



Covid and Childcare: The Role of Local Authorities

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Contents

Acknowledgements.....	4
About Coram Family and Childcare	4
Executive Summary	5
This study	5
Findings	5
Implications of findings	7
1. Introduction.....	9
The Covid and Childcare Study	9
The role of local authorities.....	10
Survey of local authority Early Years Leads	11
Reporting of prevalence.....	11
Report structure	12
2. Patterns of childcare through the pandemic	13
Overall levels of provision.....	14
Impacts for different types of providers.....	15
Variations in temporary closures across areas	17
Local characteristics influencing the impact	17
3. Support for parents	18
Guidance on the use of childcare.....	18
Assistance finding childcare	19
4. Support for settings	21
Health and safety.....	22
Staffing	25
Financial support.....	27
Quality	32
Other support	34
5. Overall role of local authorities.....	35
Number of policy areas and effectiveness	36
National and local balance in information messaging	37
Total local spending.....	38
Reductions in services	39

6. Factors facilitating and hindering local authority support.....	40
Facilitators and hindrances	40
Overall support.....	43
Links between facilitators and hindrances and policy	44
7. Post-pandemic expectations.....	46
Overview.....	46
Changes in parent demand	47
Changes in provision	48
Changes in the LA role	49
8. Implications of findings	51
Appendix A – Data collection and analysis.....	53
Recruiting Early Years Leads.....	53
Data collection	54
Analysis.....	54
Robustness of the data.....	55
Appendix B – Variation across area characteristics	56
Number of policy areas and effectiveness	56
Balance between national and local messaging.....	57
Level of support.....	60
Appendix C – LA Groupings	62
Description of the group measures.....	62
Patterns across LAs.....	63

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About Coram Family and Childcare

Coram Family and Childcare works to make the UK a better place for families by bringing together what it learns from its on-the-ground parent-led programmes and its research to campaign for solutions that parents want and need. It focuses on childcare and early years to make a difference to families' lives now and in the long term. Before August 2018, it was known as the Family and Childcare Trust.

Executive Summary

This study

This report focuses on the role played by local authorities (LAs) in supporting parents and childcare providers during the pandemic, the impacts of Covid on local childcare, and how the pandemic experience may permanently change the LA role in the sector. It presents the findings from semi-structured telephone interviews undertaken with 122 LA Early Years Leads between February and April 2021. It is part of a wider Covid and Childcare study exploring the impact of the pandemic on early education and care services, funded by the Nuffield Foundation and being undertaken by a team of researchers from the Centre for Evidence and Implementation, the University of East London, UCL, Frontier Economics, Coram Family and Childcare, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Childcare plays a vital role in enabling parents to work and providing early education that can help boost young children's outcomes and narrow the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers. It is also a hyper local market, with families tending to use childcare within a couple of streets of where they live, which means that building understanding at the local level is important. LAs have a unique insight into what is needed for their local communities, the extent to which these needs are being met, and what is needed to help fill any gaps.

This strand of the research does not directly focus on the impacts on children and families but on the role of LAs in supporting the childcare market to provide high quality childcare to meet the needs of local families. LA Early Years Leads have a strong insight into their local childcare market and are well placed to understand and comment on the wants and needs of local families and childcare settings. They also have oversight of all LA activity in the area. Our response rate was high and broadly representative of all LAs, but it should be kept in mind that our findings generally represent the views of a single individual within the LA and that 26 LAs did not take part.

This report provides a description of the survey findings on LA activity and local impacts. The findings will be used in later stages of the research to develop groupings of LAs to better understand the differential impacts of the pandemic on childcare and employment across the country. This will be complemented by different research strands in the project, including in-depth case studies in ten local areas and systems mapping of the childcare system.

Findings

Childcare market

- ▶ Demand for parent-paid hours fell substantially during the first lockdown and stayed significantly below usual levels even after restrictions changed in June 2020 due to the shift to home working and parents reducing or stopping work temporarily (on furlough) or permanently (through unemployment). Demand for these hours fell more than demand for free entitlement hours, although many LAs also reported declines in demand for funded hours for two-year-olds. Childcare usage has returned unevenly across the country since childcare reopened to all children in June 2020, with some areas seeing demand steadily rising across the period and others seeing demand staying low or dropping again in December 2020 / January 2021.

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- ▶ In terms of immediate threats of closure, the financial impacts on providers were reported to be quite moderate. Few permanent setting closures due to the pandemic were reported and most LAs reported either no or small numbers of providers at substantial risk of having to close in the near future. However, many LAs noted that it was important to wait and see what the financial impacts would be once financial supports had been withdrawn and the longer-term impacts of the pandemic had played out.
 - ▶ There was a mix of views on whether and how the quality of provision had been affected, and many Early Years Leads were not confident to make a judgement on this. While a large number of adverse impacts were reported, such as the removal of some toys or changed staffing responsibilities meaning less time with children, some LAs reported quality benefits from bubbles and smaller numbers.
 - ▶ Concerns about the future of the out-of-school sector were raised throughout the survey, both from the impact of reduced demand from parents working from home and from continuing delivery challenges reducing supply.
 - ▶ More than half of LAs thought there would be permanent changes in parent demand, in childcare provision, and in the LA role in the sector. However, only around a quarter (32 LAs) thought there would be change across all three elements, with most LAs thinking some aspects would change but not others. Hence, while the majority of LAs are expecting some shifts in the childcare market, the majority are not expecting changes in all three aspects of the childcare landscape, suggesting that wholesale change is not widely anticipated.

Support provided by local authorities

- ▶ Almost all¹ LAs reported that they had supported parents around childcare use during the pandemic, including through providing guidance and childcare brokerage (supporting parents to find a childcare place). This guidance was reported to have mainly encouraged attendance or to have taken a neutral approach regarding whether children should attend.
- ▶ All LAs reported supporting childcare providers during the pandemic and this support responded to the most pressing local needs. All gave support around health and safety issues, including advice and assistance and improving access to personal protection equipment (PPE). Just over half of LAs provided support around staffing issues.
- ▶ LAs also reported providing support in other areas to mitigate the negative effects of the pandemic, with two-thirds (80 LAs) reporting specific measures being offered in almost all policy areas, including the two types of policies supporting parents (guidance on using childcare and assistance to find childcare) and the five types of policies supporting providers (health and safety, staffing challenges, financial management, local financial support, and quality).²
- ▶ Total local additional spending to support childcare provision through the pandemic was considerable in many LAs, but there was substantial variation, with several LAs reporting no additional spending.

1 Approximate quantities correspond to specific numbers of LAs as follows: one or two LAs = literally one or two LAs; a few LAs = 3 to 9 LAs; several LAs = 10 to 20 LAs; many LAs = 21 to 60 LAs; a high proportion of LAs = 61 to 90 LAs; most LAs = 91-114 LAs; almost all LAs = 115-121 LAs; and all LAs = 122 LAs.

2 Although the number of policy areas where LAs had actively offered support could be captured in a reasonably comparable way, it was not possible to measure the extent of support offered by each LA within each policy area.

Effectiveness of local authority support

- ▶ Although LAs were active in a large number of policy areas, supporting parents and providers, they struggled to assess the effectiveness of these activities, with only nine LAs reporting that their actions had been effective in four or more of the seven areas of support.
- ▶ LAs reported a long lists of factors which had facilitated and hindered the LA's role in supporting provision during the pandemic. Many of the same factors were listed as both facilitators and hindrances, sometimes even within the same LA. The areas which elicited the largest numbers of comments were:
 - Whether there was strong senior and political support for the early years sector within the LA, allowing for quick and strong decisions to be made;
 - The status, recognition, and understanding of the early years sector within government (at both the local and national levels);
 - How quickly and effectively new technological approaches and online communications were developed; and
 - The national government guidance.
- ▶ Many LAs also mentioned the importance of the strength of the LA Early Years Team and the use of external support such as regional co-operation with other LAs and assistance from national organisations such as Hempsalls.
- ▶ National government guidance was the most common hindrance discussed by LAs, although some did identify the guidance as a facilitator. But the factor that elicited the most strongly worded views was the status of the early years sector, with a strong feeling that the sector is undervalued and not understood within government, both at the national and local levels.
- ▶ LAs which felt least supported had been active, on average, in fewer policy areas in supporting parents and providers during the pandemic.

Implications of findings

The LA survey provided a rich source of information about the impacts of the pandemic on childcare providers and how LAs seek to support the sector. The survey findings suggest several implications for broader discussion.

There is currently no widespread view among LAs that the childcare sector is on the brink of financial disaster. Most areas have not seen, and do not at this time foresee, widespread closures that would lead to shortages of childcare. While this is reassuring, many also cautioned that it is too early for making conclusive judgements. In addition, they saw a reduction in demand for childcare, particularly for hours paid for by parents. If this change is permanent, the market may be able to adjust to this change in demand in some areas, but the fact that most childcare settings provide both parent-paid hours and the government-funded early education entitlement, and cross subsidise between these two income streams, means that reductions in parent-paid hours could have negative spillover effects on provision for the funded early education entitlement. It could also have negative impacts for groups already poorly served by the childcare market, such as children with special educational needs and disabilities and families working atypical hours. It is worth noting that even small shortages can prevent parents from being able to work or can cause children to miss out on their early education entitlement. The impact of a decline in demand on local childcare markets and on children and parents with different needs will be explored in the in-depth case studies in ten areas.

LAs raised particular concerns about school-age childcare. This group were already facing shortages pre-pandemic and LAs saw a substantial contraction in their local markets through the pandemic. Despite almost twice as many children using school-age childcare as nurseries, this part of the market for school-age children has received less attention than early years provision over the last year, heightening concerns about childcare shortages. Working parents rely on out-of-school childcare to enable them to work the average working day: a reduction in supply could have negative effects on the ability of parents, and mothers in particular, to take on paid work.

LAs were not able to say with confidence what the effect the pandemic had been on childcare quality. Given the role of quality in supporting the development of young children, it is important that this information gap is addressed in order to inform whether and how additional action is needed to maintain quality and support improvements across the sector.

It is clear that LAs have played an active role in supporting childcare providers and families through the pandemic. Individual interviewees also highlighted how LAs had been able to take a nimble and responsive approach to address local need as and when it emerged.³ The range and variations in the *nature* of this support suggest that they have been responding to emerging local needs with bespoke local approaches. However, the level of activity has been inconsistent, possibly driven by variation in local priorities and resources for childcare, as highlighted in the range of facilitators and hindrances at play across different areas. While the ability to make localised interventions based on local need is a major strength of the LA role, it is concerning that this ability may be limited by local constraints in some areas.

³ The case studies will also explore in greater depth how the nature, level, and reach of LA support has affected local families and providers in ten areas.

1. Introduction

The Covid and Childcare Study

Covid has placed unprecedented demands on the English early education and care system, potentially exacerbating longer-term weaknesses in the system's ability to consistently deliver high quality and equitable services. With funding from the Nuffield Foundation, a team of researchers from the Centre for Evidence and Implementation, the University of East London, UCL, Frontier Economics, Coram Family and Childcare, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies are exploring the impact of the pandemic on early education and care services. The research will also highlight lessons for improvements at both the national and local levels to support a sustainable, high quality system for the longer term.

The study addresses five questions:

- ▶ How has the pandemic affected children's and parents' needs for and access to early education and care services in different local contexts?
- ▶ How is Covid changing the nature and viability of early education and care provision in different local contexts, and how are services responding?
- ▶ Has local support for early education and care services mitigated the effects of the pandemic, and how is this mediated by local labour market conditions?
- ▶ What opportunities and weaknesses in the early education and care system are highlighted by Covid, and what can we learn from these about building resilience in the system?
- ▶ What should the role of local authorities be, and what tools do they need to support the early education and care system in future?

The study involves several interlocking strands:

- ▶ A survey of all local authorities (LAs) in England in spring 2021 to investigate their responses to supporting childcare services during the pandemic and their views on the impacts of Covid. Data from this survey will be combined with large-scale data from before and during the pandemic to identify how changes in childcare provision and parental employment over the pandemic period are related to local circumstances and policy reactions;
- ▶ In-depth analysis of the challenges faced by the early education and care system in ten case study LAs using qualitative interviews with parents, providers, LA early years staff and employers, undertaken in spring/summer 2021;
- ▶ A mapping of the component parts of the early education and care system and the relationships between them to explore the challenges the system faces and how it could be better managed and adapted to address these challenges; and
- ▶ Workshops with national stakeholders to map the findings at local level into the broader national context.

This report presents the initial findings from the survey of LAs undertaken in early spring 2021. Interim findings from other strands will be available throughout 2021, with a final report planned for spring 2022.

The role of local authorities

Childcare plays a vital role in enabling parents to work and providing early education that can help boost young children's outcomes and narrow the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers. It is also a hyper local market, with families tending to use childcare within a couple of streets of where they live, which means that building understanding at the local level is important. LAs have a unique insight into what is needed for their local communities, the extent to which these needs are being met, and what is needed to help fill any gaps.

This strand of the research does not directly focus on the impacts on children and families but on the role of LAs in supporting the childcare market to provide high quality childcare to meet the needs of local families. LA Early Years Leads have a strong insight into their local childcare market and are well placed to understand and comment on the wants and needs of local families and childcare settings. They also have oversight of all LA activity in the area. However, it should be kept in mind that our findings generally represent the views of a single individual within the LA and that 26 LAs did not take part.

LAs have a range of responsibilities in supporting and promoting early education and childcare in their area. They are responsible for the commissioning of services for the free early education entitlement for all three- and four-year-olds and disadvantaged two-year-olds, allocating the funding received from the Department for Education (DfE) to settings. LAs also have a statutory duty to ensure sufficient childcare for working parents, as far as is practical, although they are not permitted to provide places directly unless there are no private or voluntary sector organisations willing to do so. LAs also have a wide range of duties to promote high quality early years provision and should provide a Family Information Service (FIS) with information for families about all aspects of early years and childcare services.

In light of this role, the purpose of the LA survey was twofold:

- ▶ To provide a description of the impacts of Covid on childcare provision and the patterns in how LAs responded to support parents and providers; and
- ▶ To develop a set of “groupings” of LAs based on their responses to be used in the analysis of changes in childcare provision and parental employment due to the pandemic.

This report meets the first of these objectives, presenting the data from the survey in a largely descriptive manner, with a technical appendix describing the groupings of LAs. Subsequent work will combine these groupings with national datasets on childcare provision (from Ofsted, the Survey of Childcare and Early Years Providers, the Early Years Census, and Coram Family and Childcare's Childcare Survey) and labour market outcomes (the Labour Force Survey and local labour market statistics) to consider how the childcare and employment patterns related to the groupings of LA support.

Survey of local authority Early Years Leads⁴

Semi-structured telephone interviews were undertaken with Early Years Leads during February to April 2021. A total of 122 interviews were completed, a response rate of 82%,⁵ with an average duration of 51 minutes. The discussions covered three areas:

- ▶ The impacts of the pandemic on childcare provision and how context affected the impacts;
- ▶ How LAs responded to support childcare provision in their area and whether this support was effective; and
- ▶ Views on longer-lasting impacts and how the LA role in supporting childcare provision might be permanently changed.

Two points should be noted about the robustness of the data. First, the high response rate and the fact that the demographic profile of responding LAs is very similar to that for the population of LAs indicate that the views given should be broadly nationally representative. However, there is a concern that the small number of LAs which did not participate may systematically include those where childcare is of lower priority. Despite significant efforts, we were not able to identify an Early Years Lead in seven LAs. Hence, while the data may represent the average cases well, there is a possibility that a small group of LAs which are less active in childcare policy are not fully represented.

Second, the information is dependent upon the knowledge and views of (typically) one individual in each LA. While this is not ideal, it can be argued that Early Years Leads are the most knowledgeable individuals on LA policy and actions and are likely to be the best placed to give an account of the broad experience of childcare provision within the LA. As far as possible, we have indicated where Early Years Leads found some questions challenging to answer.

Reporting of prevalence

The responses from the survey are presented in two ways.

- ▶ Where information was collected from questions directly asked in all interviews with a single or limited answer, the responses are presented as numbers or proportions of LAs (including not answered), capturing a measure of prevalence of each response. Proportions are used when there were responses for all or almost all LAs, or all or almost all of the relevant LAs, and numbers are used when response rates were low due to a large number of cases of “don’t knows” or the question was not answered.
- ▶ Where information was recorded as open-ended lists or points raised during the discussion, it is presented with an approximate measure of the numbers of LAs which listed or raised the point. As in broader qualitative analysis, this is to indicate the approximate nature of the reported prevalence and to highlight that the issues may have been less salient but not necessarily unimportant to other respondents.

⁴ Further details about the survey and the analysis are presented in Appendix A.

⁵ Three LAs operate with a shared Early Years Lead for another LA, so there were a possible 148 interviews from the 151 LAs.

The approximate quantities refer to specific numbers of LAs as follows:

- ▶ One or two LAs = literally one or two LAs
- ▶ A few LAs = 3 to 9 LAs
- ▶ Several LAs = 10 to 20 LAs
- ▶ Many LAs = 21 to 60 LAs
- ▶ A high proportion of LAs = 61 to 90 LAs
- ▶ Most LAs = 91-114 LAs
- ▶ Almost all LAs = 115-121 LAs
- ▶ All LAs = 122 LAs.

Report structure

The remainder of the report is structured as follows:

- ▶ Section 2 describes the different patterns of childcare provision through the pandemic across LAs and the challenges that the pandemic presented.
- ▶ Section 3 presents the support that LAs gave to parents in terms of guidance on using childcare and helping parents to find places.
- ▶ Section 4 examines the challenges faced by childcare settings and the support given by LAs for health and safety, staffing, financial support, and quality of provision.
- ▶ Section 5 provides an overview of the role of LAs in childcare provision during the pandemic, considering the number of areas of support, the balance between national and local sources for messaging, additional local spending, and reductions in the services offered by LAs.
- ▶ Section 6 reviews the factors that facilitated and hindered the ability of LAs to give support to settings and considers the links with the level and type of support offered.
- ▶ Section 7 considers post-pandemic expectations and views on how childcare and the role of the LA may have been permanently altered by the pandemic.
- ▶ Section 8 discusses some implications from the findings.

