

# Four things we learned about the impact of Covid-19 on mainstream schools and special education settings in 2020 and 2021

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## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had profound effects on education in both mainstream and special schools. Education in England was considerably disrupted during the 2020/1 and 2021/22 school years. There were two periods of partial school closure when most pupils stayed at home (March-May 2020 and January-March 2021). Schools were asked to prioritise on-site places for vulnerable pupils (i.e. those with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) to address their special educational needs and disabilities (SEND); a social worker; or identified as vulnerable by the local authority or education provider) and the children of key workers. Schools had to adopt strict infection control measures for those attending on site, while simultaneously providing remote teaching/learning activities for pupils at home. This report summarises key findings from a series of surveys and interviews<sup>1</sup> conducted by two research teams in the summer terms of 2020 and 2021. It also draws on other research to put the findings into a wider context.

## Key messages

### 1. Almost all pupils lost some learning time during the pandemic, but pupils with SEND and those from economically deprived backgrounds lost out most

It is estimated that between March 2020 and April 2021, mainstream school pupils in England lost about a third of their normal learning time (Elliot Major *et al.*, 2021).

In July 2020, nearly all teachers (98 per cent) in mainstream schools estimated that their pupils were behind in their curriculum learning compared to where they would normally expect them to be, by an average of around three months (Sharp *et al.*, 2020).

Teachers and senior leaders in mainstream schools also thought that vulnerable pupils (including pupils with an EHCP) were, on average, less engaged in learning than their classmates during the first period of partial school closures (Julius and Sims, 2020).

Staff in special schools and colleges reported even larger impacts on their pupils' learning, estimating that overall, their pupils' literacy and numeracy skills were around four months behind normal expectations at the end of the 2020/21 academic year (Skipp *et al.*, 2021b).

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*My child has challenging behaviours and constantly refused to engage in school work [at home] after a while. It was tough.*

Parent of a child with SEND

*Everyone else was told: 'just take a few pupils with the greatest need'. We were told 'carry on providing for 100%.'*

Special school provider (Skipp *et al.*, 2021a)

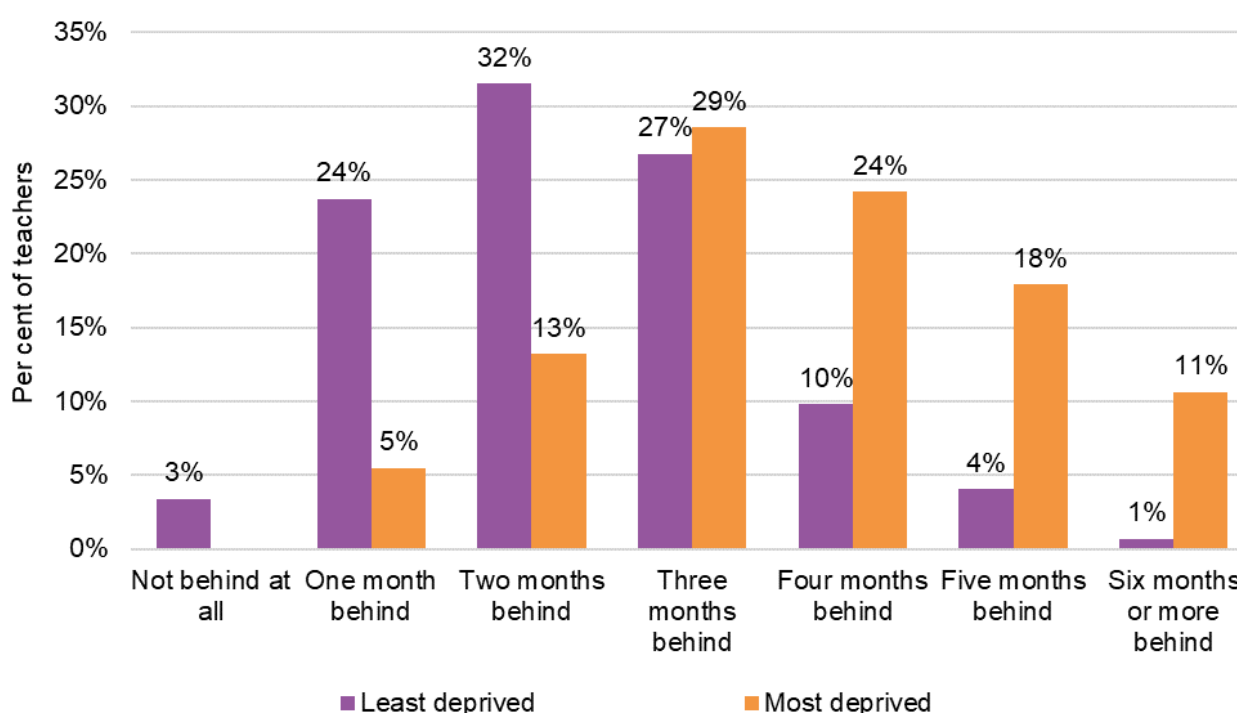
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<sup>1</sup> For full descriptions of the methods used and the samples achieved in the two research studies, please see: Sharp *et al.*, 2020; Walker *et al.*, 2020; Skipp *et al.* 2021a and b; and Nelson *et al.*, 2021.

