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Better connected: How local education and children's services in England have responded to the coronavirus pandemic

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Research commissioned by the **Local Government Association**

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Foreword

It is impossible to overstate the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on all of us, both professionally and personally. Almost overnight, in March 2020, all of our lives changed significantly – and that meant bigger changes to the services supporting children and families than any of us had ever experienced.

Those working in children’s services, in early years settings and in schools, as well as in wider support services and across our partners, pulled out all the stops to make sure children were safe, were still receiving an education, and could access the help they needed wherever that was possible. They should be proud of the extraordinary work they have done over the last year.



At the time of writing, we are in the first phase of the Government’s roadmap out of restrictions. But while the end may, hopefully, be in sight for the immediate measures to slow transmission of the virus, the impacts of the last year will be with us for years to come. Those will show up in economic hardship, mental health issues, attainment gaps and more, and it will be up to councils, schools and settings, and wider partners to support children and their families to navigate these challenges.

This is why this is the right time to learn lessons from the past year. While everyone has tackled extraordinary and unprecedented challenges, there have also been many positives in terms of how we work. As this research highlights, local relationships have flourished, the possibilities offered by virtual working have been made clear, and partners are grasping the opportunity to work with children and families in a more holistic way than ever before.

This report tells the story of how councils and their partners responded to the pandemic. It offers important learning both in terms of what went well, and where we still need to do some work if we are to avoid simply returning to the pre-pandemic “normal”. I believe I speak for all councils when I say that we want to get the very best for our children, making sure that we harness this opportunity to put children at the centre of our recovery, and tackling head on the inequalities that we have seen exacerbated by the pandemic. The recommendations in this report offer ways to help us do that.

Councillor Judith Blake

Baroness Blake of Leeds, Leader of Leeds City Council, and Chair, Children and Young People Board, Local Government Association

Executive summary

Everyone who reads this report will be able to point to ways in which their lives, both professionally and personally, have been disrupted by the effects of coronavirus. At the same time, the impact and implications of the pandemic are only just coming into focus. This report sets out how those working in local areas across education and children's services have come together to adapt and respond to the crisis, the implications for education and children's services of this period, and the lessons that can be learned both now and for the future.

This research has been commissioned by the Local Government Association (LGA). Through it, we have worked with eight local areas in England. In each local area, we have engaged council leaders with responsibility for education and children's services, primary, secondary and special school leaders, and team managers with responsibility for early help and children's social care. We have also engaged a broad range of national organisations, including those representing children and young people, early years settings, and independent children's homes.

How local areas have responded to the different phases of the pandemic

Our engagements with education and children's services leaders in local systems have suggested that there have been – to date – four distinct phases in local systems' responses to the pandemic. Despite the difference in the contexts of local areas, descriptions of these four phases, and the focus of activity in each, were remarkably consistent across all the local areas that took part in the research. We describe these phases from the perspective of local systems – we recognise that the individual experiences of young people and families may look very different.

1. **Phase 1: Initial response to lockdown** – this phase relates to the period between March and early April 2020, when the focus of local education and children's services was on managing the implications of the first national lockdown in England. Key activities that characterised local systems' responses during this period included (i) putting in place systems for keeping "eyes on" vulnerable children, and (ii) developing essential structures of system leadership, communications and partnership working.
2. **Phase 2: Adapting to lockdown** – this phase relates to the period between May and mid-July 2020, when the focus of local systems was on adapting to the conditions of lockdown and planning for recovery. Key activities within local systems during this phase included (i) refining system-wide communications, (ii) addressing practical challenges, such as access to personal protective equipment (PPE) and IT devices, (iii) assessing risk to support the return to in-person teaching and support for families, and (iv) improving core systems relating to access to support.
3. **Phase 3: "New normal"** – this phase relates to the period from September to mid-December 2020, when there was a return to in-person teaching and support for families, notwithstanding a month-long second national lockdown. Key activities during this phase included (i) putting plans and risk assessments developing during the previous period to the test of operating during and stemming the spread of the pandemic, (ii) responding to "bubbles bursting" when someone in a teaching bubble or team tested positive, and (iii) identifying and responding to children's and families' needs resulting from the first lockdown.

