teaching. There were also questions raised as to whether pupils needed, or would be able to take in, more learning at this stage. In addition, there were concerns about transport, as many pupils at special settings rely on school transport, and Headteachers were unsure whether this could be flexed to accommodate a longer day. Headteachers also said that school staff should not be expected to work additional hours, making any extension to the regular school day difficult to manage operationally.

- Headteachers and parents identified a range of measures they felt should form part of any plan to support pupils with EHCPs, their families and staff in specialist settings to help them recover. They recommended that an effective recovery plan should:
 - Focus on more than educational attainment
 - Specifically address emotional wellbeing and mental health – of pupils and staff
 - Increase health and care input for pupils with EHCPs
 - Extend support to families – ensuring they also recover and are able to support their children
 - Be informed by experts – trusting Headteachers to decide what their setting needs and how best to allocate funding
 - Allow sufficient time for real recovery – not being a ‘one off’ or short-term solution
 - Address pre-existing funding shortfalls in SEND¹⁶, which will have been exacerbated by the changes brought about by the pandemic.

“Special schools do more than just educate. The recovery period should address wellbeing and social progress as well as academic. Access to therapeutic, SaLT [Speech and language therapy] and OT [Occupational therapy] service should be more readily available.” Headteacher

“She’s missed 12 months of education. It’s not learning she’s lost out on – it’s her understanding of the world, experiences, seeing new people and seeing faces and different views. She’s lost relationships, which are hard for her to establish in the first place. She’s gone without the structure and supportive environment she needs to thrive. Basically she’s lost a year of what she needs.” Parent

Conclusions and recommendations

We make eight key recommendations for Government, locally and nationally, to:

Immediately

1. Set out how special providers can provide their full support offer safely and practically (as operating under current restrictions is too limiting)
2. Provide respite, social opportunities and family support over the Summer (without relying on staff from special provision) to prevent further damage and losses
3. Fully reinstate health and care input, address the backlog of unmet need and set out how they are going to address educational, skill, health and well-being losses.

For Autumn

4. Make the Education Recovery Plan work for pupils with SEND and their providers. This needs to:
 - Address specific areas of concern – such as mental health and emotional wellbeing, independence, physical issues, and lack of respite opportunities
 - Include additional health and care input
 - Be long term and adequately funded, based on the costs and needs of special provision
 - Trust providers to make decisions in the best interests of their pupils, families and staff.An adequate recovery plan for special education must:
 - Focus on more than just academic attainment
 - Add capacity to avoid relying on already exhausted special school staff
 - Develop approaches specifically attuned to the special school context, and not cut and paste actions designed for mainstream schools
5. Address the issue of workload and pressure in the special school sector before it affects recruitment and retention
6. Plan better for future disruption – special settings need help to stay open during lockdowns and provide full pupil support; local plans, roles and responsibilities need to be in place including the flexibility to assess possible risks versus probable effects and take proportionate action, and provide crisis support for families, with additional resource available as necessary.

Longer-term

7. Make funding sufficient to pay for costs incurred to date, full recovery from educational, skills, health and wellbeing losses and any additional support needed in the future. This is particularly important for Independent providers in the sector, who need equitable access to DfE and other support funds.
8. Make sure the SEND Review¹⁷ considers issues raised over this period, lessons learnt and current challenges being faced.

Whilst this has been a difficult time for all schools and families, the conclusions of this research are that for those working in and relying on special education, the impact of the pandemic has been even greater. A response must therefore be formulated and implemented at a pace and scale that reflects the urgent and substantial needs of the sector.

Endnotes

- 1 This represents an 11% response rate, from the sample of 1773 specialist providers in England. To ensure conclusions can be drawn about the national population of 1773 special schools based on the 192 survey responses, we must consider the sample representative of the population. The response data was weighted based on the over or under representation of school phase and FSM quartile compared to the population. The range of weightings was between 0.45 and 1.66.
- 2 This accounts for 4% of the overall headcount <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-health-and-care-plans>
- 3 This research focuses on the national lockdowns affecting education, i.e. lockdown 1 in March 2020 and lockdown 2 in January 2021. In these periods the government closed schools nationally for all pupils except those deemed 'vulnerable' and with an EHCP.
- 4 We acknowledge that 'months progress lost' is not an ideal development measure, particularly for pupils with SEND. However as no other research had looked at the effects in specialist provision and this is how effects have been calculated for pupils in mainstream settings we replicated it in order to contribute to the discussions around impacts on an equal basis.
- 5 3.9 months behind for literacy and 3.8 months for numeracy, behind where they would have been had it not been for the pandemic.
- 6 See studies reporting extent of academic losses for pupils in mainstream schools. E.g.: Blainey, K. and Hannay, T. (2021) The impact of school closures on spring 2021 attainment. Hodder Education. Available at: https://www.risingstars-uk.com/rs-assessment/whitepapers?utm_source=organic&utm_medium=sharing&utm_campaign=whitepaper_; Sharp, C., Nelson, J., Lucas, M., Julius, J., McCrone, T. and Sims, D. 'The challenges facing schools and pupils in September 2020'. NFER. Available at https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/4119/schools_responses_to_covid_19_the_challenges_facing_schools_and_pupils_in_september_2020.pdf; Renaissance learning/Education Policy Institute 'Understanding progress in the 2020/21 Academic Year'. DfE. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupils-progress-in-the-2020-to-2021-academic-year-interim-report>
- 7 The data labels in the figures are rounded to the nearest half month
- 8 <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/eef-blog-what-are-effective-learning-behaviours-and-how-can-we-develop-them/>
- 9 Those in the highest quartile for Free School Meal eligibility rates. These schools report a statistically significantly higher rate of loss than schools in the lower three quartiles ($p \leq 0.05$, using one-way ANOVA)
- 10 The data labels in the figures are rounded to the nearest half month
- 11 Details in case studies (such as name, gender and age) have been changed to protect anonymity
- 12 Sibieta, L. (2020) School attendance rates across the UK since full reopening. Education Policy Institute. [Online] Available at: <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/school-attendance-rates-across-the-uk-since-full-reopening-november/>
- 13 Under the Coronavirus Act 2020 the duty to provide full input set out in EHCPs was suspended. However, this suspension was lifted by the Secretary of State for Education in September 2020.
- 14 See Schools coronavirus operational guidance. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/schools-coronavirus-covid-19-operational-guidance>
- 15 See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-education-recovery-package-for-children-and-young-people> This plan is for all pupils in all settings
- 16 See House of Commons Education Committee (2019) Special educational needs and disabilities: First report of session 2019. Available at: <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201919/cmselect/cmeduc/20/20.pdf>
- 17 See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/major-review-into-support-for-children-with-special-educational-needs> The SEND Review publication was delayed from 2020 to 'the early part of 2021', see <https://www.cypnow.co.uk/news/article/send-review-delayed-until-early-next-year-gavin-williamson-confirms>
- 18 We acknowledge that 'months progress lost' is not an ideal development measure, particularly for pupils with SEND. However as no other research had looked at the effects in specialist provision and this is how effects have been calculated for pupils in mainstream settings we replicated it in order to contribute to the discussions around impacts on an equal basis.
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- 21 The data labels in the figures are rounded to the nearest half month
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