The greater impact of the pandemic on learning among pupils in special schools and colleges compared to their mainstream peers, appears to result from a combination of factors. It was very difficult to accommodate pupils in their usual setting with their full support and challenging to provide remote learning for those not able to attend. It was not feasible for special schools to provide on-site places for pupils with an EHCP as this applied to all their pupils, some of whom were clinically extremely vulnerable to infection. Staff absence was also higher in the special school sector (Skipp *et al.*, 2021a and b). At the same time parents found it difficult to engage children in learning at home and support services (such as physiotherapy, respite care, speech and language therapy and in-home assistance) were unlikely to be delivered.

Pupils attending schools with the highest percentage of economically deprived pupils (as indicated by eligibility for free school meals) were estimated to be furthest behind in both the mainstream and special sectors.

**Figure 1: Estimated curriculum learning relative to normal expectations, in the least and most deprived mainstream schools, July 2020**



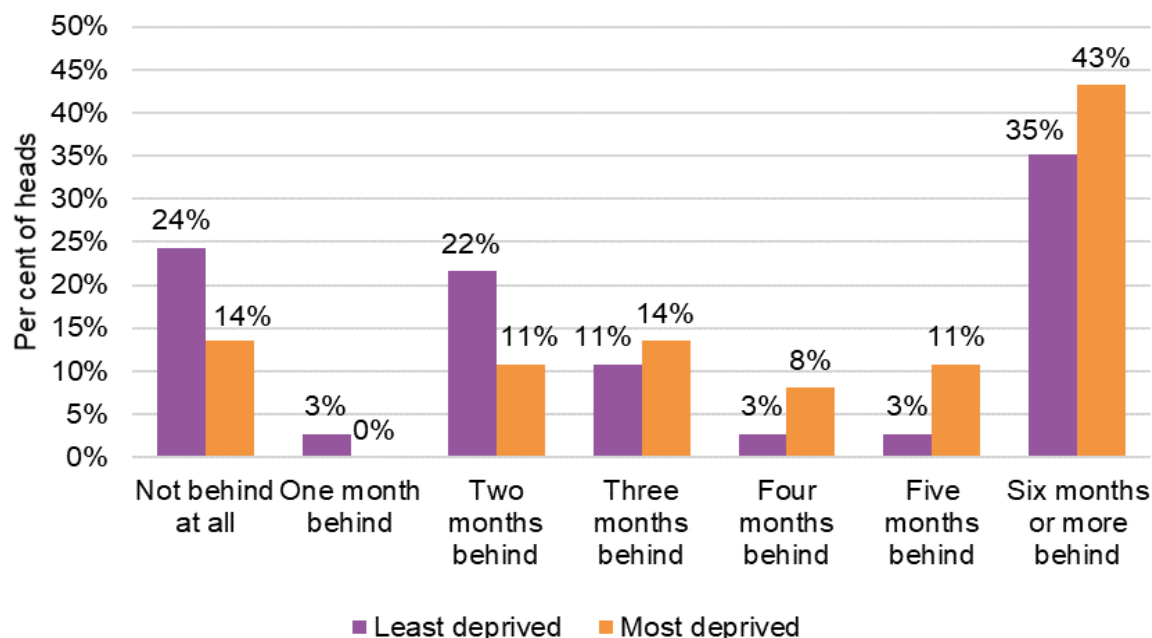
Source: NFER survey of 1782 classroom teachers: 1408 teachers gave at least one response (Sharp *et al.*, 2020)

Teachers in the top fifth most deprived mainstream schools were over three times more likely to report that their pupils were four months or more behind in their curriculum-related learning (53 per cent compared to 15 per cent).

There were a number of reasons for the deprivation-related differences in the mainstream sector. Attendance in the most deprived schools was affected by the pandemic earlier, so their pupils lost more learning time. By the end of the 2021 summer term, teachers in the most deprived schools reported the lowest pupil engagement, parental support and access to information technology; teachers also said they had taught less of the curriculum (Sharp *et al.*, 2020).