4. **Phase 4: Return to lockdown** – this phase relates to the period from January 2021, when the third national lockdown in England was announced. We remain in the midst of this period at the time of writing (March 2021). While some of the restrictions introduced during this period are similar to those introduced in the first national lockdown, the focus of local education and children’s services systems in this most recent phase has been on (i) delivering a robust offer of remote learning and remote support for families, and (ii) balancing continuity of education and support for families with reducing opportunities for transmission.

The unifying nature of the pandemic has meant that there is a “common core” to the way local systems have responded to the pandemic. Nevertheless, delving below the level of a local system, there have been distinct implications and adaptations required for different services and sectors.

- **For mainstream education for school-age pupils**, school and local authority (LA) leaders described three broad adaptations that mainstream primary and secondary schools have had to make during the pandemic period. First, they described how this experience had, in many cases, strengthened relationships between councils and schools. Second, school leaders also described how the pandemic period had placed greater emphasis on – or in some instances brought wider recognition of – schools’ role as a focal point of their local community and in providing support for the families of their students. Most of the school leaders from whom we heard considered that their relationships with families and communities had been strengthened during the pandemic period. Third, mainstream schools have had to take on new roles and develop new practices, for example developing the infrastructure and practice of remote learning, contact-tracing and mass testing.
- **In the early years sector**, LA officers and national early years bodies expressed concern about the impact on learning for pre-school children, given how critical these years are in laying a foundation for child development. There was also a perception that the early years sector was not always treated in the same way as schools – for example, in relation to the decision that mainstream schools should close to the majority of pupils in the third lockdown, but that early years settings should remain open to all children. Furthermore, there were concerns raised that the role of the early sectors as a provider of early education, rather than as childcare support for working parents, had not been fully appreciated in national policy-making. Likewise, there were concerns about the lack of access to testing for early years settings. Longer term, the significant concern remains how to maintain the financial viability of individual settings if pupil numbers do not bounce back to pre-pandemic levels.
- **Leaders in special schools and alternative provision (AP)** described how their experience of the pandemic had differed to that of mainstream schools in two main ways. First, special school leaders described the tension in national policy between, on the one hand, defining children with Education, Health & Care Plans (EHCPs) as vulnerable, and therefore with an entitlement to be in school, while, on the other, asking people who were clinically vulnerable to remain at home. Second, special school leaders felt that pupils with special educational needs or disability (SEND) had often been particularly isolated with even fewer opportunities to connect with children and services in their local community. Finally, school and LA leaders considered that it had been harder for schools – both mainstream and special schools – to replicate the learning and support structures for pupils with SEND than for their peers, and that the potential gaps in learning for pupils with SEND following lockdowns and time away from in-person teaching would be much greater. Conversely, however, some AP leaders

described how their pupils had benefitted from changes in the way learning support has been delivered during periods of lockdown, including engaging effectively in remote learning.

- **In children's social care**, local leaders reflected that the restrictions on face-to-face contact had necessitated a rapid process of risk assessment, which had placed a greater emphasis on professional judgement and had given social workers greater discretion to respond to a family's individual needs. They also considered that the pandemic had both required and demanded creativity and flexibility, as safeguarding practice based on in-person contact had had to be reimaged to maintain relationships through a range of remote and socially-distanced engagements. This had necessitated the development of more blended approaches to sustaining contact with young people and families.
- **For systems of early help**, there was consensus among LA leaders that having the capacity to deploy a flexible, multi-skilled, responsive workforce to support families facing difficulty and hardship has been crucial to their response to the pandemic. Local areas described how they had adapted their offers of early help to provide new forms of support that families needed but that local areas had not been able to offer previously, redesigned routes into early help to make it easier for families to self-refer, and strengthening partnership working with and delivery through the voluntary sector and volunteers.