Appendix A provides additional information on the survey, while Appendix B considers how the measures of the overall LA role (from section 5) and level of support (from section 6) relate to area characteristics. Appendix C presents the derivation of the kind of data that will be derived from the survey to combine with the large-scale data to consider how changes in childcare provision and parental employment over the pandemic period are related to local circumstances and policy reactions.

2. Patterns of childcare through the pandemic

This section describes the patterns of childcare provision through the pandemic as reported by the Early Years Leads in the 122 LAs which took part in the survey. Patterns in overall levels of provision across the phases of the pandemic are considered first, followed by an examination of the impacts for different types of providers and across different areas within the LA. Specific local conditions or events which influenced the local impact of the pandemic are then presented.

These patterns were driven by a mix of government guidance, settings' opening decisions, and the demand for childcare by parents. As it was typically not possible to untangle the influence of these different drivers (particularly to identify how much was settings' decisions and how much was parent demand), this description focuses on the levels and types of childcare used, with suggestions for the types of factors driving the patterns.

The key findings are:

- ▶ There were two main distinctive patterns of overall levels of provision as the pandemic developed: either demand was reported as low throughout the pandemic or generally rising following the initial drop in March 2020 or LAs also reported a second drop in demand and usage around the time of the second and third national lockdowns in December 2020 / January 2021.
- ▶ The majority of LAs interviewed at the start of the fieldwork period (in February 2021) reported that childcare demand was still low at the time of the interview, but most⁶ LAs interviewed at the end of the fieldwork period (second half of March and April) reported that demand was normal or near normal.
- ▶ Demand for parent-paid hours fell substantially due to the shift to home working and parents reducing or stopping work temporarily (on furlough) or permanently (through unemployment). Demand for these hours fell more than demand for free entitlement hours, although many LAs also reported declines in demand for funded hours for two-year-olds.
- ▶ There were very mixed reports on which provider types had the greatest reductions in provision, with some types (voluntary providers, schools, and childminders) affected by delivery issues as well as changes in demand. But LAs were unanimous that out-of-school (wrap-around) provision had suffered substantial reductions.
- ▶ There were few clear patterns in temporary closures reported: a few LAs indicated more closures and greater reductions in demand in areas of specific ethnic, religious, or cultural identity, and a few reported that closures were more prevalent in rural areas than urban areas. Several LAs reported that deprived areas had been hardest hit, but a few reported that affluent areas had greater impacts.

6 Approximate quantities use specific terms which translate into bands of numbers of LAs as follows: one or two LAs = literally one or two LAs; a few LAs = 3 to 9 LAs; several LAs = 10 to 20 LAs; many LAs = 21 to 60 LAs; a high proportion of LAs = 61 to 90 LAs; most LAs = 91-114 LAs; almost all LAs = 115-121 LAs; and all LAs = 122 LAs.

Overall levels of provision

Of the 122 LAs, 108 provided a description of the overall levels of provision across the key phases of the pandemic. Unsurprisingly, all reported that the numbers of children in childcare were severely down during the initial lockdown between March and May 2020 when only children of key workers and vulnerable children were permitted to attend. A few LAs mentioned that numbers were low even for vulnerable children and another few mentioned that the numbers were low for both vulnerable children and children of key workers.

Following the opening-up of provision from June 2020, the patterns across the LAs then diverged, as summarised in table 1.

Table 1 – Patterns of levels of childcare use from June 2020 to early Spring 2021

	Number of LAs	Percentage of LAs
Low throughout	22	20%
Rising June-Dec and drop with onset of second lockdown in late December 2020	22	20%
Rising June-Dec to almost normal and year-end drop	14	13%
Rising throughout	40	37%
Rising June-Dec to almost normal from Dec	10	9%
Total	108	100%

Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Around one in five (22 LAs) reported that use of childcare was simply low throughout. Around a third (22 LAs and 14 LAs combined) reported that use had risen through 2020 but there had been a substantial drop with the onset of the second lockdown in late December. Several of these (14 LAs) reported that use had returned to almost normal (or normal) prior to the end-of-year drop. Although not specifically asked, a few LAs mentioned that the drop in use in late December was related to the closure of schools, with one reporting that provision had closed to all except children of key workers and vulnerable children and a couple indicating that provision was much more variable across different areas during this post-Christmas period. However, the most common pattern (40 LAs) across the entire period from June 2020 was one of simply rising use throughout without any marked drop at the end of the year, while almost one in ten (10 LAs) reported that use was almost normal (or normal) from the end of 2020.

Table 2 – Levels of childcare use in early Spring 2021 (at time of interview)

	Number of LAs	Percentage of LAs
Low	58	54%
Still rising	22	20%
Near normal	20	19%
Normal	8	7%
Total	108	100%

Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

By the time of the interviews in February to April 2021, most (58 LAs) LAs reported that childcare use was still low (table 2). A few LAs mentioned specific reasons for the ongoing low use and all focused on a lack of parental demand, including home working, parents being on furlough or unemployed, and school children being at home. One in five LAs (22 LAs) reported that use was still rising, while over a quarter reported that childcare numbers were either back to near normal (“reasonably healthy”) (20 LAs) or back to normal (8 LAs).

Information on the current level of childcare use changed quite dramatically over the fieldwork period. As shown in table 3, the proportion reporting low demand fell and the proportion reporting a return to near-normality or normality rose through February and March, in line with schools reopening on 8th March and gradual easing in other Covid restrictions.

Table 3 – Levels of childcare use in early Spring 2021 by week of interview

	February weeks 1-2	February weeks 3-4	March weeks 1-2	March week 3 to April week 3
Low	72%	61%	50%	20%
Still rising	17%	19%	29%	15%
Near normal	3%	16%	11%	55%
Normal	7%	3%	11%	10%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%
Number of LAs	29	31	28	20

Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Impacts for different types of providers

Of the 122 LAs, only 10 reported that the patterns in use of childcare had been similar across different types of provision and different types of providers, while most LAs (112) described some variations in the impacts.

Most LAs described a marked difference in the impacts for parent-paid hours and for funded (free early education entitlement) hours:

- ▶ A high proportion (over half) of LAs reported that use of parent-paid hours had been reduced to a greater extent than funded hours, although several LAs reported that they had not seen any marked difference between the two.
- ▶ Many LAs reported that use of the funded hours for two-year-olds had declined more than other types of provision, although a couple of LAs reported that use of these funded hours had increased (possibly explained by rising unemployment, which meant that more families became eligible).
- ▶ A few LAs reported that use of the 30 hours element of the free entitlement funding (for working parents) had declined more than other types of provision, typically in conjunction with a greater decline in use for parent-paid hours.

Parent-paid hours and the 30 hours free entitlement are typically used to support parents to work, whereas the free entitlement for two-year-olds is targeted at disadvantaged families and is primarily used by low-income and / or workless families. Together with the universal 15-hour free entitlement for three- and four-year-olds, the two-year-old entitlement aims to narrow the achievement gap between disadvantaged children and their peers before starting school. Changes in demand for free entitlements and parent-paid hours will therefore be driven by different factors and have different impacts for local families and services.

The picture across provider types was much more mixed across LAs:

- ▶ A few reported that private day nurseries had been particularly adversely impacted, but a few also reported that numbers in private nurseries had increased (due to school closures).
- ▶ Several LAs reported that numbers with sessional or voluntary providers had been particularly low, sometimes because the community venues that they used were not available or because the older and voluntary staff were more reluctant to continue working. There was one case where numbers were reported to have increased due to school closures.
- ▶ Many LAs reported substantial reductions in provision in schools, primarily due to: settings' decisions, including those of nursery classes not to reopen from June 2020 or to close again in January 2021 even in the absence of guidance to close; more limited or less flexible opening times; and taking a smaller number of children. A few LAs mentioned that numbers in schools had been lower due to reduced parent demand because older siblings were not in school. On the other hand, a few LAs reported that provision in schools had reduced less than other types and that nursery classes had remained open when other settings had not.
- ▶ Only a small number of LAs mentioned specific impacts for maintained nursery schools (MNS) and the picture was particularly mixed: a few LAs reported that MNS had closed while a few reported that MNS had remained open throughout with reasonable numbers.
- ▶ The picture for childminders was the most varied. Many LAs reported that childminding provision had increased or held stable in their area, and a roughly equal number of LAs reported that childminding had reduced more than other provision, while a few LAs simply reported a mixed picture that some childminders had expanded while others had reduced or closed provision. A few Early Years Leads praised the childminding sector for having maintained provision and being more robust than other providers. Some suggested that childminding had expanded because childminders were viewed as smaller and safer; because they provided care when nurseries closed; and because they were more flexible. Others suggested that childminding had reduced numbers because of lower demand from home working; shielding or health concerns on the part of childminders; a lack of government support; and the virtual disappearance of shared care arrangements (whereby a child uses more than one setting or provider).
- ▶ Responses were unanimous from many LAs that out-of-school (wrap-around) provision had been substantially down and this part of the sector was typically reported as having had the greatest reductions in numbers. Suggested reasons included reduced demand due to home working and children not being in schools, but other explanations included a lack of school premises or schools wanting to reduce multiple contacts. A few LAs suggested that lack of government guidance and financial support was also a factor.

Finally, variation in impacts across two other dimensions of provider characteristics were reported:

- ▶ Several LAs noted that there had been a reduction in shared care, partly due to guidance on reducing the number of contacts but also due to home working reducing the number of hours of care needed each day.
- ▶ Two LAs reported that temporary closures had been more prevalent among larger settings than smaller settings, while a few reported the reverse – that larger settings had tended to have fewer closures and to open more quickly after any closure.

Variations in temporary closures across areas

Of the 108 LAs which responded to the question about temporary closures across areas, several (14) reported that there had been very few or no temporary closures and a high proportion (63) reported that there had been no clear pattern in closures across areas. Only 31 LAs described some pattern in closures and impacts across areas and the patterns were not strong:

- ▶ A few LAs reported that temporary closures had been more prevalent and reduction in provision had been greater in areas of specific ethnic, religious, or cultural identity.
- ▶ A few LAs reported that temporary closures had been more prevalent in rural areas than in urban areas.
- ▶ Several LAs reported that temporary closures had been more prevalent and reduction in provision had been greater in more deprived areas, while a few reported the reverse – that closures had been more prevalent and reduction in provision had been greater in more affluent areas.

Local characteristics influencing the impact

A high proportion (87 LAs) reported that there had been no specific local conditions or events that had led the pandemic to have particular impacts on childcare demand and provision in their area. Only 34 LAs reported that there had been specific local conditions or events which meant that the pandemic had resulted in particular impacts on childcare demand and provision in their area, although a further five mentioned relevant conditions or events in other parts of the survey.

Conditions or events which had reduced childcare demand or hindered the ability of the LA to give support to the sector included:

- ▶ Several LAs mentioned having areas of specific ethnic, religious, or cultural identity or of high deprivation. Conversely, one or two LAs mentioned that having particular affluent areas had meant a greater impact on childcare demand.
- ▶ Several LAs mentioned high Covid infection rates and/or high levels of health concerns.
- ▶ A few LAs mentioned local lockdowns as a key factor.
- ▶ A few LAs mentioned having severe employment shocks for large employers or sectors within the area.
- ▶ A few LAs mentioned having sparsely populated rural areas.

Conditions or events which had helped to maintain childcare demand included:

- ▶ A few LAs mentioned having high NHS employment, which had buoyed demand through key workers.
- ▶ A few LAs mentioned having access to lateral flow tests for early years staff.
- ▶ One or two LAs mentioned that bordering another LA which had closed provision had helped to maintain demand within its own area.

3. Support for parents

This section considers how LAs supported parents during the pandemic. It first examines how the LAs provided guidance to parents on whether and how they should use childcare during the pandemic and then focuses on how LAs gave additional assistance to parents to find childcare.

The key findings are:

- ▶ Almost all⁷ LAs gave guidance to parents on the use of childcare during the pandemic. This guidance was reported to have mainly either encouraged attendance or have taken a neutral approach regarding whether children should attend.
- ▶ Almost all LAs gave assistance to parents to find childcare places. This was often through existing FIS and brokerage systems, although many LAs did enhance these systems in some way.
- ▶ The majority of LAs felt that their guidance had helped to inform parents' decisions, but most LAs were less certain that the assistance in finding places had made a difference.

Guidance on the use of childcare

Almost all LAs (117 of the 122 in the survey) had provided some guidance to parents on whether or how to attend childcare (top panel in table 4).

Six different approaches for providing guidance to parents were mentioned:

- ▶ The most commonly reported approach, reported by a high proportion of LAs, was via LA websites or social media.
- ▶ Many LAs had provided guidance to parents via childcare providers.
- ▶ Many LAs had used their FIS.
- ▶ Several LAs mentioned using interactive communications to provide guidance, including dedicated telephone helplines or point of contact, Q&A sessions, and one-to-one or group discussions.
- ▶ Several LAs had conveyed guidance through related professionals such as Special Educational Needs (SEN) support and schools.
- ▶ A few LAs mentioned the use of leaflets or postal contacts.

In terms of the topics covered in the guidance to parents, LAs mentioned several areas:

- ▶ The most common area, reported by a high proportion of LAs, was health and safety issues.
- ▶ Many LAs had provided guidance on the availability of places.
- ▶ Many LAs had provided guidance on attendance rules.
- ▶ Many LAs had provided guidance on child development.
- ▶ Several LAs mentioned support for home learning when the child was not in attendance.
- ▶ A few mentioned guidance on sources of help, transitions between settings, and transitions into school.

⁷ Approximate quantities correspond to specific numbers of LAs as follows: one or two LAs = literally one or two LAs; a few LAs = 3 to 9 LAs; several LAs = 10 to 20 LAs; many LAs = 21 to 60 LAs; a high proportion of LAs = 61 to 90 LAs; most LAs = 91-114 LAs; almost all LAs = 115-121 LAs; and all LAs = 122 LAs.

Table 4 – Support for parents on the use of childcare

	Number of LAs	Percentage of LAs
Gave guidance on the use of childcare?		
No	5	4%
Yes	117	96%
Total	122	100%
Did guidance inform parents' decisions?		
No	17	15%
Yes	63	56%
Sometimes / in a limited way	13	12%
Don't know / hard to say	20	18%
Total	113	100%
Did guidance encourage or discourage attendance?		
Neutral / balanced approach	34	29%
Encouraged	41	35%
Discouraged	7	6%
Neither as not clear which message to give	11	9%
Don't know / hard to say	25	21%
Total	118	100%

Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

More than half (63 LAs) felt that this guidance had informed parents' decisions, while a further 13 LAs reported that it had informed decisions on occasions or in limited ways (middle panel in table 4). Only 17 LAs felt that it had not played a role in parents' decision-making, while 20 LAs reported that they did not know whether the guidance had been influential.

In terms of whether this guidance had broadly encouraged or discouraged attendance, a high proportion of LAs reported that their guidance had sought to be broadly neutral or balanced (34 LAs) or had encouraged attendance (41 LAs) (bottom panel in table 4). Only a few LAs felt that the guidance had discouraged attendance. Almost a third (36 LAs) stated that they could not say whether the guidance had encouraged or discouraged attendance, either because of a lack of consistency in the messages (11 LAs) or because they simply did not know (25 LAs).

Assistance finding childcare

Almost all LAs reported that parents had generally been able to find the childcare they needed⁸ during the pandemic. Several LAs mentioned that there had been some specific difficulties finding places for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). A few LAs reported particular issues for children under the age of two; out-of-school (wrap-around) and holiday provision; and in rural areas. A few LAs noted some problems for all parents during the first lockdown or for children of key workers during the first lockdown.

⁸ And, presumably, were permitted to use it under Covid restrictions during the first lockdown.

Most LAs (106 of the 121 which responded to the question) reported that they had given additional assistance to parents to find childcare in response to the pandemic (upper panel of table 5). Many LAs mentioned that this additional support had only been needed in the initial stage of the pandemic and that it had been particularly needed for children of key workers, vulnerable children, and children with SEND. A few LAs highlighted that the assistance required had been less than they had initially expected.

Table 5 – Assistance finding childcare

	Number of LAs	Percentage of LAs
Gave additional assistance finding childcare?		
No	15	12%
Yes	106	88%
Total	121	100%
Did additional assistance help parents?		
Yes	36	34%
Everyone had a place / no complaints	58	55%
Everyone had a place if not first choice	2	2%
Not answered	10	9%
Total	106	100%

Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

The additional assistance almost exclusively used existing approaches to support parents to find childcare:

- ▶ Many LAs (47) reported that this additional assistance had operated through the FIS, but reported that the FIS had operated in the normal way for most of these (28) and only a minority (19) had enhanced the service or had extra elements because of the pandemic.
- ▶ A high proportion of LAs (81) reported using brokerage services to support parents, but about half of these (39) had offered brokerage in the usual way while the other half (42) had enhanced the brokerage service or added extra elements.
- ▶ A few LAs had used hubs to assist parents to find childcare.

Around a third of the LAs which had given this assistance felt that it had helped parents, while over half reported that everyone had had a place if not necessarily due to the additional assistance (lower panel of table 5). Almost one in ten LAs gave no answer on whether it had helped parents.

In addition, many LAs mentioned in other parts of the survey that the double funding of free entitlement places (payments made to both settings when a child moved from one setting to another) had been used to assist parents to relocate to available childcare places.