A similar trend is evident in responses from special schools and colleges (Figure 2)<sup>2</sup>. Headteachers of the most deprived special schools and colleges reported significantly greater impacts on their pupils' learning, making them between 1 and 2.5 months further behind than their peers in less deprived settings.

**Figure 2: Estimated learning in literacy relative to normal expectations, in the least and most deprived special schools and colleges, May 2021**



Source: ASK/NFER survey of special setting headteachers: 189 respondents, unweighted, 1 school with missing FSM data (re-analysis of data presented in Skipp *et al.*, 2021b).

Special settings located in areas of highest deprivation reported that demand for on-site places and pupil attendance were both lower, meaning their pupils had less time in school, with specialist support, than pupils in less deprived special schools and colleges.

## 2. Education did not return to normal once schools reopened to all

The periods of partial school closures in 2020 and 2021 were the most disruptive for pupils' education, but it is important to recognise that the effects continued once schools opened to all, mainly due to the social distancing and other infection control measures in place at the time. These requirements remained in place until September 2021, when they were largely removed.

*Being able to move around the classroom and pick things up, having a corrective conversation with a child about a misconception... that's your bread and butter... and it's very artificial not being able to do that.*

Secondary leader, mainstream school  
(Sharp and Nelson, 2021)

Both mainstream and special school leaders wanted their settings to re-open fully and to get back to normal as soon as possible (Sharp *et al.*, 2020; Skipp and Hopwood, 2020). However, nearly three-quarters (74 per cent) of mainstream teachers surveyed in July 2020 said they did not feel able to teach to their usual standard (Sharp *et al.*, 2020). Managing the return to on-site provision for all pupils in 2021/2 also took up valuable time. In summer 2021, staff in special settings were reportedly spending around a quarter (26%) of their usual

<sup>2</sup> Note that Figures 1 and 2 are provided for illustrative purposes but are not directly comparable because they were administered at different times and the analysis differed slightly.

teaching time focusing on implementing measures such as testing, reacclimatising and assessing needs, instead of teaching (Skipp *et al.*, 2021b).

Interviews with 50 senior leaders from mainstream schools serving predominantly deprived populations (Sharp and Nelson, 2021) suggested that social distancing was having a largely negative impact on the quality of teaching and learning. This was due to reduced opportunities for feedback, differentiation, group work, practical work and enrichment; and less targeted support for individuals who needed it. Periods of self-isolation for pupils (and staff), due to being in contact with a Covid-infected person, were also disrupting pupils' learning.

Pupils in special schools and colleges were particularly badly affected. It is a legal requirement that pupils with EHCPs receive the health, therapy and care input set out in their plan, but the requirement was suspended between March and September 2020. Pupils continued to have restricted access to their support even after it was supposedly reinstated. This meant that pupils attending special schools were not accessing the full support or enrichment activities vital to their development, wellbeing and independence over a 12-month period.

At the end of the 2020/21 academic year, headteachers of specialist settings reported that pupils were 4 months behind with their social and communication skills, independence and self-regulation and those with physical disabilities were around six months behind normal expectations in their physical development (Skipp *et al.*, 2021b).

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*I calculated that over this period we are supposed to have received 65 hours of input from SaLT [speech and language therapy]. In all that time they have only managed to make a phone call to five families.*

Special school headteacher (Skipp *et al.*, 2021b)

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### **3. Pupils' mental health and well-being suffered, as did that of staff and parents**

Large-scale national studies have indicated an increase in emotional difficulties and mental disorders among children and young people in England since the start of the pandemic (see NHS digital, 2020; Blanden, 2021; Paul *et al.*, 2021).

In May 2021, senior leaders of special schools and colleges estimated that overall, their pupils were on average five months behind with their mental health and emotional well-being. They said this was leading to a range of negative effects, such as increased behaviour issues in the setting but also self harm, increased suicidal tendencies, greater reliance on anti-depression medications and other injurious behaviours. Some respondents suggested that what they were experiencing amounted to a 'mental health crisis' (Skipp *et al.*, 2021b).