Factors that have shaped local areas' responses

Local areas that were most positive about their system's response to the pandemic described three key conditions that had helped them to mount their response. These conditions were –

1. having a strong set of shared values and an expectation of collaborative working on system-wide issues;
2. having high levels of trust and strong inter-personal relationships backed up by effective local partnership structures; and
3. having confidence in the track-record and capacity of leaders of the system to deliver on identified, strategic, system-wide priorities.

Local systems that considered that they had had these conditions in place prior to the pandemic saw their response to the pandemic being one of evolution, rather than requiring the creation of an entirely new way of working. Other local areas that did not have these conditions in place before the pandemic have had to create systems and ways of working across council services, with partner agencies, or with settings and schools that did not exist before the pandemic.

What LA and school leaders in all the local areas with whom we have engaged have recognised, however, is that the pandemic has required a system-wide response. Local areas that had these three conditions of effective whole-system working in place at the start of the pandemic appear to have had an advantage in being able to mount a system-wide response, and have experienced a more straightforward transition to dealing with the challenges of the pandemic, compared to those that have had to create new infrastructure to enable system-wide working during the pandemic. Practical enablers – robust business continuity systems, IT infrastructure to support remote working, strong corporate practices around face-to-face working – were also highlighted as important factors in being able to mount an effective, system-wide response to the pandemic.

Opportunities arising from the pandemic period

LA and school leaders identified three broad types of opportunities that had arisen during – and indeed been necessitated by – the pandemic period. These are detailed here, not in an attempt to draw positives from this period, but rather to capture aspects of practice that have been developed to respond to the crisis and that leaders of local systems did not want to lose once the immediate challenges of the pandemic recede.

First, there was strong consensus among LA and school leaders that the pandemic had necessitated a rapid expansion of virtual working, and that this should form part of the toolkit for education and children’s services in future. Virtual working has been used as a platform for –

- strategic meetings involving school and setting leaders and a range of partner agencies;
- care planning, decision-making or risk assessment meetings that require input from multiple partners;
- direct engagement with families as a means of providing support or involving them in their children’s learning; and
- remote learning and support to children and young people.

Those we interviewed saw the benefits of maintaining a mix of virtual and in-person communications in the future, commenting on the convenience and reduction in travel time, the flexibility of engagement, and the opportunities to work with some young people and families in different ways. Education and children’s services leaders were also clear that virtual working was not without its drawbacks. They highlighted reduced opportunities for informal interaction with colleagues or families, the growth of the digital divide within disadvantaged communities, and the challenges of seeking to make nuanced judgements about risk or progress without direct contact with young people and families.

Second, several local areas highlighted that the pandemic had stimulated a period of transformation in services. They described how they had used time during lockdowns to embed new decision-making processes and ways of working. Often, these related to decision-making processes around access to targeted or specialist forms of support. For local areas that had undertaken service transformation projects, the aim was not only to address long-standing strategic priorities, but also to strengthen processes that could contribute to the recovery after periods of lockdown. Some local areas also described how they had used the opportunity to “reset” some services and reorientate them towards more preventative forms of support.

Third, many leaders across education and children’s services observed that the experience of the pandemic period had fostered a more sophisticated and shared understanding of vulnerability. The process of risk assessing support for children, identifying children who were “out of sight” of services, and working with families who had been placed into conditions of hardship by the pandemic, had sharpened understanding of the indicators of and risks associated with “vulnerability”, as well as the necessity of joint working. This had, in turn fostered stronger information sharing and multi-agency working to support vulnerable families, and less work limited by organisational silos. It had also, in some cases, brought out into the open levels of deprivation and hardship that were previously hidden to settings, schools and services.

Challenges arising from the pandemic period

LA and school leaders reflected on three broad sets of challenges that they had experienced in developing their local systems' responses to the pandemic.