4. Support for settings

This section examines how LAs supported settings through the pandemic. It describes the support for health and safety, staffing, setting finances, quality, and other areas of assistance.⁹

The key findings are:

- ▶ Health and safety issues presented widespread and multiple challenges for providers. All LAs offered some support in this area. The most prevalent approaches were offering advice, assistance with risk assessments, and access to free or discounted cost PPE.
- ▶ Staffing issues were not widespread and only just over half of LAs reported giving support in this area. Several LAs¹⁰ reported that help had not been needed or that contingency plans relating to staffing had not been used due to lack of need.
- ▶ In terms of immediate threats of closure, the impacts on financial sustainability for providers were reported to be quite moderate. Few permanent setting closures due to the pandemic were reported and most LAs reported either no or a small number of providers at substantial risk of having to cease operation. However, many LAs noted that it was important to wait and see what the financial impacts would be once financial supports had been withdrawn and the longer-term impacts of the pandemic had played out.
- ▶ LAs supported providers financially in three ways. First, almost all gave financial management advice, often using external organisations to assist. Second, most followed government guidance and paid free entitlement funding on the basis of expected rather than actual attendance. Finally, a high proportion allocated local funds to support providers, most typically through discretionary sustainability grants.
- ▶ Many LAs struggled to say conclusively whether the quality of provision had been affected by the pandemic and there was a mix of views on how the quality may have been affected. While a large number of adverse impacts were reported, some LAs reported quality benefits from bubbles and smaller numbers. A high proportion of LAs reported they had given additional quality support in response to the pandemic, although most of those that had not done so stated the reason was because they were always supportive of quality.
- ▶ For all four areas, quite low proportions (26 LAs or less) reported that the support had been effective, while around half responded positively (but with less conviction) to the question on effectiveness in terms of having had positive feedback from providers or noting that settings had not closed.

⁹ While this describes how LAs supported settings, it was not possible to capture information on the precise depth of support in terms of the numbers of settings supported or the duration of support or the amount of resources used.

¹⁰ Approximate quantities correspond to specific numbers of LAs as follows: one or two LAs = literally one or two LAs; a few LAs = 3 to 9 LAs; several LAs = 10 to 20 LAs; many LAs = 21 to 60 LAs; a high proportion of LAs = 61 to 90 LAs; most LAs = 91-114 LAs; almost all LAs = 115-121 LAs; and all LAs = 122 LAs.

Health and safety

Before discussing how the LAs had supported providers in meeting new health and safety requirements, Early Years Leads were first asked which of the new requirements they felt had impacted providers to a significant degree. The most commonly cited aspect, reported by a high proportion of LAs (table 6), was staff and child bubbles. Many LAs reported cleaning and PPE as having a significant impact, while social distancing was reported by many often as part of an “all aspects” were significant response. Several LAs mentioned the exclusion of parents from premises as having a significant impact, while a few mentioned lateral flow testing. Only a few LAs responded that they thought all aspects of the new requirements had generally been managed without significant impacts.

Table 6 – Health and safety requirements with significant impacts on providers

	Number of LAs	
	Individually mentioned	Individually mentioned plus covered in all aspects
None – all were managed	7	7
Cleaning	52	60
PPE	48	52
Lateral flow testing	6	6
Social distancing	16	34
Staff and child bubbles	84	87
Exclusion of parents from premises	11	11
Not answered	3	3

Notes: The columns do not sum to 122 because respondents could give multiple answers. A total of 119 of the 122 LAs gave some response. The “plus all aspects” in the final column adds an aspect listed in the question probes where there was a response of “all aspects” or “everything” and the aspect had not been directly mentioned.

Early Years Leads also gave some further insights on the nature of the impacts:

- ▶ Many LAs reported that the main issue with the cleaning requirements had been the financial cost, while several mentioned the staff time required for the cleaning. A few highlighted how the cleaning requirements had led to a slight shortening of opening hours or reorganisation of the timetable. On the other hand, a few LAs reported that they thought that the cleaning aspect had not been too difficult.
- ▶ Many LAs reported that the main issue with PPE had been the cost (including the occasional sharp rises in prices) and/or availability. Several highlighted that another issue had been the need for guidance or training on how to use the PPE, while a few mentioned that the lack of parity between schools and other types of settings in the provision of PPE had given rise to a sense of being undervalued or resentment by non-school settings. On the other hand, several LAs reported that the use of PPE had not been a problem, often because the sector already used some types of PPE.
- ▶ Several LAs mentioned that social distancing had simply not been possible (or had even been harmful) in the context of early years provision.

- ▶ Many LAs reported that the issue with the staff and child bubbles had been the reduction in flexibility in the use of staff, particularly in maintaining ratios, and the consequent need to use more staff. Several LAs mentioned that the bubbles had also created additional management costs and had required new management skills, while several highlighted that it had been difficult to interpret the guidance on bubbles. A few LAs noted that the bubbles had led to reductions in capacity for some settings and increased delivery costs. A few also noted that bubbles had had particular impacts for providers with restricted venue space and that management of the bubbles had been particularly challenging for out-of-school provision and those involved in shared care arrangements. On the other hand, several LAs reported that the use of bubbles had not been too difficult more generally.
- ▶ A few LAs gave some insights into the problems of excluding parents from the premises, including the child's emotional reaction (especially when first settling in), new arrangements and child safety at drop-off and pick-up, and the reduction in contact and engagement between staff and parents (including for safeguarding).
- ▶ On lateral flow testing, a few LAs mentioned the lack of access for non-school providers (again giving rise to some resentment) or highlighted issues around complicated rules for testing or time needed to visit testing centres.

More broadly, a few LAs noted the totality of the financial costs and staff time required to meet the new health and safety requirements, including the time spent on understanding the guidance and developing their risk assessments. There was some division in views on whether meeting the new requirements had been harder for small providers (including childminders) or whether it had been easier for childminders to meet the new requirements. However, there was a unanimous view that meeting the requirements had been harder for private, voluntary and independent (PVI) providers than for schools.

All LAs reported that they had provided support to settings to help meet the health and safety requirements of the pandemic (top panel in table 7).

Table 7 – Supporting settings with health and safety requirements

	Number of LAs	Percentage of LAs
Has the LA helped settings meet the health and safety requirements of the pandemic?		
No	0	0%
Yes	122	100%
Total	122	100%
Was the support effective / made a difference?		
Yes	25	20%
Appreciated by providers	63	52%
Mixed response / providers dissatisfied	9	7%
No	*	*
Don't know	*	*
Not answered	22	18%
Total	122	100%

Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding. * indicates 1 or 2 LAs and 1% of 2% (not shown for disclosure reasons).

The support for health and safety requirements covered nine areas:

- ▶ A high proportion of LAs reported that they had made guidance available and had signposted to further guidance sources.
- ▶ Many LAs had provided virtual network meetings or webinars to give advice and answer questions.
- ▶ Many LAs had made specific staff available to assist providers or had undertaken regular visits or one-to-one meetings with providers.
- ▶ A high proportion of LAs had given support for the preparation of settings' risk assessments, often offering risk assessment templates.
- ▶ A high proportion of LAs had provided help to access PPE or had distributed free PPE or offered PPE at reduced cost through bulk buying.
- ▶ A few LAs also mentioned giving advice on how to use PPE.
- ▶ Several LAs had provided financial assistance or free access to cleaning and cleaning materials.
- ▶ Several LAs had offered help with lateral flow testing or vaccinations.
- ▶ A few LAs mentioned support for reporting and dealing with Covid infections.

Within almost all LAs, the support covered multiple elements across these nine areas. Only 18 LAs reported a single element of support, while 50 LAs reported two elements and the remainder (54 LAs) reported three or more elements used.

Many LAs mentioned the involvement of health and safety staff in providing this support, including through co-working in delivering webinars and virtual meetings and in developing and assisting settings with risk assessments. Several LAs noted how the support for schools had differed from that for other providers, including that schools had generally received more support or had been able to organise and manage health and safety independent of the LA support.

One in five LAs felt that the support had been effective and had made a difference to provision, while over half reported that this support had been appreciated by providers (bottom panel in table 7). A small proportion reported that there had been a mixed response, with some providers dissatisfied with the support, while a substantial proportion (one in five) did not answer whether the support had been effective.

Staffing

Before discussing how the LA had supported providers with any staffing challenges, Early Years Leads were first asked whether settings had reported staff shortages related to the pandemic. Only 17 LAs responded that there had been no reports of shortages, while 7 LAs responded that there had been staffing issues but these had been managed so had not resulted in a shortage, and 24 LAs responded that there had been a few cases of shortages. The remaining 74 LAs reported that there had been staff shortages and some staff-related setting closures.

Table 8 – Staffing issues

	Number of LAs	
	Individually mentioned	Individually mentioned plus covered in all issues
None	17	17
Staff (or family) needed to shield	23	23
Older staff needed to shield	5	5
Staff illness / positive cases	43	57
Staff need to isolate	35	35
Health concerns about working	19	33
Staff children unable to attend school / key worker status issue	23	23
Staff need to look after own children / reluctant for own children to be in school or childcare	14	27
Less use / availability of agency staff	3	3

Notes: The columns do not sum to 122 because respondents could give multiple answers. All 122 LAs gave some response. The “plus all issues” in the final column adds an issue listed in the question probes where there was a response of “all issues” or “everything” and the issue had not been directly mentioned.

The most commonly cited staff issue was staff illness or positive Covid cases (table 8). Many LAs also reported other health-related issues including staff needing to shield (especially older staff) or self-isolate and staff having health concerns about working. A second set of issues centred on the need of staff to look after their own children. Many LAs reported staffing issues arising from early years staff needing to look after their own children, including cases where these children had been unable to attend school because early years staff had not (at least initially) qualified for key worker status and where early years staff had been reluctant to send their own children to childcare or school. A few LAs mentioned that reduced use and availability of agency staff had given rise to staffing issues.

There were mixed views on which types of providers had had greater staffing issues. A few LAs reported that staffing had been more difficult for small providers (including childminders) because large settings had been better able to manage the issues. But a few providers reported that the issues had been greater for PVI settings, while a few others reported that staffing problems had been greater for school-based provision.

Table 9 – Supporting settings with staffing

	Number of LAs	Percentage of LAs
Has the LA supported settings in meeting any staffing challenges arising from the pandemic?		
No	53	43%
Yes	69	57%
Total	122	100%
Was the support effective / made a difference?		
Yes – effective or appreciated by providers	26	38%
No - did not make a difference	5	7%
Don't know	3	4%
Not answered	35	51%
Total	69	100%

Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Just over half (69 LAs) reported that they had provided support to settings to help meet staffing challenges arising from the pandemic (upper panel of table 9). Several LAs reported that such support had not been needed and they had not received any requests for help from providers, while a few LAs reported that contingency plans had been made to support staffing but had not been used. A few LAs mentioned that staffing issues were not a matter for the LA because provision was privately run and the LA therefore had no influence on staffing. A few others noted that settings or schools had developed their own hubs for resolving staffing issues. Finally, several LAs noted that there had been barriers, including safeguarding procedures such as police checks, to staff sharing or reallocating staff across settings.

The support for staffing included four areas:

- ▶ The most common type of support had been guidance on staffing, often with regards to the furlough scheme and on safe staff recruitment. This had been provided by several LAs.
- ▶ Several LAs had offered support for staff well-being and stress management.
- ▶ Several LAs had considered or offered support to reallocate staff across settings, but it was only used in less than half of the LAs which had considered or offered it.
- ▶ Several LAs had considered or offered LA staff to help in settings, but, again, it was only used in less than half of LAs which had considered or offered it (and was consequently only used in a few LAs).

Where staffing support had been provided, most LAs did not know or did not answer whether it had been effective in helping settings (lower panel of table 9). Of those that did give a response, most thought that it had been effective or had been appreciated by providers, while a few LAs felt that it had not made a difference.

Financial support

Before discussing how the LA had supported providers with any financial difficulties arising from the pandemic, Early Years Leads were first asked about the financial impacts of the pandemic on providers in their area. For these questions, it is worth noting that Early Years Leads are unlikely to have detailed knowledge of the financial position for individual settings, but they are likely to have good understanding of the local childcare market and use of particular settings, including the number of children attending settings and levels of occupancy.

Many LAs reported that there had been no permanent closures due to the pandemic among group-based providers (table 10).¹¹ A high proportion reported a number of permanent closures (or responded with “a few” or “some”), but most of these LAs then added that all or most would have closed at some point soon and that the pandemic was the final factor leading to closure. Overall, only 12 LAs reported that there had been more than two closures due to the pandemic.

Table 10 – Numbers of permanent closures due to the pandemic

	Number of LAs		
	All	Most would have closed anyway	Due to pandemic
No closures	33	n/a	n/a
1 closure	28	20	8
2 closures	22	17	5
3-9 closures	24	17	7
10 or more closures	5	3	2
A few / some closures	10	7	3
Total	122	64	25

Notes: Setting closures were typically reported separately for group-based settings and childminders and this table presents the figures for group-based providers.

The picture was broadly similar for childminders: of the 47 LAs which specifically commented on childminders, 39 LAs reported that turnover for childminders had been as normal, while 7 LAs reported a net loss of childminders and 1 LA reported a net gain in the number of childminders.

It was quite challenging for some Early Years Leads to estimate the number of providers in severe financial difficulties, defined as settings at substantial risk of having to cease operating. Several LAs noted that this was hard to estimate and one suggested that some settings would struggle to know this themselves. Many LAs did not offer a precise estimate but responded in quite broad terms. Where precise numbers of proportions were reported, the closure of 2 or fewer settings and the closure of 1% to 2% were categorised as lower levels, while the closure of 3 to 50 settings or 2% to 15% were categorised as being at higher levels. Many (21 LAs) reported that no settings had been in severe financial difficulties due to the pandemic alone, while many (37 LAs) indicated that only a lower level in the number or proportion of settings had been in severe difficulties due to the pandemic (table 11). Several LAs indicated a higher level in the number or proportion (13 LAs) with widespread financial difficulties (7 LAs) due to the pandemic.

¹¹ Setting closures were typically reported separately for group-based settings and childminders. One or two LAs reported a single number which was unusually high and likely combined group-based and childminders.

Table 11 – Numbers of providers in severe financial difficulties due to the pandemic

	Number of LAs	Percentage of LAs
None / only those struggling anyway	21	17%
Very few / not many / some	27	22%
1-2 settings or 1%-2% of settings	10	8%
3-50 settings or 3%-15% of settings	13	11%
Many in severe financial difficulties / widespread financial difficulties	7	6%
Hard to know / don't know	11	9%
Not answered	33	27%
Total	122	100%

Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

Although they did not report any or substantial numbers of immediate financial problems, many LAs noted that it was important to wait and see what the financial impact of the pandemic on childcare provision would be in the longer term. In particular, there were several concerns about what might happen to provision when the government financial supports were withdrawn and when the longer-term picture on home working became clearer. On the other hand (and in almost equal numbers), many LAs were more optimistic about the future, reporting that replacement openings of settings (new settings had opened whether others had closed) had continued, that more openings were in the pipeline, and that there were signs of future expansion.

Early Years Leads were asked about three areas of financial support for settings:

- ▶ Support for financial management
- ▶ Additional free entitlement funding
- ▶ Allocation of local funds to directly support settings financially.
- ▶ Each of these is considered in turn below.

LA support for financial management

Almost all LAs (116 LAs) reported that they had provided support to settings for financial management during the pandemic (top panel of table 12).

Table 12 – Financial management support

	Number of LAs	Percentage of LAs
Has the LA supported settings with financial management support during the pandemic?		
No	6	6%
Yes	116	95%
Total	122	100%
Was the support effective / made a difference?		
Effective / it works	10	9%
Effective – kept settings open	36	31%
Effective – appreciated by providers	23	20%
Did not make a difference	*	*
Don't know	*	*
Not answered	40	34%
Total	116	100%

Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding. * indicates 6 or fewer LAs and 1% to 5% (not shown for disclosure reasons).

This support consisted of four types:

- ▶ The most commonly reported type by a high proportion of LAs was from early years advisers. However, a few LAs remarked that these advisers did not have any specialist business experience.
- ▶ Many LAs reported that they had offered business support through network meetings, webinars, or bulletins and a few mentioned that they had offered business or financial “training” for settings.
- ▶ Many LAs indicated that support had been available from generic (covering all sectors) LA business advisers and support.
- ▶ Many LAs had used external support organisations, including 31 LAs which specifically mentioned Hemsalls¹² as a helpful source and several LAs which mentioned other national and local business support organisations (with national and local mentioned in almost equal measure).

More than half of LAs reported that they had used a mix of types of support from two or more of these groups.

A high proportion (69 LAs) felt that the support had been effective, although most did so on the basis that settings had remained open or that the support had been appreciated by providers (bottom panel of table 12). Almost all of the remainder did not know whether it had made a difference or did not offer an answer on the effectiveness.

¹² Hemsalls is a national organisation which supports organisations (particularly early years, childcare and activity providers, local authorities, and central government) to achieve best practice in services for children, young people, and families.

Additional free entitlement funding

The normal process for determining free entitlement funding allocations from DfE to LAs is to use the annual census count of the number of hours taken up by children in each LA in January. This is the mid-point of the academic year and so balances the relatively lower numbers eligible for the free entitlements in the autumn term and the higher numbers in the summer term. This means that, in normal circumstances, LAs would be paid for the summer term 2020 based on the January 2020 census data, and for the autumn term 2020 based on the January 2021 census. However, in July 2020, DfE asked LAs to continue funding providers as if the pandemic had not happened, with the LA autumn term funding being based on the January 2020 census count. In other words, funding for March to December 2020 would be based on “expected” attendance using numbers for the 2019/2020 academic year in order to financially support settings which faced low attendance without a parallel reduction in delivery costs. This was issued as guidance rather than as a statutory requirement, that is, it gave direction to LAs on what they “should” rather than “must” do.

