

# Special education during lockdown: providers' and parents' experiences

## Research summary

Amy Skipp, Vicky Hopwood & Rob Webster

With Jenna Julius & Dawson McLean, NFER

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## Research details

This study explored the experiences of special education providers (schools and colleges) and parents of children who usually attend these settings during the first national lockdown from March – August 2020. The research was carried out between 3rd July and 3rd August 2020, using:

- A representative survey of 201 senior leaders of special schools and colleges in England
- In-depth interviews with 40 providers and 40 parents or carers
- A survey of 515 parents /carers whose children attended special schools and colleges supporting children with SEND.

The report details the experiences of participants during the first national lockdown in 2020 but also offers insights into what providers and families are likely to be experiencing during the current third national lockdown (early 2021), with restrictions being placed again on education. These findings should inform policy development around any future lockdowns or changes to special educational provision as a result of Covid-19 in order to offer the best possible support to pupils, families and education staff. We have made 10 recommendations based on our findings.

## Research findings

The main findings from this research relate to four key topics, namely how the lockdown affected:

- 1 In-school provision**
- 2 Support provided at home**
- 3 Support available from health, care, and social services**
- 4 Families and their children more generally**

## 1 In-school provision

In the first national lockdown, the Government announced that schools and colleges would close to all pupils apart from those considered vulnerable, in which they included pupils with EHCPs<sup>1</sup>. This meant that special schools and colleges could have been expected to continue providing places for all of their pupils throughout the first lockdown. Most special schools and colleges (89%) were able to continue offering some school places. However, the majority had to reduce their capacity, meaning on average they could only provide around a third of their usual number of places.

Announcements about what special schools and colleges should provide in terms of school places, did not consider what schools and colleges could provide. There were several factors which affected what schools and colleges were able to offer, and for how many pupils. These included:

- **Staff availability.** Schools and colleges struggled with staff absence due to illness, self-isolation and shielding. Staff were also required to deal with their own childcare issues, with some unable to secure critical worker in-school places for their own children. Those who were available may have only been trained to support particular pupils.
- **A lack of guidance tailored to special schools and colleges.** The guidance provided by government about how education should be offered safely did not take account of features of special provision (how they operate, their size and the needs of pupils they support).
- **A lack of clarity about the level of infection risk posed to and by pupils, staff, and families in special education.** This made it difficult to determine whether there were increased risks associated with special provision. School and college leaders were therefore required to interpret what they felt was safe. This led to wide variation in the provision available.
- **Difficulties for pupils in adhering to social distancing requirements.** 98% of providers had some pupils at their school or college who they thought would find it difficult to adhere to 'safe practice' (such as social distancing) and 49% thought this was the case for the vast majority of their pupils.
- **Individual pupil support needs.** As well as some pupils being unable to adhere to social distancing, some pupils required close contact between staff and students, which made social distancing impossible. For example:
  - 76% of special schools and colleges had pupils requiring personal care such as help getting around, eating, going to the toilet or with medical monitoring.

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1. There are approximately 354,000 children and young people in England with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). An EHCP is a legal document describing a child's special educational needs and the support they require, and which their local authority must fulfill. Around half of children with an EHCP are educated in special provision (i.e. special schools or specialist post-16 colleges) and nearly all pupils in special provision (97.9%) have an EHCP.

- 98% of schools and colleges provide one to one support, such as a personal assistant or an adult who helps pupils to access learning or regulate behaviour. 51% provide this support to more than half of their pupils.

- **Part-time provision.** After June 1st (when government guidance changed to facilitate more pupils being in school<sup>2</sup>) special schools and colleges were able to offer places to more pupils. They did this by providing more places on a part-time basis, and their capacity increased slightly. This allowed more children and young people to spend some time in school.