First, local leaders described a strained relationship between central and local government, which they considered had not been characterised by genuine partnership working and mutual trust. School and LA leaders recognised the pressures that central government departments were under in responding to rapidly-changing circumstances and unprecedented challenges. They also welcomed the opportunities for dialogue with representatives of national government that have been established anew or utilised for novel purposes since the start of the pandemic. Nonetheless, local system leaders – both LA and school leaders – felt that, too often, plans were developed unilaterally and without genuine co-production and testing with LA, school and setting leaders. As a result of this, policy announcements were made to which local leaders had to scramble to respond. Some of the ways in which this tension was manifested included the volume, timing and lack of notice when publishing new or updated guidance, and the demand for data which were then not shared with local areas. School and LA leaders highlighted the breakdown in trust caused by the decisions and advice given around remote learning and school closures before and after the Christmas holidays. The early years sector highlighted the absence of a rationale behind the decision that early years settings should remain open to all children in the third national lockdown.

Second, local leaders described the challenge of balancing an ever-increasing number of competing priorities during the pandemic period. One notable challenge in the first lockdown had been maintaining the appropriate balance between care and education. Whereas the emphasis for schools during the first national lockdown was very much on children's safety, by the third national lockdown there were clearer expectations about the continuity of education. This brought new challenges, not least the workload pressure on school staff to provide in-person and remote learning in parallel and balancing this with support for sport and physical activity, mental health and wellbeing, and managing testing and contact tracing.

LA and school leaders also described their concerns at the scale of the learning gaps from the first national lockdown, particularly for children with SEND and those who had other vulnerabilities. The challenges thrown up by the pandemic, and cycles of lockdown, have not necessarily *created* new needs, but rather have *exacerbated* existing vulnerabilities and widened learning gaps. This is unlikely to be solved by quick "catch-up" initiatives. Instead, local leaders recognised the need for a long-term offer of intensive, holistic, pro-active, joined-up support for families at risk and those who are potentially vulnerable.

Third, local leaders described extreme fatigue, the risk of burnout, and the strain on local resources, both human and financial. They paid tribute to the resilience, fortitude and creativity that staff across education and children's services had demonstrated during this period, but also underscored the fragility and fatigue of the workforce. The relentless nature of decision-making, and the need to provide stability and reassurance, against a backdrop of changing demands, staff sickness and reduced capacity was referenced by leaders across children's services and education. Those who engaged in the research also reported significant pressures on budgets as a direct result of the pandemic –

- at the level of individual families, with notable increases in eligibility for free school meals;
- at the level of schools and settings, with leaders reporting higher expenditure on items like IT, supply staff, cleaning, signage and administrative staff to manage test-and-trace; and

- at LA level, where, on top of the direct costs of the pandemic, there were additional children's social care costs caused by, for example, delays in the courts leading to slower decision-making and a reduction in available foster placements and places in children's homes.

Implications of the pandemic period so far and recommendations if local education and children's services are genuinely to "build back better"

The response to the pandemic period must acknowledge and address the direct impact on children and families, but also the exacerbation of underlying inequalities and vulnerabilities

Our research has explored not only what the pandemic has *caused*, but also what it has *revealed*, within the systems of support that educate our children and support our most vulnerable and at-risk families. A strong message throughout our research has been that those children and young people who were already vulnerable, either in terms of their engagement with learning or their family lives, have been the most negatively affected by the pandemic. There were six main areas of needs that have been exacerbated by the pandemic that LA and school leaders highlighted to us.