Table 13 – Free entitlement funding for March-December 2020

	Number of LAs	Percentage of LAs
Based on expected attendance throughout	37	30%
Followed Government guidance	57	47%
Based on expected attendance in Summer term and actual attendance in Autumn term	9	7%
Based on expected attendance and then actual attendance (unspecified timing)	6	5%
Based on expected attendance during two lockdowns and actual attendance during summer	*	*
Based on actual attendance throughout	7	6%
Don't know / not answered / unclear	*	*
Total	122	100%

*Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding. * indicates 6 or fewer LAs and 1% to 5% (not shown for disclosure reasons).*

According to the Early Years Leads, most LAs (94 LAs) had paid free entitlement funding on the basis of expected attendance rather than actual attendance for the period March to December 2020 (table 13). Most expressed this as payment which had “followed government guidance” but many were explicit that this had been based on expected (or 2019) numbers. A few of those which had followed government guidance also mentioned using top-up funding or making adjustments to numbers when using actual attendance numbers, indicating some variation in the interpretation of what following government guidance meant.

Many LAs had deviated from the dominant pattern and reported that they had paid free entitlement funding on the basis of actual attendance for all or some of the period. Most of these reported that they had used top-up funding or had made adjustments to numbers when using actual attendance numbers.

Several LAs mentioned that payment on the basis of expected numbers could be problematic for settings which had not been open in 2019 or for settings which were delivering more places than in 2019. It was also noted that payment based on historic numbers had reduced the incentive for settings to increase child numbers. A few LAs reported that expected numbers had specifically not been used for two-year-old children and for childminders because the numbers had differed so much from 2019.

In addition to the adjustments around expected and actual numbers, many LAs had also paid double funding for free entitlement places when a child had moved from one setting to another.

Local funds to financially support settings

A high proportion of LAs (86 LAs) reported that, in addition to the national financial supports, the LA had allocated local funds to directly support settings financially (top panel of table 14). Some of the LAs without additional funding support noted that settings had been eligible to apply for generic business grants available to all sectors.¹³

Table 14 – Local funds to financially support settings

	Number of LAs	Percentage of LAs
Has the LA allocated local funds to directly support settings financially?		
No	35	29%
Yes	86	70%
Not answered	1	1%
Total	122	100%
Was the support effective / made a difference?		
Effective / it works	19	22%
Effective – kept settings open	32	37%
Effective – appreciated by providers	5	6%
Too early to tell	6	7%
Not answered	24	28%
Total	86	100%

Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

The local financial support for settings came in several forms:

- ▶ A high proportion of LAs reported that they had used discretionary sustainability grants to support settings and a few had used the underspends from overall funding.
- ▶ Many LAs reported that they had topped up the free entitlement funding from local funds.
- ▶ Several LAs reported use of Covid recovery or business scheme grants.

As noted above, a high proportion of LAs had provided PPE free or at discounted cost, and several had provided cleaning or cleaning materials for free. A few also noted that some settings had benefited from rent suspensions using LA premises.

There were few reports of support having been targeted to specific types of providers. Several LAs had targeted support to childminders who were not eligible for national supports, while a couple of LAs reported targeting out-of-school provision for support.

Many LAs (56 LAs) which had provided local financial support felt that it had been effective, although many did so (again) on the basis that settings had remained open or that the support had been appreciated by providers (bottom panel of table 14). A few LAs thought that it was too early to tell whether this financial support had been effective in supporting settings. A few LAs also mentioned that demand for this support had been lower than they had expected.

¹³ Total amounts of additional local spending are explored in section 5, but detailed figures for amounts of direct financial support for settings were not collected.

Quality

Before discussing how the LA had supported provision quality (defined as how well a child's experience in a setting supports the child's cognitive and social development), Early Years Leads were first asked how they thought the pandemic had impacted the quality of provision.

Just under a quarter of LAs (28 LAs) felt that quality had generally not been affected (table 15), while just over a third (42 LAs) reported that quality had not been as normal, and a further 11 LAs thought that the pandemic must have impacted quality. Just over a third of LAs (41 LAs) responded that it was hard to know whether there had been an impact on quality (several mentioned the absence of site visits as a reason) or did not answer the question.

Table 15 – Impacts on the quality of provision

	Number of LAs	Percentage of LAs
Quality generally not affected	28	23%
Quality not as normal	42	34%
Logic says quality must have been affected	11	9%
Hard to know / not answered	41	34%
Total	122	100%

Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

A large number of ways in which quality had been (or must have been) adversely affected by the pandemic were reported:

- ▶ In terms of staffing, several LAs reported that the educational focus of provision had been diminished due to extra work “keeping children safe”. A few LAs mentioned that staff anxiety about the pandemic had been transferred to children. One or two LAs raised issues around there being fewer staff, less staff training, and a lack of access for specialist staff and services.
- ▶ In terms of physical environment, several LAs reported that the removal of some physical resources (toys and play equipment) had been detrimental to the child's experience. A few LAs mentioned the lack of physical contact between staff and children (particularly for younger children) and that social distancing had impacted play and communication. A few LAs also highlighted how face masks may have had negative impacts on speech and language development.
- ▶ For childminding, one or two LAs noted the absence of opportunities for childminders to meet up in groups or enjoy trips out.
- ▶ The interrupted patterns of attendance were reported by a few LAs to have been unsettling for children when back in provision, while several mentioned that absences had meant that settings had been working with children beginning from a lower starting point developmentally and with more behavioural issues from the additional time spent at home.
- ▶ While one or two LAs noted that settling into provision had been harder for children when parents were not permitted into the setting, one or two LAs reported that this had sometimes been easier when parents were not in attendance for extended periods.

More broadly, several LAs noted that non-attendance per se would have detrimental impacts on children's development, although some acknowledged that time at home could be beneficial for some children.

A few LAs mentioned some positive impacts on provision. A few felt that the bubbles, lower ratios, and small numbers (particularly in the first lockdown) had been beneficial for children, while others felt that provision might have improved through more outdoor play, more staff attention, and more focused play. In addition, a few LAs praised providers' commitment and adaptability to maintain the quality of the child's experience.

Among the LAs which reported that quality had been affected, many (29 LAs) mentioned only negative impacts, while 1 LA mentioned only positive impacts and 8 LAs mentioned both negative and positive impacts. Among LAs which thought quality must have been impacted (but did not know) or reported that it was hard to know, several still mentioned specific examples and the balance was a little more even: 12 LAs mentioned only negative impacts, while 7 LAs mentioned only positive impacts and three LAs mentioned both negative and positive impacts.

A high proportion (87 LAs) reported that the LA had provided additional support for provision quality in response to the pandemic (top panel of table 16). Among those which reported no additional support, around two-thirds stated that there had been no additional support because they were always supportive of quality.

Table 16 – Additional support for quality

	Number of LAs	Percentage of LAs
Has the LA provided any additional support for provision quality in response to the pandemic?		
No	32	28%
Yes	87	71%
Not answered	3	2%
Total	122	100%
Was the support effective / made a difference?		
Effective / it works	25	29%
Good feedback from providers	47	54%
Did not make a difference / low take-up	4	4%
Don't know	3	3%
Not answered	8	9%
Total	87	100%

Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

The additional support for quality came in several forms:

- ▶ The most common approach was training through virtual platforms, reported by many LAs. Many LAs also reported additional support for quality through virtual meetings and events, while several had increased one-to-one online contact.
- ▶ Many LAs reported that they had used quality advisers for the additional support, while a couple of LAs reported they had used lead teachers to enhance quality support.
- ▶ Several LAs had posted materials or had provided other books, resources, or information to support quality.
- ▶ A few LAs had offered free or discounted training subscriptions.
- ▶ Several LAs had developed home learning materials to share with parents.

The objectives of the additional quality support also varied:

- ▶ The most common objective cited by many LAs was to support vulnerable children and children with SEND, while a couple of LAs reported that the support had been targeted at two-year-olds.
- ▶ Several LAs reported that the objective had been to support language development.
- ▶ Several LAs reported that the objective had been to support well-being and mental health.
- ▶ A few LAs reported using a recovery curriculum to help children catch up after periods of absence, while a couple had used approaches to support children to settle back into settings.
- ▶ A few LAs had aimed to support preparation for the Early Years Foundation Stage reform and a few had been focused on supporting Ofsted ratings.
- ▶ A few LAs reported that the focus had been on supporting outdoor and physical activity.

Many LAs (25 LAs) which had offered additional support for quality felt that it had been effective, while many (47 LAs) reported good feedback from providers for the support (bottom panel in table 16). A few LAs felt that it had not made a difference or that the support had had low take-up.

Other support

In addition to the areas covered in the preceding sections, a few LAs mentioned some overarching approaches for pandemic-related support. These included:

- ▶ The creation of a dedicated Covid information hub for providers and parents;
- ▶ Support for provision for children with SEND; and
- ▶ Support for provision for vulnerable children.

Although only reported as overarching themes by a few LAs, most LAs had dedicated webpages to pandemic-related information and many mentioned a focus on support for children with SEND and vulnerable children within the approaches described above.

5. Overall role of local authorities

This section focuses on the overarching LA role in supporting childcare provision during the Covid pandemic. It begins by summarising the evidence from the previous two sections to examine the number of policy areas where LAs took additional actions in response to the pandemic and how effective the policy was considered across all these areas. The number of policy areas where LAs actively offered support is used as a measure of the degree of LA activity because it can be captured in a reasonably robust way that can be compared across LAs.¹⁴ This section also explores other measures of LA activity covering the balance of national and local messaging, total local spending, and whether there was any reduction in local services to accommodate the additional pandemic-related support.

The key findings are:

- ▶ All LAs had pandemic-related policy in at least three of the seven policy areas covering the two types of policies supporting parents (guidance on using childcare and assistance to find childcare) and the five types of policies supporting providers (health and safety, staffing challenges, financial management, local financial support, and quality). Two-thirds (80 LAs) reported offering pandemic-related support in six or seven policy areas. This variation in the number of policy areas highlights how some LAs had broader involvement in supporting the sector than other LAs. However, it should be noted that although the number of policy areas where LAs actively offered support could be captured in a comparable way, it was not possible to measure the extent of support offered by each LA within each policy area.
- ▶ Although LAs were active in a large number of areas, they struggled to assess the effectiveness of these activities, with only 9 LAs reporting that their actions had been effective in four or more policy areas.
- ▶ LAs generally indicated that there was a mix of national and local messaging for both parents and providers. But almost a third (38 LAs) predominantly used local messages rather than national sources, while the remaining LAs were roughly equally split across using simply “a mix” of local and national sources; mainly using national messages but translated into the local context; and mainly using national messages or signposting to national sources.
- ▶ Total local spending to support childcare provision through the pandemic was considerable in many LAs¹⁵ but there was substantial variation, with several LAs reporting no additional spending.
- ▶ Half of LAs reported that there had been no reduction in the early years services they delivered during the pandemic. Many others reported that the only change had been a switch from face-to-face to online contact, with some uncertainty about whether this constituted a reduction in services or change in method of delivery. Several LAs mentioned a complete withdrawal of some services which had been face-to-face and some reduction in staff training.

¹⁴ It was not possible within this limited survey to measure the depth of support offered in terms of numbers of parents or providers supported or the duration of support within each policy area for each LA.

¹⁵ Approximate quantities correspond to specific numbers of LAs as follows: one or two LAs = literally one or two LAs; a few LAs = 3 to 9 LAs; several LAs = 10 to 20 LAs; many LAs = 21 to 60 LAs; a high proportion of LAs = 61 to 90 LAs; most LAs = 91-114 LAs; almost all LAs = 115-121 LAs; and all LAs = 122 LAs.

Number of policy areas and effectiveness

Table 17 presents the number of policy areas where LAs provided pandemic-related support covering seven areas, including the two types of policies supporting parents (guidance on using childcare and assistance to find childcare) and the five types of policies supporting providers (health and safety, staffing challenges, financial management, local financial support, and quality).¹⁶ The number of policy areas where LAs actively offered support is used as a measure of the degree of LA activity because it can be captured in a reasonably robust way that can be compared across LAs. It was not possible to measure the extent of support offered in terms of numbers of parents or providers supported or the duration of support within each policy area for each LA. Hence, the number of policy areas is the best measure of the extent of LA activity than can be derived from this survey.

Table 17 also presents the number of areas where LAs responded positively to the question on whether the policy had been effective in supporting parents or providers. As shown in the previous sections, these responses were divided into: (a) less conclusive statements, which included positive feedback from parents or providers, an absence of complaints, accounts of help for parents in a limited or occasional way, and reports that settings had not closed; and (b) clearer statements that the policy had been effective and/or had made a difference to providers or parents.¹⁷ Table 17 presents the number of areas where either response was given (“positively viewed”) and the number of areas where the stronger statement was given (“effective”).

Table 17 – Number of policy areas, positively viewed policy areas and effective policy areas

Number of policy areas	Pandemic-related policy		Policy areas positively viewed		Policy areas reported as effective	
	Number of LAs	Proportion of LAs	Number of LAs	Proportion of LAs	Number of LAs	Proportion of LAs
None	---	---	3	2%	23	19%
1	---	---	3	2%	32	26%
2	---	---	13	11%	39	32%
3	2	2%	22	18%	19	16%
4	13	11%	31	25%	5	4%
5	27	22%	32	26%	*	*
6	50	41%	16	13%	*	*
7	30	25%	2	2%	---	---
Total	122	100%	122	100%	122	100%

Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding. * indicates 3 LAs or fewer and 1% to 2% (not shown for disclosure reasons). See text for explanation of positively viewed policy areas and policy areas reported as effective.

All LAs had pandemic-related policy in at least three of the seven policy areas covering the two types of policies supporting parents (guidance on using childcare and assistance to find childcare) and the five types of policies supporting providers (health and safety, staffing challenges, financial management, local financial support, and quality). Two-thirds (80 LAs) reported offering pandemic-related support in six or seven policy areas. This variation in the number of policy areas highlights how some LAs had broader involvement in supporting the sector than other LAs.

¹⁶ It should be noted that this count is not reliant on the areas most salient in respondents' minds because a separate question on whether the LA had offered any support was specifically asked for each clearly defined area.

¹⁷ As support to settings for staffing received so few positive responses and the responses were particularly ambiguous between being positively viewed and being effective, all responses were counted as effective.

The number of areas where LAs had any indication that policies had been useful was generally lower. Moreover, almost one in five (23 LAs) did not report that the support had been effective in making a difference in any of the areas, while only 9 LAs reported that it had been effective in four or more areas. No LA reported that it had been effective in all areas where it had offered support, and only 3 reported it had been effective in all but one area where it had been offered.

The mean number of policy areas across all LAs was 5.8, the mean number of areas where policy was positively viewed was 4.0, and the mean number of areas where it was reported to be effective was 1.7. On average, LAs reported that 69% of the areas with pandemic-related policy were positively viewed and 29% were effective.¹⁸ Larger LAs tended to have a higher number of policy areas and higher mean proportions of policy areas which were positively viewed or reported as effective, but there were no strong patterns across other area characteristics of region, urbanity, deprivation, or ethnicity (see Appendix B).

National and local balance in information messaging

Early Years Leads were asked whether they had provided information on the pandemic primarily in the form of bespoke local information or whether they had relied heavily on signposting to national sources both for the information they had given to parents on the use of childcare and for the support and guidance they had given to settings. Most LAs (108 of the 122) gave a similar response for both the messaging to parents and the messaging to providers (table 18).

Table 18 – National and local balance in information messaging

	Number of LAs	Percentage of LAs
Similar predominant approach for parents and providers:		
Local messages drawn from national sources	38	31%
Mix of local and national sources for messages	25	20%
National messages translated into local context	23	19%
National messages / signposting to national sources	22	18%
Different predominant approaches for parents / providers:		
Mix / national	5	4%
Local / translated national or national	5	4%
National / mix	2	2%
National / local	2	2%
Total	122	100%

Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

¹⁸ The mean proportions of policy areas which were positively viewed were 83%, 71%, 63%, 71%, and 71% for LAs with 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 policy areas respectively. The mean proportions of policy areas reported as effective were 17%, 33%, 27%, 26%, and 37% for LAs with 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 policy areas respectively.

Most LAs indicated that there had been a mix of national and local messaging, but there had been variation in the amount of input from the local perspective. The most common response (reported by 38 LAs) was the use of mainly local messages rather than national sources, often with national messages simplified into bespoke local guidance. Roughly equal proportions of LAs reported that they had used the other three options. First, some reported simply “a mix” of local and national sources, indicating a balance between the two (or possibly uncertainty about the balance). Second, some reported using mainly national messages but translated into the local context (with some mentioning the care taken not to contradict or undermine the national messages). Finally, some LAs reported using mainly national messages or signposting to national sources. Several LAs reported contrasting approaches for parents and providers. A few (10 LAs in total) had used a mix of local messages for parents while focusing on national sources for providers. Conversely, a few (4 LAs in total) had used national sources for parents while focusing on a mix of local approaches for providers.¹⁹

Total local spending

The survey asked Early Years Leads for an estimate of how much the LA had spent so far on supporting childcare providers through the pandemic. Over half of LAs did not offer a response, which is not surprising given the multiple spending streams, the fact that some spending (such as for PPE) may have originated in other departments, and that much of the spending may still have been ongoing at the time.

Several LAs (13 LAs) responded that no extra funding had been spent, with costs having been covered out of existing budgets (and some reporting that this was because there was no extra money available). Many (27 LAs) provided an estimate of the total cost, with an average amount of £620,000 and a range of £45,000 to £2,000,000. Several (20 LAs) provided an estimate of some of the costs (indicating a minimum spend figure), with an average amount of £600,000 and a range of £20,000 to £4,000,000.

This indicates that local spending to support childcare provision through the pandemic may have been considerable in many LAs, but that there was substantial variation in the level of this support. However, not only do the limited number of responses make analysis of the variation challenging but comparability across LAs is also problematic for several reasons. First, these estimates covered different ranges of items (for example, some included additional free entitlement funding, while some did not). Second, the estimates reflect substantial variation in LA size and total budget in normal times. Third, several LAs mentioned that a major cost was related to the redeployment of staff or additional staff time, which is not easy to measure.

¹⁹ The variation in the national and local balance in information messaging is presented in Appendix B.