***“By June we were getting parents who were a lot more emotional requesting places. They were just at the end of their tether.”*** Provider interview

- **The time of year.** The dry and warm weather, which characterised the first national lockdown, made it possible for schools and colleges to make use of any outdoor space (as the virus is less transmissible outdoors) and to increase their capacity (as outdoors provided more space for social distancing).
- **Transport.** A reduction, or alteration, in home-school transport services, due to factors such as staff availability and the implementation of social distancing, meant it could be difficult for pupils to get to their school or college. Aligning transport bubbles with in-school bubbles was also problematic for providers.

Many providers saw their role during this time as providing ‘childcare’ rather than teaching. 74% of providers said their aim initially was to provide childcare to pupils rather than a focus on learning.

***“Our aim is to help our pupils to tread water during this time until we get back to normal and teaching them again.”*** Provider interview

Even if offered a place, our research revealed there were a range of issues which affected whether families were able or willing to send their child into school.

Parents’ reasons for not wanting to send their child into their special school or college included:

- A lack of clear guidance meaning that some parents felt unable to assess the risks involved and/or believed they and their child were at increased risk of infection from taking up an in-school place
- Many families of children with special needs were shielding and therefore could not risk their child’s exposure to others

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2. Department for Education (2020) Policy paper. Actions for education and childcare settings to prepare for wider opening from 1 June 2020. Updated 16 June 2020[Online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-educational-and-childcare-settings-to-prepare-for-wider-opening-from-1-june-2020/actions-for-education-and-childcare-settings-to-prepare-for-wider-opening-from-1-june-2020>

- Parents were concerned that children would be unable to adhere to in-school measures, such as social distancing
- Some parents felt that the place offered to their child was unsuitable (for example, lacking their full support, or requiring changes to routines).

Parents who had sent their children into school when offered a place had done so because:

- They needed to go to work as critical workers
- They felt their child needed the continued routine of going into school or college
- Their child needed specialist input and support.

## **2 Support provided at home**

Supporting pupils from special schools and colleges at home required a lot of staff time and resources to tailor learning to children's individual needs and circumstances and provide all the other equipment and support they needed.

This research found that schools and colleges offered lots of different ways to support pupils at home over the first national lockdown period. However, this was reportedly difficult as home learning resources need to be tailored to accommodate:

- Individual pupils' needs, abilities and interests - 66% of providers said they personalised learning resources for the majority of their pupils and, on average, providers reported providing personalised feedback to 73% of their pupils.
- Families' circumstances, and parents' need for help to support their children with special learning needs at home - Nationally available resources were not suitable for these pupils. Many families also required special equipment and other items to enable home learning.

Special school and college staff found providing this tailored at-home support to be extremely resource intensive and struggled to manage it alongside catering for the needs of pupils attending school.

Not all pupils with special educational needs could access online learning (providers estimated around 30% of families had limited IT access), and many pupils struggled to engage with online learning due to their needs. Schools and colleges therefore needed to support home learning via a range of different methods.

Across special schools and colleges, those with the highest rates of pupils eligible

for FSM<sup>3</sup> faced greater challenges in supporting pupils who stayed at home over the first lockdown, with schools and college leaders fearing that there may be a further widening of the attainment gap, for those from poorer backgrounds. There were also issues with these families being able to get free school meals (or vouchers) at home.

Parents found engaging their child in learning and providing specialist support difficult. They were often trying to do this at the same time as caring for other children and trying to work.

***“It is impossible to educate a child with SEND who requires a 1-1 and also work full-time especially with another child who also requires attention and education. There is a reason he needs specialist teaching and a 1-1. Also, I am not a therapist either. He needs the therapy.”*** Parent interview

Despite how difficult it was to support pupils at home, special school and college leaders had concerns about whether pupils would return to education after the first national lockdown, which have proved to be well founded. Data from November 2020<sup>4</sup>, when education was supposed to be ‘back to normal’, showed that even at this point one in four pupils with EHCPs were not attending their specialist provision. This shows that even when the majority of pupils return to their special school or college, a significant proportion may still need to be supported at home. This means special schools and colleges will have an ongoing need to provide both in-school and at home support.