1. **Increasing levels of financial hardship and poverty in families**, revealed initially in increasing eligibility for free school meals, home-to-school transport and the two-year-old free childcare entitlement (the latter is available to children in deprived households).
2. **Higher levels of demand for support from early help**, including increasing self-referrals. LA leaders described seeing increased demand from families who would not have been on the radar of early help, facing difficulties and encountering financial hardship because of the pandemic, and being more willing to seek support from early help.
3. **Pressure on and a concentration of demand for statutory children's social care**. This has been due to a backlog of demand that would ordinarily have been spread across a year being concentrated into the months after all pupils returned to settings and schools after the first national lockdown. Added to this has been the impact of the slowdown in the family courts. This has meant that more children have remained in care and fewer have moved on to permanency via adoption or special guardianship orders. Leaders of children's services also reflected on the greater complexity of needs of children coming into the care system particularly in relation to contextual safeguarding risks, county lines, substance abuse and mental health needs.
4. **More families choosing elective home education** – one local area estimated that they had seen an increase of 40%, while another reported that numbers of children in elective home education had more than doubled. The reasons for this were often due to parents making positive choices following their experience of home learning during the first national lockdown. In many instances, however, LA leaders described how parents' decisions to educate their children at home were taken because of fear about the risks of their child contracting Covid-19 or the health risks posed to vulnerable parents or carers.
5. **Growth in mental ill health among young people**, across all ages, and at all levels of severity. Local leaders reported how the impact of isolation of families was beginning to be seen in the cases coming to the attention of early help and statutory social care. This included vulnerable families with new babies or very young children, issues of parental conflict, the impact of adult mental ill health, substance abuse and/or domestic violence, coupled with young people's own feelings of anxiety and isolation. The impact of bereavement and loss were strong themes

in our discussions with practitioners across children's services and education settings, as was the added burden placed on young carers.

6. **The scale of the learning gaps for some pupils**, notably children with SEND and other vulnerabilities. During periods of remote learning, particularly during the third national lockdown, the level of parental engagement with and support for learning has been a significant determinant of a child's learning. There were also particular concerns about the rises in levels of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) given the way the pandemic has restricted opportunities for apprenticeships, work-based learning and other supported routes into the world of work.

Recommendation 1: There needs to be a long-term strategy for "building back better" in education and children's services, shared between central government and local systems

LA and school leaders identified the need to balance being positive about what could be done to reclaim lost ground with being honest about the scale of learning losses and the risks experienced by the most vulnerable young people –

- avoid overplaying the impact of the pandemic on *all* children, for fear of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy about children falling behind;
- recognise the pandemic has exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, which are likely to endure after the current period of coronavirus restrictions comes to an end; and
- carry out an honest appreciation of both what education and children's services can achieve in terms of mitigating some of the effects of the pandemic period and the cycle of lockdowns, but also of the scale of the needs that the pandemic has exacerbated.

There was a strong consensus among the LA and school leaders that the concept of "catch-up" did not do justice to what was needed to "build back better". Instead, they advocated a highly targeted, long-term strategy, underpinned by dedicated streams of funding, that would focus resources in the most vulnerable communities and on the most disadvantaged pupils. This strategy would need to be co-produced by national government, including the Department for Education (DfE), Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), and the Treasury, LAs, and school and setting leaders. Such a strategy should focus on enabling long-term and sustainable local delivery of –

- a robust early help offer, with agreement at national and local level that this is an essential part of a flexible, pro-active, multi-disciplinary approach to supporting potentially vulnerable families;
- a comprehensive offer of support for school improvement, school leadership and governance, and academic and pastoral interventions, including recognition of the need for a broader curriculum offer to engage and support all young people in a school's community;
- a holistic strategy for early years education, recognising this as an essential public service that provides high-quality early education and child development in the most formative years of a child's life, rather than being seen in terms of how it assists parents to return to work;
- a stronger offer of emotional wellbeing and mental health support, including capacity-building within schools, a focus on mental health in professional development, and greater access to support for mental ill health for young people and staff;
- an evaluation and formalisation of good practice in the use of remote learning and virtual working in education and children's services so that this can be used safely and effectively to engage young people and families where appropriate; and

- dedicated – and potentially ring-fenced – long term funding for early intervention heavily weighted towards indicators of disadvantage to build capacity for flexible, responsive, early intervention and restorative support.