Reductions in services

Exactly half of LAs reported that there had been no reduction in the support that they usually gave to childcare providers due to the pandemic. Almost one-third of LAs (38 LAs) reported that face-to-face visits, meetings, and other contact had been moved online (or sometimes telephone), while 35 LAs reported that there had been some reduction in services (with an overlapping 13 LAs reporting both a move online and reduction in services). In some cases, Early Years Leads were uncertain whether a move to online had amounted to a reduction in services or simply a change in the method of delivery.

Several LAs reported that reduced services had included a reduction or complete withdrawal of some face-to-face visits such as SEND assessments, while several LAs reported a reduction or withdrawal of some staff training. A few LAs mentioned a generic reduction in LA support staff, while one or two LAs each mentioned reduced quality checks, loss of NHS Speech and Language Therapy service, and the withdrawal of transition into school events.

Many (26) LAs commented on the impacts of the switch to online from face-to-face visits, meetings, and other contacts. Several (the majority of those which commented) thought that people had adapted to the new virtual environment and that online interactions worked well, with benefits of greater engagement and time-saving. On the other hand, a few LAs noted that some people had struggled to adapt and that online interaction had substantial drawbacks, while a few others thought the impacts were mixed with advantages and drawbacks and the switch working well for some but not others.

6. Factors facilitating and hindering local authority support

This section explores the factors which facilitated and hindered the role of LAs in supporting settings and families' access to childcare during the pandemic. It first describes these factors before presenting the variation of key factors across LA characteristics and considering how the level of support relates to the policy approaches.

The key findings are:

- ▶ LAs reported a long lists of factors which had facilitated and hindered the LA's role in supporting provision during the pandemic. Many of the same factors were listed as both facilitators and hindrances, sometimes even within the same LA. The areas which elicited the largest numbers of comments were:
 - Whether there was strong senior and political support for early years within the LA, allowing for quick and strong decisions to be made;
 - The status, recognition, and understanding of the early years sector within government (at both the local and national levels);
 - How quickly and effectively new technological approaches and online communications had been developed; and
 - The national government guidance.
- ▶ Many LAs also mentioned the importance of the strength of LA Early Years Team and the use of external support such as regional co-operation with other LAs and assistance from national organisations such as Hemsalls.
- ▶ National government guidance was the most common hindrance discussed by LAs, although some did identify the guidance as a facilitator. But the factor that elicited the most strongly worded views was the status of the early years sector, with a strong feeling that the sector is undervalued and not understood within government, both at the national and local levels.
- ▶ Focusing on the factors with most potential influence on the LA's ability to support provision (the Early Years Team, within-LA factors, and external support), showed that relatively few LAs felt that hindrances had broadly outweighed facilitators (a negative assessment of support) while almost half felt that the facilitators had broadly outweighed the hindrances (a positive assessment of support).
- ▶ LAs with a negative assessment of support reported a lower mean number of policy areas with Covid-related support than other LAs. LAs with negative or neutral assessments of support were notably less likely to have placed more reliance on national sources for messaging.

Facilitators and hindrances

LAs reported a long lists of factors which had facilitated and hindered the LA's role in supporting provision during the pandemic. These are presented in table 19 and organised by broad area with the facilitators set alongside the hindrances as the presence (or absence) of a facilitator may alternatively be reported as the absence (or presence) of a hindrance.

Table 19 – Factors facilitating and hindering the LA role

Facilitator	Number of LAs	Hindrance	Number of LAs
Early Years team:		Early Years team:	
• Good relationships / stable team	16	• Staff shortages / lack of resources	8
• Commitment and high work hours	14	• Staff health and safety	*
• Skilled / experienced	12	• Heavy workload	*
• Strong team	7	• EYS reforms at same time	*
Within LA:		Within LA:	
• Political / senior support and speedy decisions with Early Years valued	38	• Lack of support and slow decisions from political / senior level	*
• Good relationships with other departments (health/education)	20	• Poor integration with other LA services	*
• Good relationship with providers	34		
		Early Years status in Government (national and local):	
		• Undervalued / not understood	35
		• Different treatment / attitude to schools	32
External support:		External support:	
• Regional cooperation with other LAs	10	• Lack of co-ordination / differences with neighbouring LAs	*
• Good contact / communication with DfE	8	• Poor communication with DfE	*
• Hemsalls	7	• Providers' discontent with DfE	*
• Other national organisations	5	• Issues with Ofsted	*
• Ofsted staff	*	• Obstructive union attitudes	*
Technology:		Technology:	
• Good IT support / online communications	33	• Need for/lack of high speed internet	*
		• Online working / communication problems	12
		• IT technical issues	4
		• Lack of face-to-face contacts	13
		• Misinformation on social media	5
Data:		Data:	
• Improved data and data sharing	*	• Staff time providing data	*
		• Lack of Early Years data	*
National guidance:		Policy:	
• Helpful	9	• Lack of funding for Early Years	10
• Clear	*	• Lack of PPE / testing / vaccinations / key worker status for Early Years	19
• Quick delivery of guidance / decisions	*		
Policy:		Policy:	
• National financial / funding supports	9	• Lack of funding for Early Years	10
• Local additional funding	*	• Lack of PPE / testing / vaccinations / key worker status for Early Years	19
• LA direct provision	*		
Local context:			
• Resilience / adaptability / support of providers and parents	19		
• Small / geographically compact LA	5		

Notes: Other national organisations included PACEY, NDNA, ELA and the Local Government Association. * indicates 3 or fewer LAs (not shown for disclosure reasons).

It should be noted that Early Years Leads were not specifically asked about each item in the list but were allowed to respond openly to the broad question of what factors had helped or hindered them to give support. Hence, the number of LAs next to each response indicates the number of cases where the factor was salient or important and does not indicate that the factor was irrelevant in other areas. In addition, some of the factors (particularly those in the policy row) may have been considered by some respondents as direct support for the sector rather than as factors which influenced how well LAs could support the sector.

The areas with factors which elicited the largest number of comments were the support from and relationships within the LA, the status of the early years sector, technology, and the national guidance:

- ▶ Senior and political support for early years and speedy decision-making with recognition for the value of the sector within the LA were seen as important facilitators in many LAs. Good relationships with providers were also viewed as critical in many LAs and good working relationships between the Early Years Team and other departments in the LA including health and education were also viewed as helpful in several LAs.
- ▶ The area that elicited the most strongly worded views was the status of the early years sector within government, both at the national and local levels. The feeling that the sector is undervalued and not understood in terms of what it achieves was seen as a severe hindrance to supporting the sector in many LAs. The differential treatment and attitude to schools was viewed as especially unhelpful in promoting support, and was specifically listed by many LAs as a hindrance but also occurred as a recurrent theme that arose throughout the survey discussions.
- ▶ While the swift development of technological approaches and online communications was heralded as a key facilitator in providing support during the pandemic by many LAs, technological problems were seen as a major hindrance by several LAs. In addition, several LAs felt that the lack of face-to-face contact was still a hindrance to providing support, and a few LAs reported that misinformation on social media (particularly around access to testing and vaccinations) was extremely unhelpful and confusing for providers.
- ▶ The national guidance elicited comments from the highest number of LAs: only 29 of the 122 LAs did not list some element related to the guidance as a facilitator or a hindrance. Some 28 LAs felt that the guidance had been helpful in some ways, while 89 reported that it had been unhelpful in other ways (with 24 LAs listing points in both directions). While many LAs reported that the guidance had been helpful or clear, a larger number reported that it had been incomplete or confusing (particularly with the frequency of changes). Moreover, the timing of the release of guidance was heavily criticised both for the delays in guidance and decisions but mainly because announcements had been last minute without giving advance notice to LAs to enable them to prepare support for providers.

Many LAs²⁰ mentioned factors related to their Early Years Team and to external sources of support:

- ▶ Several LAs highlighted that the strength of their Early Years Team, particularly in terms of being a stable team or having commitment or experience, had been a key factor in helping them support settings. On the other hand, a few LAs reported that staff shortages or lack of resources had been a hindrance.
- ▶ Regional co-operation with other LAs was reported as having been helpful by several LAs (and the lack thereof as having been a hindrance). Several LAs reported that contact and communication with DfE had been good, while only a couple mentioned that the relationship with DfE had been unhelpful. Several LAs mentioned that the support of Hemsalls and other national organisations had been helpful.

20 Approximate quantities correspond to specific numbers of LAs as follows: one or two LAs = literally one or two LAs; a few LAs = 3 to 9 LAs; several LAs = 10 to 20 LAs; many LAs = 21 to 60 LAs; a high proportion of LAs = 61 to 90 LAs; most LAs = 91-114 LAs; almost all LAs = 115-121 LAs; and all LAs = 122 LAs.

Three other types of factors were mentioned by a smaller number of LAs:

- ▶ Only a few LAs mentioned the role of data in helping or hindering them to give support. A few LAs noted improved data sharing, while a few others felt that the lack of early years data (akin to that available for schools) was a hindrance.
- ▶ Several aspects of policy were also mentioned. A few LAs felt that national financial support schemes and the continuation of funding had been helpful, while several LAs reported that the lack of funding, PPE, testing, priority vaccinations, or key worker status for early years had been a significant hindrance. However, as mentioned above, these policy issues could be considered as direct support for the sector rather than as factors which influenced how well LAs could support the sector.
- ▶ In terms of local context, a few LAs reported that being a small, geographically compact LA had been helpful for the LA to give support because the Early Years Team had a good understanding of the providers. Several LAs also praised the resilience, adaptability, and support of providers and parents as being helpful for the LA to support the sector.

Overall support

The variation in support captured in the lists of facilitators and hindrances was examined for three areas: the Early Years Team, factors within the LA (plus the hindrance of early years being undervalued within government, as this was often reported as being a factor within the LA), and external support. These three areas were selected as those that had greatest influence on the ability of the LA team to support local provision rather than other factors which may have had greater influence directly on provision. Although national government guidance was the most common topic discussed by LAs, it is not included in this analysis as it did not vary at a local level, that is, all local authorities were working with the same guidance.

The first three rows in table 20 present the proportions of LAs which reported any facilitators and/or hindrances in these three areas. While more than two-thirds (84 LAs) mentioned at least one factor related to the LA, much smaller proportions (48 LAs and 25 LAs respectively) mentioned at least one factor related to the Early Years Team or external support. For the Early Years Team and external support, substantially higher proportions of LAs mentioned only facilitating factors than mentioned hindering factors or a combination of both. In contrast, almost a third (38 LAs) mentioned a hindering factor from within the LA, although more than half mentioned a facilitating factor.

The bottom row in table 20 presents that balance across all three elements, where each element (Early Years Team, LA, and external support) was counted as a hindrance if hindrances outnumbered facilitators in that area and as a help if facilitators outnumbered hindrances in that area. This means that the three elements are given equal weight in this overall assessment.

Just over one in ten LAs (14 LAs) had an overall negative assessment of support from these three elements, while just under a third (38 LAs) were neutral on the combined support. More than half (70 LAs) were, on balance, positive about the support from these elements.²¹

²¹ The variation in support across a number of LA characteristics is presented in Appendix B.

Table 20 – Summary of key facilitators and hindrances

	Number of LAs	% of LAs
Early Years team:		
Only facilitators	35	29%
Only hindrances	10	8%
Facilitators and hindrances	3	2%
Neither facilitators nor hindrances	74	61%
Total	122	100%
Within LA:		
Only facilitators	46	38%
Only hindrances	13	11%
Facilitators and hindrances	25	20%
Neither facilitators nor hindrances	38	31%
Total	122	100%
External support:		
Only facilitators	19	16%
Only hindrances	3	2%
Facilitators and hindrances	3	2%
Neither facilitators nor hindrances	97	80%
Total	122	100%
Balance across three elements:		
Negative (hindrances outnumber helps)	14	11%
Neutral (helps equal hindrances)	38	31%
Positive (helps outnumber hindrances by one)	44	36%
High positive (helps outnumber hindrances by two or more)	26	21%
Total	122	100%

Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding

Links between facilitators and hindrances and policy

LAs which felt least supported (those with a negative balance of facilitators and hindrances) were, on average, active in fewer policy areas in supporting parents and providers during the pandemic (that is, they reported a lower mean number of policy areas with Covid-related support than other LAs) (table 21). But there was little difference in the number of policy areas between LAs with a neutral, positive, or high positive assessment. In contrast, LAs with high positive support reported, on average, that more policy areas where they had offered support had been positively viewed. However, the average proportion of policy areas reported as effective did not vary in any clear pattern across the levels of support.

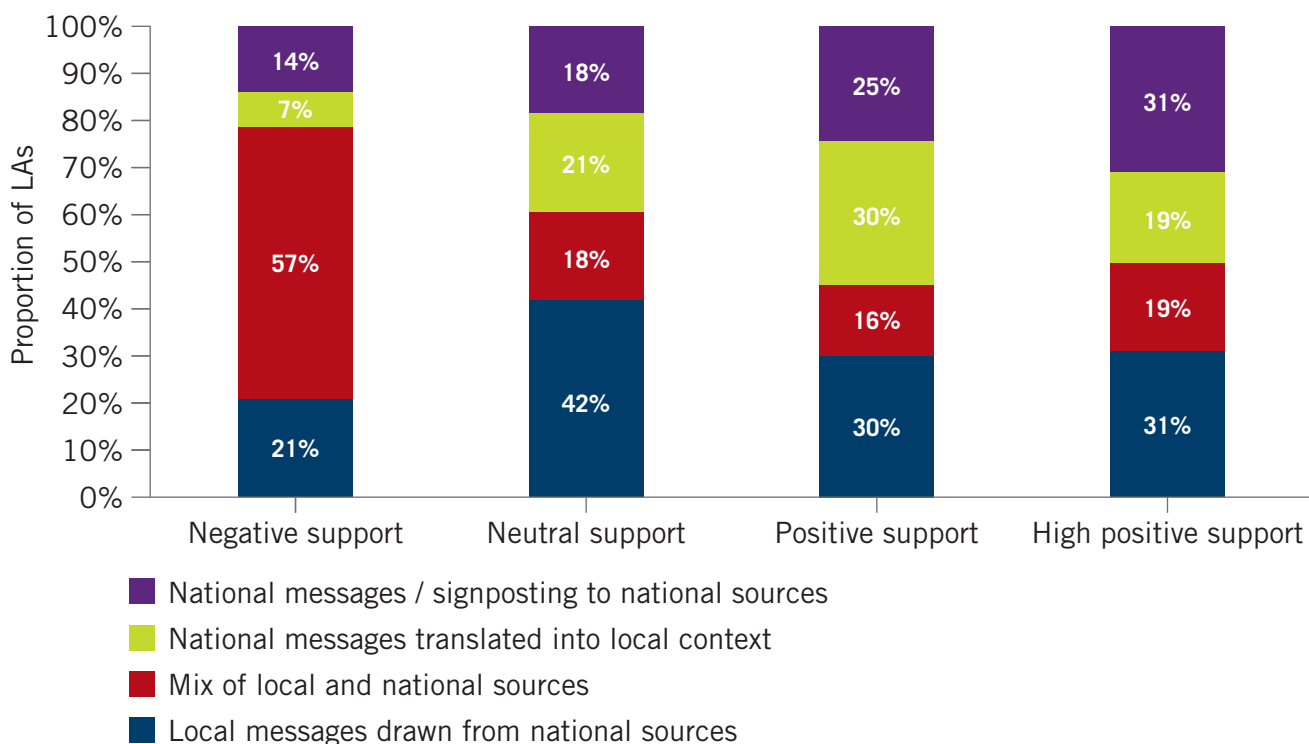
Table 21 – Number of policy areas and effectiveness by overall balance of facilitators and hindrances

Balance of support across three elements	Mean number of policy areas	Mean % of policy areas positively viewed	Mean % of policy areas reported as effective	Number of LAs
Negative (hindrances outnumber helps)	5.4	68%	32%	14
Neutral (helps equal hindrances)	5.8	67%	27%	38
Positive (helps outnumber hindrances by one)	5.8	69%	31%	44
High positive (helps outnumber hindrances by two or more)	5.9	75%	27%	26
All	5.8	69%	29%	122

Notes: The mean proportions reported as positively viewed and as effective are fraction of the number of policy areas in each LA.

Figure 1 presents the relationships between the assessment of support and the national and local balance in messaging. LAs which felt less supported (that is, with negative or neutral assessments of support) were less likely to have primarily relied on national messages and signposting to national sources than LAs which felt more supported.

Figure 1: National and local balance by overall balance of facilitators and hindrances



7. Post-pandemic expectations

This section describes the views of the Early Years Leads on how the pandemic may permanently change parental demand for childcare, childcare provision, and the role of the LA in supporting the sector.

It should be noted that these views were given during February to April 2021 when there remained considerable uncertainty about the future path of the pandemic and the factors that might influence future developments in the provision of childcare. The responses are highly speculative but give some insight into key concerns and hopes for improvements going forward.

The key findings are:

- ▶ More than half of LAs thought there would be permanent changes in parent demand, in childcare provision, and the LA role. However, only 32 LAs thought there would be change across all three elements, with most LAs thinking some aspects would change but not others. Hence, while the majority of LAs were expecting some shifts in the childcare market, the majority were not expecting changes in all three aspects of the childcare landscape, suggesting that wholesale change is not widely anticipated.
- ▶ Many LAs²² reported that demand could be permanently lower due to higher levels of homeworking, more flexible working, and shorter commuting times.
- ▶ Many LAs reported that demand could be lower specifically for hours outside the core 9am to 3pm and for out-of-school (wrap-around) care due to changes in work patterns, leading to a reduction in the provision of out-of-school (wrap-around) care and full-day care. Indeed, concerns about the future of the out-of-school sector were raised throughout the survey.
- ▶ The most commonly reported permanent change in the LA role (sometimes expectations and sometimes hopes) was a move towards greater virtual working and greater recognition and understanding of the early years sector within government.
- ▶ Very few LAs commented on whether the relative strengths of the local and national government roles in childcare should change going forward and most of these did not see any need for change.