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*There's been a lot of tearfulness which we've not had previously. Quite a few children... are worried about something awful happening.*

Primary leader, mainstream school  
(Sharp and Nelson, 2021)

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Most of the 50 senior leaders of mainstream schools interviewed in summer 2021 (Nelson *et al.*, 2021; Sharp and Nelson, 2021) said their pupils' well-being and mental health had deteriorated since the pandemic. Symptoms had reportedly worsened among pupils who were already vulnerable (for example, due to their family environment or SEND), but senior leaders also had concerns about pupils who had no history of such issues. Senior leaders

identified a range of Covid-related reasons for an increase in well-being issues, including: social isolation during lockdown; experiencing illness and death in the family; and increased parental anxiety, job insecurity or conflict. Some secondary-aged pupils were said to be worried about their future prospects, including high-achievers who were anxious about the implications of changes to national assessments.

School leaders saw pupils' well-being as integral to learning. The top priorities of mainstream senior leaders for the start of the 2020/21 school year were to provide support for pupils' emotional and mental health and well-being (81 per cent); re-engage pupils with learning (64 per cent); and to settle them into school (63 per cent) (Sharp *et al.*, 2020). In May 2021, 83 per cent of special school/college heads said they were focused on reacclimatising pupils to being in their setting and re-establishing their confidence and routines. Just under three-quarters of providers (74%) said they were focusing on addressing increased emotional wellbeing and behaviour issues (Skipp *et al.*, 2021b).

However, both mainstream and special school leaders reported that the specialist services that pupils, schools and families rely on (including children and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), social care and SEND assessments) were not operating fully and/or were insufficient to meet demand (Nelson *et al.*, 2021; Skipp *et al.*, 2021b).

Both mainstream and special school leaders also reported a negative impact on the well-being of staff and parents (Sharp and Nelson, 2021; Skipp *et al.*, 2021b). Staff shortages led to increased pressures on schools and staff (Walker *et al.*, 2020; Skipp *et al.*, 2021a and b) at a time when most schools were providing additional support, such as food, information and home visits, to vulnerable pupils and their families (Julius and Sims, 2020; Skipp *et al.*, 2021a and b).

The profound effects on families came through strongly in our report on special education. Nine out of ten (89%) headteachers surveyed in 2021 reported that parents' support needs had increased during the pandemic. Parents reported how their own stress and anxiety had increased due to the removal of their usual support structures, the difficulties of juggling work with caring for a child with SEND and the uncertainties of their situation. They said their other children had suffered too (Skipp *et al.*, 2021b).

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*I'm emotionally scarred, exhausted and cannot see how I'll ever recover. As parents, we just cannot go on. The strain has just been too great.*

Parent of a special school pupil (Skipp *et al.*, 2021b)

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#### 4. Schools want the government to support schools better in future

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*All the guidance came out at 3.30 on a Friday, with no mention of specialist colleges, no advice. We had to decide it all for ourselves, take all the risk, but we knew we had no other choice, we knew we had to help our young people.*

Specialist college headteacher (Skipp *et al.*, 2021a)

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School leaders felt that the immediate government response to the pandemic was confusing and unhelpful. 'Directives from government' was one of the three key sources of pressure<sup>3</sup> on senior leaders of mainstream schools (Walker *et al.*, 2020). Leaders of special schools were especially frustrated by an apparent lack of understanding from local and national government of the needs of their sector (Skipp *et al.*, 2021b).

Schools at particular risk of financial hardship were disproportionately likely to be serving the most deprived communities (Julius *et al.*, 2021). Some of the mainstream school leaders interviewed in 2021 said they had few reserves prior to the pandemic and were further impacted when their spending on infection control was not fully reimbursed (Sharp and Nelson, 2021).

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*The amount of money we've received for COVID top-up hardly skims the surface unfortunately.*

Primary leader, mainstream school  
(Sharp and Nelson, 2021)

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<sup>3</sup> The other two main sources of pressure were: 'concerns about opening the school more fully in future' and the 'health and well-being of my staff'.

They were struggling to meet their pupils' additional well-being needs as well as supporting pupils to recover and make progress with their learning.

Senior leaders in both the mainstream and special sectors called for more government funding to be given to schools to support pupils' recovery, but they wanted to decide how best to use it, rather than having it tied to specific programmes (Sharp and Nelson, 2021; Nelson *et al.*, 2021; Skipp *et al.*, 2021b). Headteachers of special schools and colleges felt the government's recovery support was inappropriate for pupils with SEND (Skipp *et al.*, 2021b).

## Conclusion

This body of research shows how the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted education in England and affected schools, pupils and their families. The pandemic appears to have increased inequalities for those with SEND and from poorer backgrounds. Children, young people and their families rely on the structure and support provided by schools and other vital services, all of which have been affected by the pandemic. There is a clear need for schools, localities and central government to use the learning from this period to address the immediate and longer-term impact of the pandemic on pupils' education and well-being, as well as to improve plans to reduce the potential harm from future shocks.

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