In responding to the pandemic period, it is also essential to recognise the importance of local systems, not as marriages of proximity, but as essential partnerships that work with and support local communities

The pandemic has provided a stark reminder about the inter-connected nature of local systems. It has required a system-wide response to education, to keeping children safe, and to supporting vulnerable families. LA and school leaders highlighted numerous examples of where a local system response had been invaluable during the pandemic – these have implications not only for the pandemic response, but also for the work of local systems beyond the pandemic.

- **The approach to ensuring that there were “eyes on” vulnerable children** during the first national lockdown, and subsequent work to track children who are potentially vulnerable and those at risk during subsequent cycles of lockdown.
- **Convening school leaders to share practice and agree common approaches in relation to maintaining education during periods of lockdown**, developing and sharing practice around remote learning, risk assessments, and engagement with families.
- **Convening education, children’s services and public health leaders to ensure school and setting leaders could take informed approaches based on the latest local information.** This has been important in responding to the day-to-day challenges of the pandemic, but could also inform more tailored approaches in the future to initiatives such as Healthy Schools and tackling the social, education and health determinants of poverty and deprivation.

This is not to argue for the return to an era of the all-powerful “local education authority” – if such an era ever truly existed. Instead, we want to highlight the important role of well-functioning local *systems* in responding to the pandemic, and consequently the need for the roles and responsibilities within local systems to be re-articulated. Within this, we would argue, there needs to be a recognition of the unique role of the LA, alongside the roles of other partners in a local system, such as schools, early years settings, independent sector providers, and other agencies. Overall, in continuing to respond to the pandemic and in the post-pandemic future, local systems need to be seen as essential partnerships between schools, settings and LAs, and between education, children’s services, public health and other partners. Working as part of a local system must not be seen as an optional add-on.

Recommendation 2: Central and local government should jointly re-articulate the importance of local education and children’s services systems, agree how local government can be enabled to fulfil its role within local systems, and develop a more co-productive relationship between central and local government

There needs to be recognition, at a national and local level, that local systems are essential and inter-dependent partnerships for providing education and support for children and families, not optional marriages of proximity between autonomous actors. “Building back better” after the pandemic cannot be achieved without fundamentally rethinking the complementary and connected roles of schools, settings and LAs. While this “rethinking” of the roles within local systems cannot simply be a rhetorical

exercise, clear and consistent national rhetoric is needed. This must capture the essential role of local systems and system-wide approaches in delivering education and support for vulnerable children and families. Within that, it must also articulate the essential role of LAs in a well-functioning education system, and the complementary roles of LAs, schools and settings, and other local partners such as the Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs).

National rhetoric from the DfE, representatives of local government, and bodies representing settings and schools, that acknowledges the role that local systems and their leaders have played in the pandemic, and the importance of their role in the future, is a start. It is not, however, sufficient, if the lessons of the pandemic are to be learned and applied. School and LA leaders reflected that LAs alone have the potential to bring together education, children's services, public health, plus other services such as transport, procurement, health and safety, and legal support. This role complements the work of other partnerships, such as clusters of schools and settings, multi-academy trusts, or local area strategic education partnerships. LAs cannot stand in for the intensive work that takes place to support leaders, staff and pupils within clusters and multi-academy trusts, but, as the pandemic has demonstrated, neither can multi-academy trusts and clusters replicate the connections between education, children's services, public health and other services that are crucial to mounting effective system-wide support for all children and families.

A central element of a strong local system is a there being a clear role – and the capacity to play that role – for LAs, and an understanding of the way the role of the LA complements those of school and setting leaders, and regional and national partners. In responding to the pandemic and the beyond, LAs will need the power and capacity to act as –

- a convener of partnerships – to convene all system leaders and initiate system-wide initiatives around education and support for vulnerable children and families, not as optional add-ons, but as business-as-usual for all setting and school leaders;
- a champion of vulnerable children – to have the power to shape holistic, multi-professional support and challenge non-inclusive practice within settings and schools towards children from deprived backgrounds, those with SEND, or those with other vulnerabilities; and
- a commissioner of services – with the power to create and reshape provision for vulnerable children and families, including AP and specialist SEND provision, to reflect local needs.