Overview

Table 22 presents an overview of the responses to the three questions:

- ▶ Do you have any thoughts on how the pandemic may permanently change parental demand for childcare in your area?
- ▶ Do you have any thoughts on how the pandemic may permanently change childcare provision in your area, both in terms of the types of providers that are used or how care is delivered within settings?
- ▶ Do you think the experience of the pandemic will permanently change how your LA supports local provision or how it views its role in the sector?

²² Approximate quantities correspond to specific numbers of LAs as follows: one or two LAs = literally one or two LAs; a few LAs = 3 to 9 LAs; several LAs = 10 to 20 LAs; many LAs = 21 to 60 LAs; a high proportion of LAs = 61 to 90 LAs; most LAs = 91-114 LAs; almost all LAs = 115-121 LAs; and all LAs = 122 LAs.

For all three questions, more than half of LAs reported that they thought there would be a permanent change (table 22): 71 LAs thought parent demand would permanently change, 79 LAs thought childcare provision would change, and 69 LAs thought the LA role would change (combining the 16 LAs who thought the enhanced role during the pandemic would be maintained and the 53 LAs who reported further change might happen or was likely to happen). But there were differences across the three questions in the proportions which felt no permanent change would happen: twice as many LAs thought their role would be unchanged as the number who thought childcare demand and provision would be unchanged. The difference was balanced by more uncertainty (not answered and “don’t knows”) for the questions about parental demand and provision than for the role of the LA.

Table 22 – Overview of post-pandemic expectations

	Change in parental demand for childcare		Change in childcare provision		Change in LA role in supporting provision	
	Number of LAs	% of LAs	Number of LAs	% of LAs	Number of LAs	% of LAs
Not answered	7	6%	10	8%	8	7%
No-one can answer this / too early to know	9	7%	5	4%	2	2%
Don't know / depends on other factors	21	17%	12	10%	4	3%
Nothing / little will change or return to normal	14	11%	16	13%	32	26%
Intervention reduced back to pre-pandemic level	----	----	----	----	7	6%
Greater role / support will be maintained	----	----	----	----	16	13%
Change may happen / likely to happen	71	58%	79	65%	53	43%
Total	122	100%	122	100%	122	100%

Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding. “----” indicates an option which is not relevant for that question.

Interestingly, there were few strong patterns in the combined responses to the three questions. Only one or two LAs gave no answer (“don’t know”) to all three questions, and only three LAs thought there would be no change for all three questions, but 32 LAs reported that there could be change for all three aspects. The only other patterns reported by more than 10 LAs were no answers (“don’t knows”) for parent demand and childcare provision and change for the LA role (11 LAs) and change for parent demand and childcare provision but no change for the LA role (16 LAs).

Changes in parent demand

Many LAs reported that any permanent changes in parental demand for childcare would depend upon how the pandemic permanently changed the nature of working patterns. Several also reported that future unemployment would be an important influence, although it should be noted that long-run economic recovery from the pandemic should mean that any impact of unemployment on childcare should be a medium-term rather than permanent effect.

Of the 71 LAs which reported they thought there would be changes in parental demand, 50 LAs gave reasons (often multiple ones) why demand would possibly be lower, typically due to changes in work patterns or health concerns. Three suggested reasons why demand could possibly be higher due to greater demand for the two-year-old entitlement and 14 gave both types of reasons (that is, that demand would be lower for work or health concern reasons and higher for the two-year-old entitlement). The remaining four did not report how demand would change.

Among those suggesting that demand could be permanently lower:

- ▶ Many LAs (the majority of those which reported that demand could be permanently lower) thought that this would be due to greater homeworking, more flexible working, and shorter commuting times.
- ▶ Many LAs reported that demand could be lower specifically for hours outside the core 9am to 3pm and for out-of-school (wrap-around) care due to changes in work patterns. A couple of LAs suggested that demand for the youngest children (under two-year-olds) would be specifically lower due to changes in work patterns (and would lead to a reduction in the provision of baby rooms) because reduced childcare use to support work would affect the very youngest children more than children in the ages immediately preceding school where childcare is used for school preparation.
- ▶ Several LAs suggested that demand could be lower due to higher unemployment (although, again, this could be a medium-term impact rather than a permanent one).
- ▶ A few LAs suggested that demand for the 30 hours free entitlement would be lower (either due to changes in work patterns or higher unemployment).
- ▶ A few LAs suggested that health concerns could permanently reduce demand (although other LAs also suggested that demand would gradually recover as parents felt that childcare was safe for their children again).

Several LAs felt that demand for two-year-old free entitlement places could be higher because of higher unemployment, more free school meals, and Universal Credit claimants increasing the proportion of two-year-olds who would be eligible for the entitlement.

Changes in provision

Many LAs felt that there could be permanent changes in the hours of care that are offered, driven by changes in work patterns. Specifically:

- ▶ Many LAs reported that there could be considerable reductions in the provision of out-of-school (wrap-around) care and concerns about the future of this sector were raised throughout the survey. A few LAs noted that this could happen hand in hand with a reduction in the use of shared care.
- ▶ Relatedly, a few LAs reported that there could be a switch in provision from offering full-day care to core hours of 9am to 3pm care.
- ▶ On the other hand, several LAs suggested that provision would (or would need to) become more flexible and adaptable in terms of the hours offered to meet demand from more flexible working patterns.

Views on how the structure of the sector (numbers and types of settings) might change were much more varied. The key themes (mentioned by more than two LAs) were:

- ▶ Several LAs reported that there could be a reduction in the number of voluntary providers.
- ▶ Several LAs reported that there could be a reduction in the number of childminders, primarily due to changes in work patterns. On the other hand, a few LAs felt that the use of childminding could increase.
- ▶ Several LAs reported that businesses and settings would close (implying a reduction in the number of settings), while a few LAs explicitly reported that there would be fewer settings. Some LAs suggested that there would be fewer small settings, while other LAs suggested that remaining settings would be the stronger and more viable providers.

In terms of delivery models, several LAs indicated that settings would need to undertake a re-examination of business models (particularly reliance on income from parent fees) and would need to consider more flexible business models. A few LAs mentioned that there could be a long-term adverse impact on staff recruitment and retention due to staff leaving and potential new staff not wanting to join the sector because of the impacts of Covid on staff well-being.

Changes in the LA role

Just over a quarter (32 LAs) felt that nothing or little would change permanently in the role of the LA in childcare provision, while a further 6% thought that the higher level of intervention during the pandemic would be reduced as provision recovered. The majority of LAs (69 LAs) offered some insights on the nature of future changes, but there were some variations on whether the changes would happen, could happen, or should happen, with the distinction not always clear cut. In describing each possible change, the weight between these three perspectives is highlighted as far as possible, but it should be noted that there is a mix of views from predicting a certain change to hope for a particular change. In addition, many of the changes were described as developments which had occurred during the pandemic but which would continue into the future.

There were six broad areas mentioned for future changes in the LA role:

- ▶ Reported by many LAs and reflecting developments during the pandemic, the most commonly mentioned change was that the LA role would move towards greater virtual working with more meetings, communications, and training being undertaken online. A few reported that there would or should be greater investment in IT facilities, both at the LA and provider levels.
- ▶ The second most reported change (again mentioned by many LAs as a continuation of developments during the pandemic) was greater recognition of the value of early years provision and understanding of the childcare sector. These responses primarily referred to support and recognition within the LA but were also applied more broadly across both national and local levels of government. A few LAs mentioned a bridging of the gap in the treatment of and attitude to PVI and school provision. However, it is important to note that these responses were broadly evenly divided between what would or could happen and what should happen.
- ▶ Several LAs suggested that the increased co-operation between different departments, such as early years, health, and education, within the LA would (and should in a few cases) continue.
- ▶ Several LAs reported that the closer relationships between the LA and providers and improved communications between them would continue.
- ▶ Several LAs reported that there would be improvements in the business and sustainability support and advice offered by LAs to providers.

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- ▶ A few LAs mentioned that the amount of public investment and intervention in the sector should be increased in the future, but none of these cases predicted that this would happen.

Finally, most LAs did not offer any comment on whether, going forward, there should be a stronger role for local government or a stronger role for national government in childcare provision. The responses did not indicate any widespread desire for change:

- ▶ A few LAs commented that the improved communication and consultation between DfE and LAs should continue.
- ▶ A few LAs responded that relative roles were unlikely to change or there was no need for a change in roles because early years is about serving local needs and the pandemic had shown that early years cannot be managed at the national level.
- ▶ A possible change in roles was only mentioned by three LAs. One or two LAs suggested that any widening of the early years remit would require an enhanced local role. On the other hand, two LAs suggested that LA statutory duties (or the use of “must” versus “should” in the guidance) should be reviewed to make more elements of the LA role obligatory rather than optional “extras”. However, this could be interpreted as enhancing the role of early years within the LA as much as (or rather than) strengthening the national role.

8. Implications of findings

The LA survey provided a rich source of information about the impacts of the pandemic on childcare providers and how LAs have sought to support the sector. This final section draws out some of the implications of the survey findings for broader discussion.

Several insights can be drawn about the impact of the pandemic on childcare provision and potential longer-term effects:

- ▶ The assessment from the LAs is that the childcare sector does not appear to be on the brink of financial disaster. For the moment at least, widespread closures have not occurred and most LAs are not reporting substantial numbers of providers in severe financial difficulties. Although many LAs are considering greater business support for the sector, there does not appear to be widespread concern that additional support in this area is needed urgently.
- ▶ If working patterns are permanently changed by the pandemic, there are potential issues around lower demand for parent-paid hours or demand for more flexible provision (such as in the number of days used per week). While the market may be able to adjust to this change in demand in some areas, the fact that most childcare settings provide both parent-paid hours and the government-funded early education entitlement means that reductions in parent-paid hours could have negative spillover effects on provision for the funded early education entitlement. It could also have negative impacts for groups already poorly served by the childcare market, such as children with special educational needs and disabilities and families working atypical hours. It is worth noting that even small shortages can prevent parents from being able to work or cause children to miss out on their early education entitlement.
- ▶ LAs raised particular concerns about school-age childcare. This group were already facing shortages pre-pandemic²³ and LAs saw a substantial contraction in their local markets through the pandemic. Despite almost twice as many children using school-age childcare as nurseries, this part of the market for school-age children has received less attention than early years provision over the last year, heightening concerns about shortages. Working parents rely on out-of-school childcare to enable them to work the average working day; a reduction in supply could have negative effects on the ability of parents, and mothers in particular, to take on paid work.
- ▶ There is the potential for demand for the two-year-old free entitlement to rise if unemployment rates increase rapidly as the furlough scheme is wound down and other pandemic-related financial assistance is gradually removed. Although this may be a short-term rise in demand, LAs may need to prepare for an increase in numbers taking up this element of the free entitlement.
- ▶ LAs were not able to say with confidence what the effect of the pandemic had been on childcare quality. Given the role of quality in supporting the development of young children, it is important that this information gap is addressed in order to inform whether and how additional action is needed to maintain quality and support improvements across the sector.

Other insights can be drawn about the role of LAs in supporting childcare provision in their local areas:

- ▶ First, and possibly foremost, the pandemic has shown how flexible LAs can be in supporting local provision. The range and flexibility in the nature of LA responses to the pandemic demonstrates a degree of nimbleness to do whatever is needed, be it hand-delivering packs of PPE or offering LA staff to fill gaps in settings. The fact that support was less active in areas where there was apparently less need (such as the need for additional brokerage to find places or to support staffing issues) indicates a responsiveness to what is required.
- ▶ However, the level of activity has been inconsistent, possibly driven by variation in local priorities and resources for childcare, as highlighted in the range of facilitators and hindrances at play across different areas. While the ability to make localised interventions based on local need is a major strength of the LA role, it is concerning that this ability may be limited by local constraints in some areas. The fact that, despite considerable effort, Early Years Leads could not be identified for a handful of LAs is indicative that the divergence in support for the sector across areas may be driven by local priorities as much as by need.
- ▶ There were many positives that came out of the enhanced importance of the LA role during the pandemic, including stronger relationships within the LA, with providers, and, in some cases, with DfE. Many LAs reported substantial benefits from enhanced recognition and understanding of the sector. For some LAs, the pandemic highlighted the importance of regional working with neighbouring LAs. Like many other sectors, providers and LA staff also discovered that virtual working can have many advantages even if it is not always a good or appropriate substitute for face-to-face contact. However, the continuation of these benefits is not guaranteed and LAs (and others) may need to be proactive in maintaining these new relationships and understanding. In addition, as expressed by some LAs, investment in IT may be needed to ensure all providers can benefit from new ways of online working.
- ▶ On the other hand, one negative outcome from the pandemic was the spotlight placed on the differences in treatment of schools and other types of settings (exemplified by the access to PPE, testing, and key worker status). Consideration could be given at both the national and local levels on how to bridge this gap (the need for which was expressed in the survey) to ensure that children's experience is not affected by the luck of whether they are in a school setting or other type of setting.

Two final observations:

- ▶ The survey responses gave the impression that not many LAs were certain of whether the pandemic-related policies had been effective in making a difference for parents and providers. This may have been because there had been insufficient time or resources to assess this or it would not have been feasible to do so. However, understanding what works may be helpful for LAs to target limited resources into the most beneficial activities. A focus on effective monitoring and evaluation of activities and sharing this intelligence between LAs could help to spread effective activity and reduce ineffective activity.
- ▶ Even when directly prompted, most LAs did not offer any comment on whether, going forward, there should be a stronger role for local government or a stronger role for national government in childcare provision.

Appendix A – Data collection and analysis

This appendix describes the methodology for the collection and analysis of the data. This covers the recruitment of Early Years Leads to take part, data collection, analysis, and the robustness of the information.

Recruiting Early Years Leads

Extensive work was undertaken to help ensure that all LAs were given the opportunity to take part in the survey. This included initial publicity about the study and emails to the Early Years and Family Services teams and the Directors of Children's Services in December 2020, highlighting that there would be a survey of Early Years Leads from February and requesting contact information for those with lead responsibility for childcare in the area. Further identification of Early Years Leads was undertaken using web searches and telephone calls to the relevant LA departments in early 2021 and during the fieldwork period. Where there was no position with a title akin to Early Years Lead, the role was described as the individual leading on areas such as childcare provision and sufficiency, early education entitlement, or (occasionally as a final resort) the Family Information Service (FIS). Where an appropriate individual could not be identified, the Director of Children Services was approached again and Coram Family and Childcare approached their contacts within the FIS to help identify and make contact with the appropriate individual.

The identified Early Years Leads included individuals with a variety of position titles. Many were a combination of early years and childcare with lead / head / manager, occasionally with an element of "strategy" or "strategic". But many job titles included references to elements related to education (including early education entitlement, free entitlement, education, education achievement, and school readiness); to the private and voluntary element of provision (including sufficiency, childcare market, business support, and childcare development); to the nature of provision (including quality improvement, quality assurance, and inclusion); and to a broader scope of services (including family services / information, children's centres, early health, early start, prevention service, integrated early years services, and social services). Given that LAs themselves were asked to indicate the best person to respond to the topics in the survey (and some individuals recommended others after they had begun the interview), this range is unlikely to have been driven by chance selection in respondents across LAs. Moreover, it is indicative of the variation in how childcare and early years education is placed within LAs.

Interviews were achieved with 122 of a possible 148 Early Years Leads (three of the 151 LAs operate a joint lead with another LA), a response rate of 82%. Of the 26 which did not participate, 12 had shown some interest in taking part but either a convenient time could not be arranged within the fieldwork period (8 cases) or the lead was not available (for example, due to illness) or had not been in the position sufficiently long to be able to answer the survey. LAs specifically declined to take part in seven cases and an appropriate individual to take part could not be identified in a further seven cases.

In terms of demographic characteristics, the sample of the 122 interviewed LAs were almost identical to the population of 148 LAs in terms of the regional distribution, urbanity, local deprivation, average income level, ethnicity, and LA size.²⁴ However, there is a possibility that LAs which did not participate in the survey may have systematically differed from those which did participate in their approach to supporting childcare. It is possible that they differed through a greater focus on delivering support or having especially limited staff resources (more likely for those with a deliberate response not to participate) or that childcare has a lower priority in these LAs (more likely for those where no Early Years Lead could be identified).

Data collection

The discussions with Early Years Leads were undertaken as semi-structured telephone interviews, allowing broad discussive responses to a set list of questions and follow-ups (probes). This approach allows substantial flexibility in responses (particularly useful when part of the objective is to obtain information on the range of issues or approaches) but within a framework which can allow meaningful comparisons across a larger number of responses.

The discussions covered three areas:

- ▶ The impacts of the pandemic on childcare provision and how context affected the impacts;
- ▶ How LAs responded to support childcare provision in their area and whether this support was effective; and
- ▶ Views on longer-lasting impacts and how the LA role in supporting childcare provision might be permanently changed.

Most interviews (70) were undertaken in February, with 46 undertaken in March and 6 in April. The length of interviews ranged from 30 to 79 minutes, with an average time of 51 minutes. Most (111) interviews were undertaken with a single respondent, while six were undertaken with two respondents and five with three respondents.

Analysis

The responses were analysed by question (or set of questions where the information overlapped) and coded in two ways:

- a. Where information was collected as a response to a direct question asked in all interviews, there was typically one exclusive answer, and non-responses and the reasons for non-responses were specifically coded. This information has been presented as numbers or proportion of LAs with each response (including not answered) as capturing a measure of prevalence of each response.
- b. Where information was recorded as open-ended lists in response to a question or where an issue related to the question was simply mentioned, the positive mention was coded but the absence from a list or an issue not mentioned was not coded. This information has been presented as an approximate quantity of positive responses, highlighting issues which were salient to some respondents but without any indication that they were necessarily unimportant or non-existent to others.