### 3 Support from health, care, and social services

Health, care, and social support were severely reduced over the first national lockdown, at a time when many families’ needs for these services increased. Gradually some services switched to being delivered ‘remotely’ but it is not clear how effective this was. This loss of support was seen as underpinning many of the issues families had experienced over this time, and leading to many of the longer-term effects of the period predicted by providers.

***“These pupils all have EHCPs, which are meant to involve support from three services. But everyone else just went home and expected us to pick it all up.”*** Provider interview

During the first lockdown it was difficult to deliver health and care services when health and care professionals were redeployed, unable to carry out face to face work, or instructed to work from home. This research found that:

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3. Free School Meals

4. Sibietta, 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/>

- The health and care support set out in EHCPs was generally not well implemented during this time:
  - Healthcare support was either not provided at all, or only to a small extent for 65% of pupils attending school or college and 83% of those at home.
  - Social care and support (including respite care and home help) was either not provided at all, or only to a small extent for 57% of pupils attending school or college and 77% of pupils at home.
- Parents described how the lack, or severe reduction, of health care services over this period had resulted in appointments being missed (for CAMHS<sup>5</sup>, physiotherapy, consultants), a lack of equipment needed for their child, and a loss of therapy input for their child.
- Schools, colleges and parents reported that this led to a regression of children's skills and abilities, and increased social isolation and mental health issues for both pupils and their parents.
- Education staff attempted to 'plug the gaps' left by this loss of support including by carrying out family welfare checks, providing food and counselling to families and managing an increasing number of safeguarding issues.
- School and college leaders felt that pupils' overall needs had increased over the first national lockdown. 72% thought that a significant proportion of their pupils would require a greater amount of support after lockdown than was previously set out in their EHCPs.

***“They have missed out on a significant amount of support and interventions. Physical deterioration could be permanent and therefore children will have far greater needs than before lockdown. This will mean more detailed assessments and more costly provision”.*** Provider survey response

## **4 Families' experiences of the first lockdown and effects on pupils.**

The experience of lockdown was very difficult for some pupils with EHCPs and their families.

***“It has been absolutely awful. I am trying to do a full-time job and home school a 5- and 3-year-old, one with ASD. My mental health is very much worse and I have felt suicidal at times.”*** Parent interview

Participants in this research described how:

- Children with EHCPs often needed constant care at home. The loss of usual support and changes to routine had, in many cases, increased children's needs or

behaviour issues.

- Some families felt the loss of respite services and in-home help, both formal and informal (for example with other family members not being able to help), acutely.
- Families reported experiencing increased stress, anxiety, and mental health issues. This had affected their ability to manage their child with additional needs, and put strain on parents' relationships.
- Parents and professionals felt that children and young people had lost skills and abilities and valuable development during the first lockdown. Families had also seen increased behavioural and mental health issues affecting their children. It was felt that the lockdown could impact on the future life chances of children with EHCPs, and that this situation would be compounded by any further disruption to learning.

## Conclusions

This research has identified clear lessons that can be learnt from during the first national lockdown. These should inform how special educational provision is planned for any future lockdowns and how 'vulnerable' families should be supported.

The research also highlights some of the difficulties children with EHCPs, their families and special education providers are likely to be facing during the current (third) national lockdown in early 2021. The government has stated that all pupils with EHCPs should now be offered a full-time place in their school or college and that the full support set out in their EHCP needs to be delivered. It is not clear to what extent the barriers identified by this research to schools and colleges offering full-time places with full EHCP support for all pupils have been addressed. Indeed, data from January 2021<sup>6</sup> suggested that only around a third of all pupils with EHCPs (across special and mainstream schools) are attending their school or college, which is a similar rate of attendance to that which we identified in special schools in the first national lockdown. This suggests that there may well still be considerable barriers to pupils with EHCPs attending school. Government must now work with the special schools and colleges to assess how to fully support vulnerable pupils, both in school and at home.