This will require work between the DfE and local government, alongside other partners within and beyond central government, to agree what is needed to enable local government to fulfil these roles and help to shape effective local education and children's services systems. Our recommendation is that the DfE, local government and bodies representing school and setting leaders should agree a set of clear expectations of whole-system approaches and co-operation between LAs and schools / settings. This should include co-operation around issues relating to support for vulnerable children, including admissions and fair access, SEND, AP and other children who are at-risk of harm. LAs should have the power and capacity to support such system-wide approaches and to challenge instances of poor practice or non-engagement.

Furthermore, in responding to the pandemic now and in a post-pandemic future, there needs to be a re-casting of the partnership between central and local government in relation to education and children's services. This should be built on an appreciation of the respective roles of each, on mutual trust, and on a commitment to genuine, two-way, co-productive dialogue to share, test and develop a consistent national policy framework within which effective local delivery can take place.

* * *

Introduction

'This has probably been the hardest period of my professional life.' (LA officer)

'When I look back on my career, when people ask me what body of work I am most proud of, it will be the work I have done between March and now.' (Secondary school leader and multi-academy chief executive)

Everyone reading this report will be able to point to ways in which their lives, both professionally and personally, have been disrupted by the effects of coronavirus. At the same time, however, the impact and implications of the pandemic period are only just beginning to be reckoned with. At the time of writing, we remain in the grip of the crisis, partway through the third cycle of national lockdowns in England, and on the first step of the Government's roadmap out of lockdown. The after-effects of the pandemic are likely to be with us for a long time to come, while the factors driving these continue to affect our lives.

Despite the shocks, the pressures, the disruptions and the thwarted plans of 2020 and early 2021 – and these have been consistent themes throughout our research – there has been a sense of pride in the accomplishments of local education and children's services in responding in the face of this unprecedented challenge. This research project has sought to do justice both to the scale of that challenge (and what it has revealed that needs repair in England's education and children's services systems), as well as to the ways in which local systems have sought to support families, keep vulnerable children safe, and maintain young people's education during this unfolding crisis.

The aims of the research

In July 2020, the LGA commissioned Isos Partnership to undertake research to explore how education and children's services in local areas were having – and are continuing – to adapt and respond to the coronavirus pandemic. This has included detailing the challenges of the pandemic period, but also the learning and the good practice, borne of necessity, that has been developed at the same time.

The research had four aims, which were to –

1. understand how councils, mainstream and special schools, and early years have responded to the challenges posed by Covid-19, specifically in relation to education and children's services;
2. consider how education leaders, children's services professionals, and families have adapted and responded to these challenges and developed new ways of working;
3. explore how different partners within the local area have worked together during this period, including how education settings and children's services have worked together to identify vulnerabilities and provide holistic support to families and communities; and
4. develop an evidence base for councils and their partners to draw on as they seek to embed the emerging good practice and address the ever-evolving challenges of the pandemic period and its aftermath.

This research has focused on the responses of what we have termed "local education and children's services systems" in England. Many of the themes we have explored through this research will resonate with the experiences of the other UK nations, but our scope has been to explore directly the

responses of a selection of local areas in England. By “local education and children’s services systems”, we mean –

- local – the geographical area based on the boundaries of a local authority (LA) in England (single tier and upper tier authorities – county councils, metropolitan and London boroughs, unitary authorities);
- education – our focus has been on children of an age to attend an early years setting or school¹;
- children’s services – both statutory children’s social care services and the wider system of early help and non-statutory support for vulnerable children and families; and
- system – the connections between the range of partners involved in supporting the safety, wellbeing, learning and wider development of children, young people and their families.