The approximate quantities refer to specific numbers of LAs as follows:

- ▶ One or two LAs = literally one or two LAs

²⁴ Specifically, the distributions for the sample of 122 were with one percentage point of those for all 148 for seven regions (North East and Yorkshire and Humber combined and West and East Midlands combined); an urban/rural divide; and three tertile groups for IDACI (deprivation) score, proportion of children on free school meals, mean gross disposable income per head, mean proportion of 25- to 49-year-olds with education level at NVQ 4 or more, proportion of three- and four-year-olds classified as of minority ethnicity, proportion of children without English as their first language, and number of early years settings.

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- ▶ A few LAs = 3 to 9 LAs
 - ▶ Several LAs = 10 to 20 LAs
 - ▶ Many LAs = 21 to 60 LAs
 - ▶ A high proportion of LAs = 61 to 90 LAs
 - ▶ Most LAs = 91-114 LAs
 - ▶ Almost all LAs = 115-121 LAs
 - ▶ All LAs = 122 LAs

Relevant information given anywhere during the survey was coded with the appropriate question and there was considerable such cross-coding between questions and sections of the survey.

The coded responses to the questions were then used to describe the patterns in impacts and LA responses, which were then used to develop a number of groupings of LAs with common patterns of experience.

Robustness of the data

The following points should be noted about the robustness of the data:

- ▶ The high response rate and the fact that the demographic profile of responding LAs is very similar to that for the population of LAs indicate that the views given should be broadly nationally representative. However, there is a concern that the small number of LAs which did not participate may be more likely to include those where childcare is of lower priority. Hence, while the data may represent the average cases well, there is a possibility that a small group of LAs which are less active in childcare policy are not fully represented.
- ▶ The information is dependent upon the knowledge and views of (typically) one individual in each LA. While this is not ideal, it can be argued that Early Years Leads are the most knowledgeable individuals on LA policy and actions and are likely to be the best placed to give an account of the broad experience of childcare provision within the LA. They are also well placed to understand the issues under discussion and to be able to respond in an analytical way to the questions. This was often indicated in the discursive nature of the responses where Early Years Leads were better able to answer some types of questions (or the evidence they were basing their answers on), and these have been highlighted in the analysis where possible.
- ▶ Completeness and inconsistency are always risks in coding such a large number of responses, particularly when, as in this case, the coding was undertaken by more than one individual. Completeness was supported by the coding frames initially being set up for a subset of responses and subsequently revised in an ongoing manner as coding for the remainder was undertaken. Inconsistency is less of an issue for the type (a) coding where a single code is required for all LAs, but there is a possibility that the type (b) coding where lists or issues are being flagged may be open to differences in interpretation or occasional omissions. This concern is another reason why the number of responses for this type of information is presented as approximate groups rather than precise numbers.

Appendix B – Variation across area characteristics

This appendix presents the variation in some of the policy measures across area characteristics, including region, urbanity, deprivation level, ethnicity, and LA size. The first section considers the mean number of policy areas and the proportions viewed positively or as effective. The second examines the variation in the balance between local and national messaging, while the final section presents differences in how well LAs felt supported.

The key findings are:

- ▶ There was some regional variation in the average number of policy areas, and larger LAs tended to have covered more areas, but there were no clear patterns across urban and rural areas or across local deprivation or between areas with lower and higher proportions of ethnic minority children.
- ▶ There was some regional variation in the balance between local and national messaging. LAs more likely to use a predominantly local approach included those in urban areas, those in high deprivation areas, and those with middle or higher proportions of ethnic minority children. Larger LAs were less likely to use the most local approach than small or medium-sized LAs.
- ▶ There was some regional variation in LAs' assessment of how supported they felt, and LAs in rural areas felt less supported than those in urban areas. LAs in areas with low deprivation or proportion of ethnic minority children felt less supported, while smaller LAs felt more supported than middle-sized or larger LAs.

Number of policy areas and effectiveness

Table 23 shows the variation in the mean number of policy areas and the proportions viewed positively or as effective across different regions and different types of areas. The table shows that:

- ▶ LAs in the North West and East of England reported the highest mean number of policy areas, while LAs in London reported the lowest mean number, but the regional variation is not large. There was greater regional variation in the mean proportions of policy areas which were viewed positively (from 63% in the South East to 79% in the East of England) and which were reported as effective (from 21% in the South East to 34% in the North East with Yorkshire and the Humber).
- ▶ There was little difference in the mean number of policy areas or mean proportions of policy areas which were positively viewed or reported as effective across urban and rural areas.
- ▶ There was little difference in the mean number of policy areas or mean proportions of policy areas which were reported as effective across areas with different levels of deprivation, but the mean proportions of policy areas which were positively viewed were lower in low deprivation areas.
- ▶ There was little difference in the mean number of policy areas or mean proportions of policy areas which were positively viewed or reported as effective across areas with low and high proportions of ethnic minority children.
- ▶ Larger LAs tended to have a higher number of policy areas and higher mean proportions of policy areas which were positively viewed or reported as effective.

Hence, while LA size may have influenced the degree of policy response to the pandemic, other area characteristics were not of substantial importance.

Table 23 – Mean numbers of policy areas, positively viewed areas and effective areas across LA characteristics

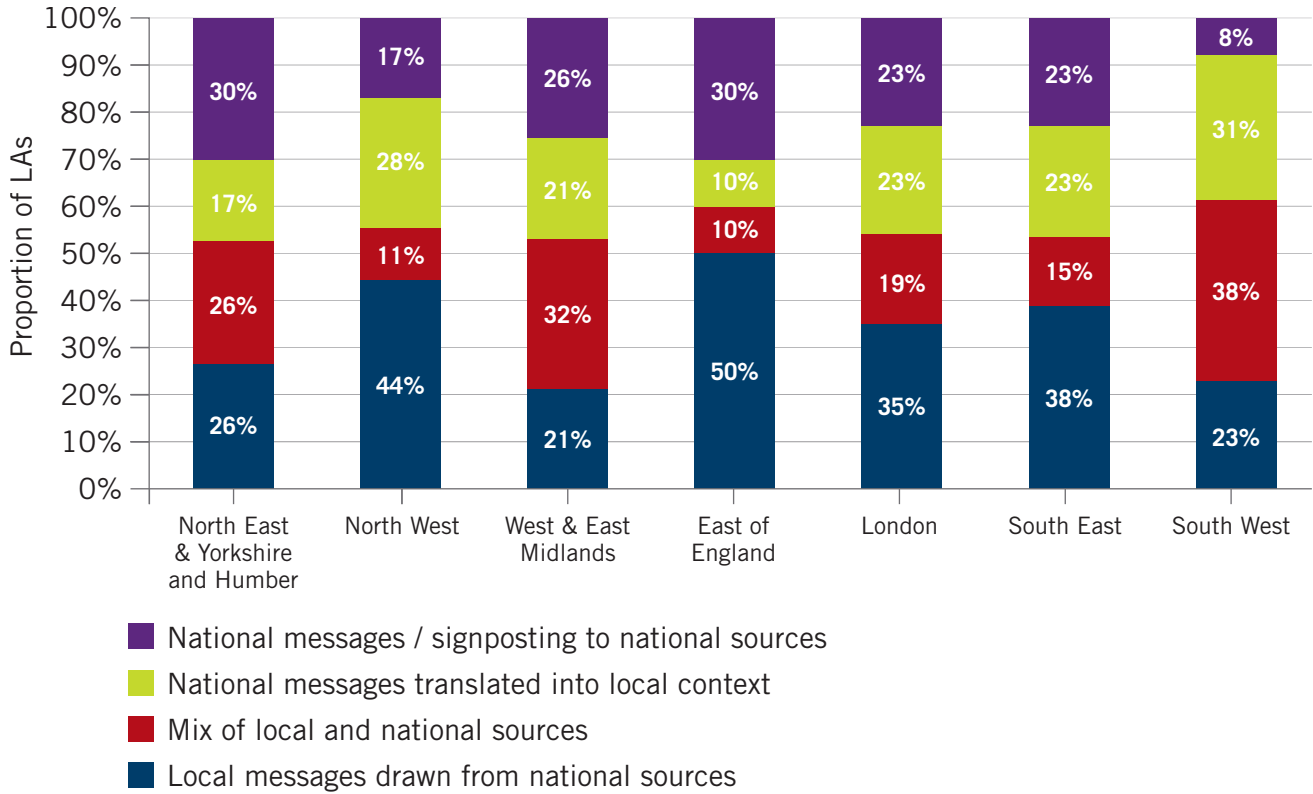
	Mean number of pandemic-related policy areas	Mean % of policy areas positively viewed	Mean % of policy areas reported as effective	Number of LAs
Region:				
North East + Yorkshire and Humber	5.7	76%	34%	23
North West	6.0	67%	29%	18
Midlands (West and East)	5.7	69%	29%	19
East of England	6.0	79%	23%	10
London	5.5	65%	29%	26
South East	5.9	63%	21%	13
South West	5.9	70%	35%	13
Urbanity:				
Urban	5.7	70%	29%	102
Rural	6.0	69%	29%	20
Area deprivation (IDACI):				
Low deprivation level	5.8	66%	30%	35
Middle deprivation level	5.9	70%	28%	41
High deprivation level	5.6	72%	30%	46
Proportion of ethnic minority children (% of 3-4 year olds):				
Low	5.9	69%	29%	36
Middle	5.8	72%	31%	44
High	5.6	67%	28%	42
LA size (number of Early Years providers)				
Small	5.5	71%	25%	41
Medium	5.8	62%	28%	39
Large	6.0	75%	34%	42
All	5.8	69%	29%	122

Notes: The mean proportions reported as positively viewed and as effective are fraction of the number of policy areas in each LA.

Balance between national and local messaging

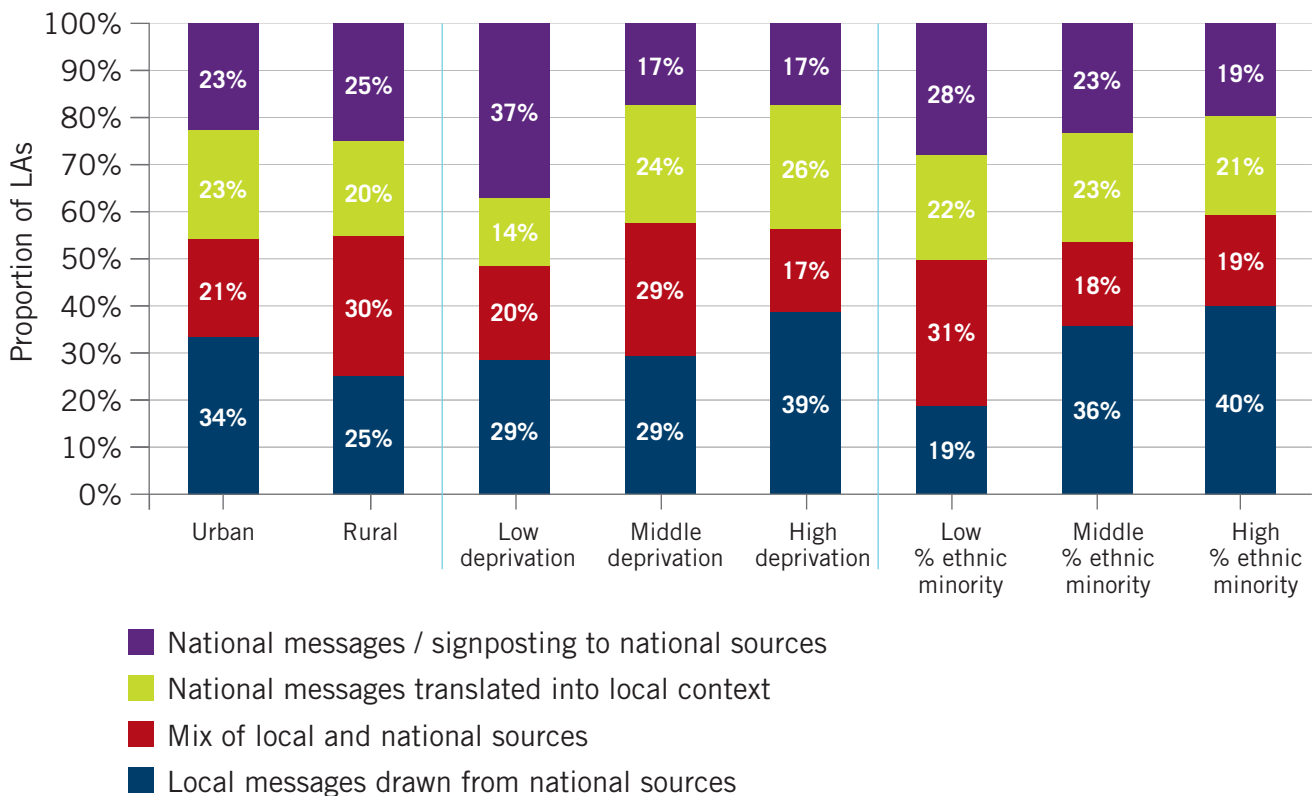
Figures 2 to 4 present the national and local balance in information messaging (from section 5) across a number of LA characteristics. For aid in presentation, the 12 LAs which had different approaches for parents and for providers were recategorised into one of these four categories on the basis of the approach used for providers.

Figure 2: National and local balance by region

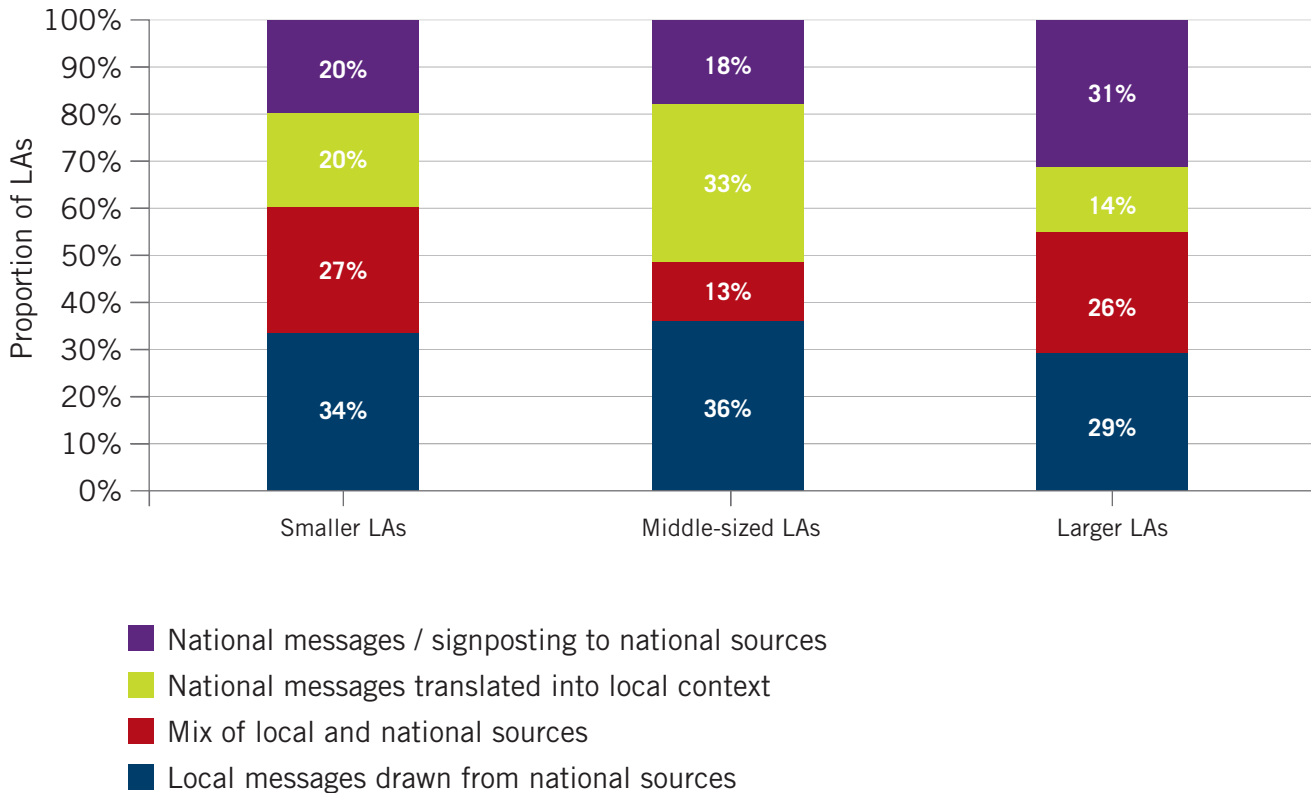


Notes: The number of LAs in each category is shown in table 23.

Figure 3: National and local balance by area urbanity, deprivation and ethnicity



Notes: The number of LAs in each category is shown in table 23.

Figure 4: National and local balance by LA size

Notes: The number of LAs in each category is shown in table 23.

The figures show that there are some marked differences in the balance between national and local messaging across different types of areas:

- ▶ LAs in the East of England and North West are more likely to use the most local approach than LAs in other areas, although LAs in the East of England are also most likely to use the most national approach together with LAs in the North East. The South West has the highest proportions using the middle two balances, while there is also a high tendency for LAs in the West and East Midlands to use these two approaches.
- ▶ LAs in rural areas are slightly less likely than those in urban areas to use the most local approach, but the difference is balanced by a similarly sized greater proportion using the mix of local and national sources.
- ▶ LAs in high deprivation areas are most likely to use the most local approach, while those in low deprivation areas are more likely to use national messages and signposting to national sources to a greater extent.
- ▶ Ethnicity follows a similar pattern to deprivation, with LAs with higher or middle proportions of ethnic minority children more likely to follow the most local approach. However, unlike the pattern for deprivation, LAs with low proportions of ethnic minority children are more likely to use a mix of local and national sources than LAs elsewhere.
- ▶ Larger LAs are more likely to use the most national approach and less likely to use the most local approach than small or medium-sized LAs.