Failure to learn from the issues faced by special schools and colleges and families who attend them, from the first national lockdown, could result in the effects on children, young people and their parents being exacerbated, further damaging the longer-term life chances of children and young people with SEND.

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6. Approximately 34% of all pupils with an EHCP on roll in state-funded schools were in attendance on 13 January 2021 Gov.UK (2020) Week 4 2021 Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak [Online] Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>



## Key recommendations from this research for special education during the Covid-19 pandemic:

1. In order to provide specialist in-school and college places for a greater number of pupils with EHCPs, during the pandemic:

- More school staff need to be available, including those with appropriate skills and training to support the particular needs of children with SEND, to cope with higher than normal levels of staff absence and delivery restrictions.
- Government guidance needs to set out explicit advice for specialist providers (taking account of the ways they work and the normal activities they carry out).
- Specialist providers may need access to more physical space to deliver their support in line with safety guidance.
- Risks for pupils with special educational needs and those who work with them, and how these can be addressed, need to be clearly set out. This is in order to reduce parents' and providers' concerns about children and young people attending special schools and colleges.

2. Special schools and colleges are likely to need to continue to provide home learning support for a significant proportion of their pupils (due to isolation, shielding and part-time in-school provision). This means:

- Special schools and colleges, and families of pupils who usually attend them, need to be equipped to fully support some pupils with EHCPs at home.
- Extra resources will be required to continue providing remote learning support for pupils with EHCPs at home as this is extremely resource intensive for school staff (especially if they are also trying to support pupils in school at the same time).
- Families of children with SEND who are not able to attend school and college, need equipment, IT access, resources and support to be able to attempt home learning.
- Special schools' and colleges' ability to deliver remote learning for these pupils needs to be assessed and lessons on effective practice shared.

3. Health, care and social support services for pupils attending special schools and colleges need to be maintained in any future lockdowns, including for pupils who cannot attend their school or college. Failure to do so is likely to result in pupils' needs increasing.

4. The effectiveness of remote delivery of health, care and social support must be urgently assessed, with lessons on effective practice shared.
5. It appears the first national lockdown could have had greater effects on pupils with EHCPs facing socio-economic disadvantage. Steps must be taken to prevent this in future lockdowns and provide the extra support for recovery these pupils will need.
6. Schools, colleges and parents reported that the disruption of the first national lockdown, the lack of support, and lost opportunities for development caused mental, physical and emotional harm to pupils from special schools and colleges. To prevent issues worsening and before educational and developmental loss can be addressed, schools and colleges must be supported to focus on addressing pupils' mental, physical, and emotional needs.
7. School, colleges and parents reported that the first national lockdown placed great strain on families. Consideration needs to be given to what help they need to recover and how to ensure that during any future lockdowns they are not left isolated and trying to cope alone.
8. To help pupils with SEND recover from the disruption of this period any support and funding to help recovery (such as catch up<sup>7</sup> and tutoring<sup>8</sup> funding) must be appropriate to the needs of pupils with EHCPs and special education providers.
9. Local and national government need to help special education providers to: recover from the pandemic; develop new ways to deliver safe, full-time, in-school, fully supported places; support pupils at home; and devise plans for future lockdowns that recognise that their needs are very different from those of mainstream schools.
10. Pupil attendance at special schools and colleges and the extent to which they receive the support set out in their EHCPs needs continued monitoring to check if/ which pupils are not returning or receiving their full, legally required support.

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7 See: Department of Education (2020) Guidance catch up premium. [Online] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/catch-up-premium-coronavirus-covid-19/catch-up-premium>

8 See: Nationaltutoring.org.uk (2020) National Tutoring Programme [Online] Available at: <https://nationaltutoring.org.uk/>



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