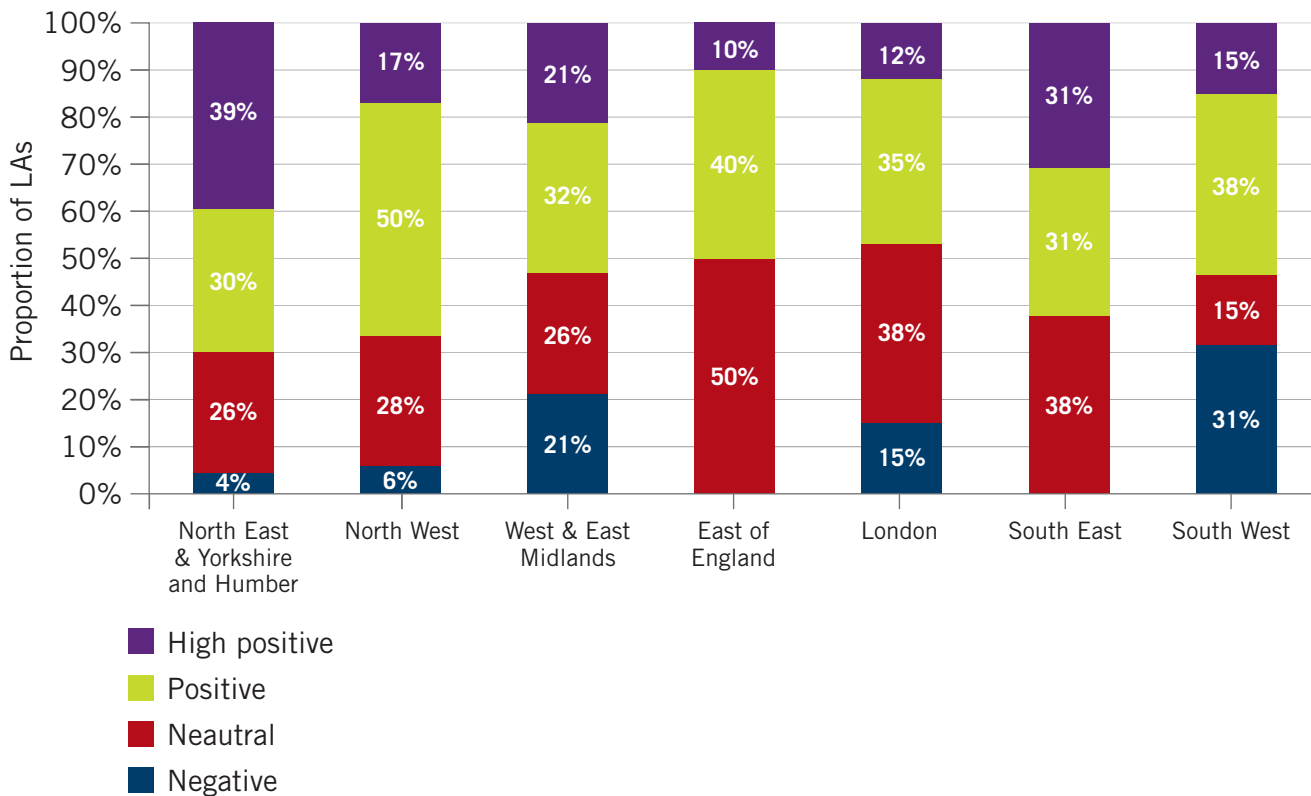
Level of support

Variations in the summary support measure (described in section 6) are presented in figures 5 through 7 for a number of LA characteristics.

These figures show:

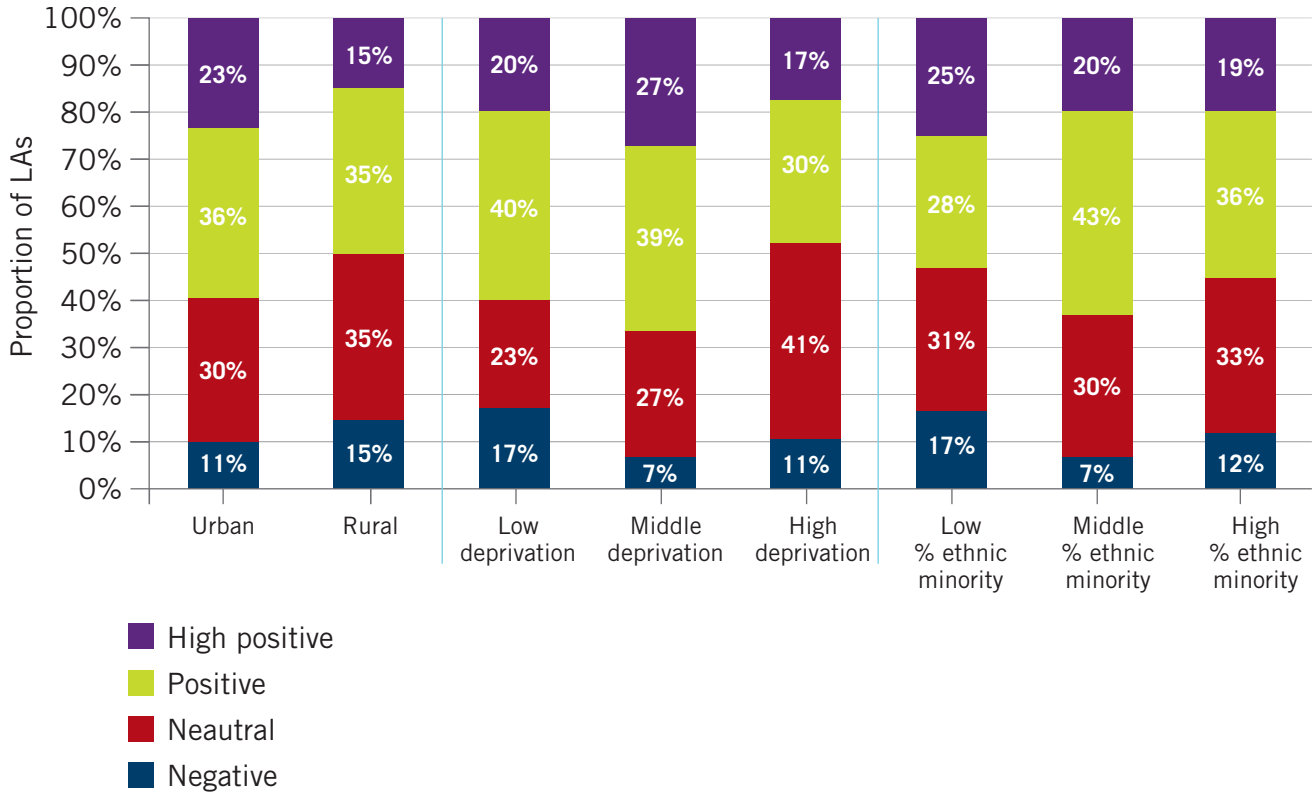
- ▶ The North East (with Yorkshire and Humber) and the South East have the highest proportions of LAs with a high positive assessment of the support, while the North West also has a high proportion of positive assessments. On the other hand, the South West and West and East Midlands have the highest proportion of LAs with an overall negative assessment, with London also having a high proportion.
- ▶ The proportion of LAs with a negative assessment is slightly higher for LAs in rural areas than for those in urban areas, with a correspondingly lower proportion of LAs with a high positive assessment.
- ▶ The pattern across deprivation levels is not clear cut: while areas of low deprivation have the highest proportion of LAs with negative assessments, those with high deprivation have the lowest proportion of LAs with positive or high positive assessments.
- ▶ Similarly, the pattern across different proportions of ethnic minority children is also not clear cut: LAs in areas with low proportions of ethnic minority children have both the highest proportion reporting a negative assessment and the highest proportion reporting a high positive assessment.
- ▶ Smaller LAs have a higher proportion of LAs with a high positive assessment than middle-sized or larger LAs, while larger LAs have the highest proportion with negative assessment.

Figure 5: Overall balance of facilitators and hindrances by region



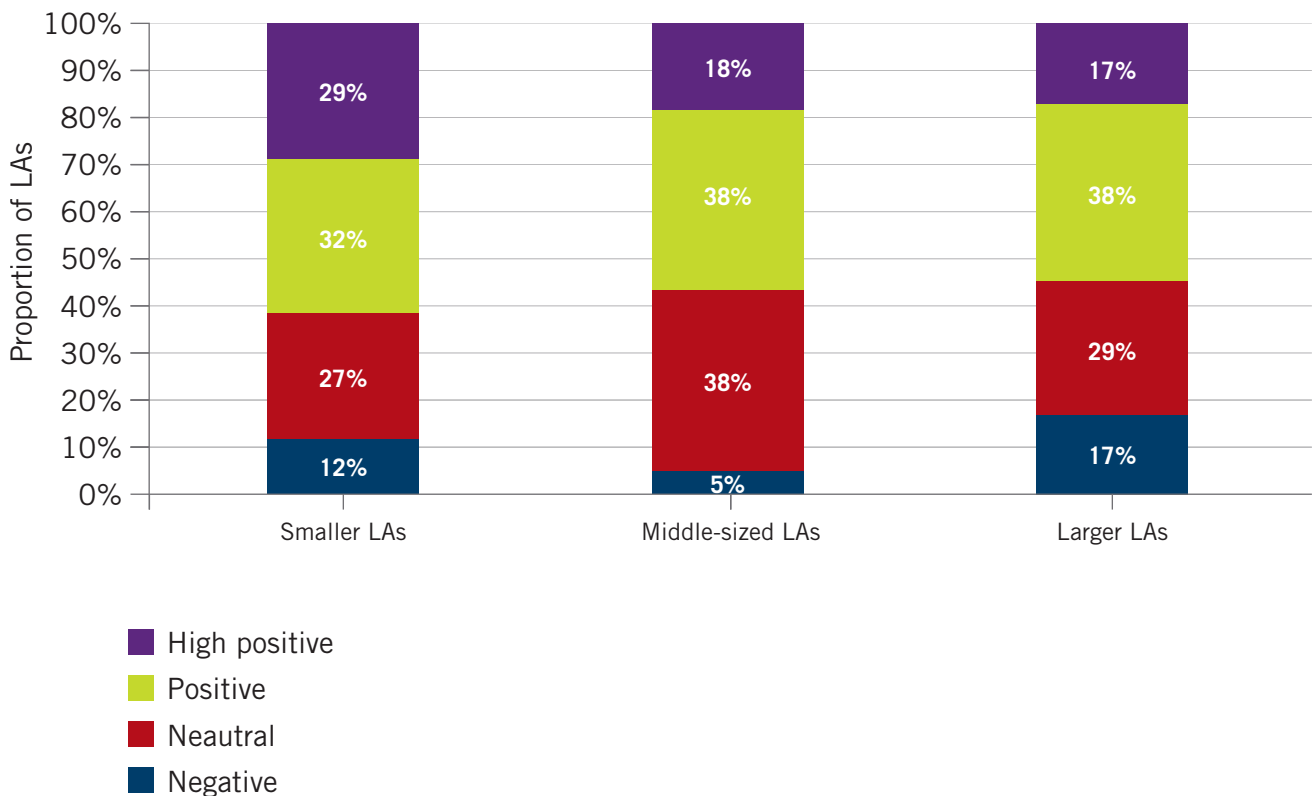
Notes: The number of LAs in each category is shown in table 23.

Figure 6: Overall balance of facilitators and hindrances by area urbanity, deprivation and ethnicity



Notes: The number of LAs in each category is shown in table 23.

Figure 7: Overall balance of facilitators and hindrances by LA size



Notes: The number of LAs in each category is shown in table 23.

Appendix C – LA Groupings

This appendix describes the kinds of measures that will be taken forward into the analysis of outcomes. These measures are more refined versions of the broad patterns presented above and will form the basis for those explored for the later research. The measures are first described, before the patterns across LAs are presented.

Description of the group measures

The summary measures of LA policies focused on three areas:

- ▶ The number of policy areas and the effectiveness of policy in each area;
- ▶ The local and national balance used in messaging to parents and providers; and
- ▶ The degree of support for policy from within the Early Years Team, the LA, and external organisations.

Number and effectiveness of policy

A categorisation of policy was derived from two underlying scores:

- ▶ A “policy score” was calculated as the number of areas that the LA reported to have provided pandemic-related support. The maximum number was seven, covering two types of policies supporting parents (guidance on using childcare and assistance to find childcare) and five types of policies supporting providers (health and safety, staffing challenges, financial management, local financial support, and quality). As all LAs reported some support for health and safety for providers, this only scored a point if the number of specific actions mentioned was greater than two.
- ▶ An “effectiveness score” was calculated based on the responses given for these seven policy areas, with a score of two if the response clearly expressed that the policy had made a difference and a score of one if the response was indirect approval (such as positive feedback from providers or help for parents in a limited or occasional way). As the effectiveness of support for provider staffing could only score a maximum of one, the maximum effectiveness score was 13.

The policy score was divided into three groups of low (4 or less), middle (5), and high (6 or more), and the effectiveness score was divided into three groups of low (4 or less), middle (5 or 6), and high (7 or more), based on creating three reasonably even groups for each measure. The final policy measure was constructed as six categories:

- ▶ a low number of policy areas (divided into low and middle/high effectiveness)
- ▶ a middle number of policy areas (divided into low/middle and high effectiveness)
- ▶ a high number of policy areas (again divided into low/middle and high effectiveness).

Local and national balance in messaging

This measure was simply the four categories presented in table 18, where the predominant approach was similar for parents and providers. The 12 LAs which had a mixed approach were recategorised into one of these four categories on the basis of the approach used for providers. A messaging score was then assigned on the basis of one for the most local approach through to four for the most national approach.

The degree of support

This measure was based on the lists of facilitators and hindrances given for the Early Years Team, factors within the LA (plus the hindrance of early years being undervalued within government as this was often reported as being a factor within the LA), and external support. These three areas were selected as those having the greatest influence on the ability of the LA team to support local provision rather than other factors which may have had a greater influence directly on provision.

For each of these three areas (Early Years Team, LA, and external), the number of facilitating factors mentioned were weighed against the number of hindrances and a score assigned as:

- ▶ -1 if there were more hindrances than facilitators (negative support)
- ▶ 0 if the number of hindrances and facilitators were equal (neutral support)
- ▶ 1 if there were more facilitators than hindrances (positive support).

The total support score was calculated as the sum of these three and could range from -3 to +3. This total score was then categorised as negative (less than zero), neutral (exactly zero), positive (exactly one), and high (more than one).

Patterns across LAs

Table 24 presents the proportions of LAs in each of the summary policy categories. By construction (the choice of group thresholds), the six groups are reasonably even in numbers of LAs. Also by construction, the mean policy score and effectiveness scores are closely related to the summary measure which is derived from them. While the mean policy score for all LAs is 5.2, this is only 3.6 for the LAs in the lowest policy group and 6.4 and 6.2 for LAs in the two highest policy groups respectively. While the mean effectiveness score is 5.5 for all LAs, it ranges from 6.0 to 8.3 across the higher effectiveness groups and from 2.7 to 5.3 across the lower effectiveness groups.

Table 24 – Policy number and effectiveness

	Number of LAs	% of LAs	Mean policy score	Mean effect score	Mean message score	Mean support score
Low number	18	15%	3.6	2.7	2.2	0.4
Low number + middle/high effect	12	10%	3.6	6.0	2.2	0.5
Middle number	28	23%	5.0	3.9	2.5	0.8
Middle number + high effect	12	10%	5.0	7.8	2.6	0.4
High number	28	23%	6.4	5.3	2.4	0.9
High number + high effect	24	20%	6.2	8.3	2.3	0.8
Total	122	100%	5.2	5.5	2.4	0.7

Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

The more interesting part of table 24 is the final two columns, which show the relationships between the number and effectiveness of policies and the messaging balance and degree of support. The mean messaging score is highest (greater emphasis on national messages) for those in the middle policy range, while it is lowest (greater emphasis on local messages) for those with a low number of policies. This suggests that greater reliance on national messaging sources is associated with a higher number of local policies, although the differences are not large and the relationship is not a strong one. The final column shows notably higher mean support scores for the high number of policy groups, suggesting that LAs which felt more supported were active in a larger number of ways.

Table 25 presents the analogous table for the local and national balance in messaging. By construction, the mean messaging score in the penultimate score simply reflects the group categorisation. The relationship between reliance on national sources and the number and effectiveness of policy areas is evident again in the slightly lower policy and effectiveness scores in the first two rows, but the differences are small, emphasising that the link is a weak one. The final column shows notably higher support scores for LAs with greater emphasis on national than local messaging.

Table 25 – Local and national balance in messaging

	Number of LAs	% of LAs	Mean policy score	Mean effect score	Mean message score	Mean support score
Local messages drawn from national sources	40	33%	5.2	5.6	1.0	0.7
Mix of local and national sources for messages	27	22%	5.2	5.2	2.0	0.3
National messages translated into local context	27	22%	5.3	5.7	3.0	0.9
National messages / signposting to national sources	28	23%	5.2	5.4	4.0	0.9
Total	122	100%	5.2	5.5	2.4	0.7

Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

For completeness, table 26 triangulates the information presented in the previous two tables, with the analogous table for the degree of support. By construction, the final column shows the mean scores within the defined groups.

Table 26 – Degree of support

	Number of LAs	% of LAs	Mean policy score	Mean effect score	Mean message score	Mean support score
Negative	14	11%	4.8	5.4	2.1	-1.1
Neutral	38	31%	5.3	5.3	2.2	0.0
Positive	44	36%	5.2	5.5	2.5	1.0
High positive	26	21%	5.4	5.8	2.5	2.1
Total	122	100%	5.2	5.5	2.4	0.7

Notes: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

The mean scores for policy, effectiveness, and messaging in table 26 confirm more strongly the message from the previous two tables that higher levels of support were associated with activity in more policy areas, a greater perceived effectiveness of policy, and greater reliance on national sources over local ones for messaging to parents and providers.