How we have approached the research

The project has involved a series of iterative discussions with leaders of local education and children’s services. Throughout the project, we have worked with eight local systems. We selected local areas to ensure that our sample was as representative as possible in relation to a range of relevant factors, including –

- the size of the pupil population;
- levels of deprivation (using IDACI, or the income deprivation affecting children measure);
- the proportion of schools that are academies (to consider the extent to which the make-up of the school system might affect responses to the pandemic);
- the rate of children in care per 10,000 children aged under 18 (to consider the extent to which prior levels of children in care might affect responses to the pandemic);
- geographical region; and
- political control.

In alphabetical order, the eight local areas that agreed to take part in the research were –

1. Brent;
2. Gateshead;
3. Hackney;
4. Leicester City;
5. Lincolnshire;
6. Staffordshire;
7. Stockport; and
8. Swindon.

Since the focus of this research has not been on any individual sector, but on the local system as a whole and its strategic response to the pandemic period, we have focused our evidence-gathering on engagements with LA leaders. In each local area, we have held conversations with –

¹ This is not because we are blind to the impact of the pandemic period on very young children, but instead because we have explored this topic in its own right in our [Working for babies: Lockdown lessons from local systems](#) report for the First 1001 Days Movement. Similarly, this research has not focused on the implications of the pandemic on the further education sector, as this is another topic that warrants focus in its own right.

- the Director of Children’s Services or the Director of People;
- Assistant Directors and Heads of Service responsible for school and early years education, inclusion and SEND;
- Assistant Directors and Heads of Service responsible for children’s social care and early help; and
- the Lead Member for Children’s Services.

To broaden our evidence base and to gather complementary perspectives from frontline professionals about their local systems’ responses to the pandemic, we have also held 1-to-1 discussions and workshops with –

- a selection of team managers of children’s social care and early help teams; and
- a small cross-section of leaders (headteachers / principals, multi-academy trust chief executive officers, and governors) of primary, secondary and special schools and AP providers (maintained and academies).

Within the scope of this work, it has not been possible to speak directly to frontline professionals in every phase of education, sector and service involved in education and children’s services. In addition to speaking to schools and children’s services teams, we have sought to complement this feedback by engaging with national bodies representing the early years sector and children’s homes, for example. This is not because we think that any sector or service is more important than other – indeed, the impact of the pandemic on the early years, on mainstream schools, on special schools, on AP providers, on further education, on children’s homes are all topics that merit exploration in their own right. Instead, our focus has been on the connections that make up local systems, and we have sought to balance perspectives of those concerned with early years child development, school-age education, children’s social care and family support at local and national levels.

Throughout the research, we have shared and tested emerging findings with council elected members through the LGA’s Children and Young People Board, including virtual workshops with members in November and January. Later in the process, between late January and March 2021, we also shared, tested and updated our emerging findings and prospective recommendations through –

- a virtual roundtable event for representatives from the eight participating local areas; and
- a series of engagements with national partners, including the Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS), the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL), the DfE, the Early Years Alliance, the Independent Children’s Homes Association (ICHA), the National Association of Headteachers (NAHT), the Office of the Children’s Commissioner, and Ofsted.

The research has focused on the 12 months between March 2020 and March 2021. During the research, those who participated were asked to cast their minds back to the period leading up to the closure of England’s early years settings, mainstream primary and secondary schools to all but a minority of children and the first national lockdown, announced on 23 March. Our main evidence-gathering activities took place through a series of iterative engagements between October 2020 and February 2021.²

² In the third national lockdown, early years settings have remained fully open. In both the first and third national lockdown, where restrictions were imposed on the pupils who could attend schools, pupils with EHCPs for SEND remained eligible to attend school. Since over 97% of pupils in special schools have EHCPs, it is important to distinguish between the impact of the pandemic period on mainstream primary and secondary schools on the

Our thanks to those who have contributed to the research

One of the challenges we have faced in undertaking this project has been ensuring that the research has kept pace with the rapid changes of policy with which local systems have been grappling. This task has been made easier by the patience, flexibility and generosity of colleagues from the eight participating local areas. We remain grateful to them for the time, reflections and ideas that they have contributed to this research.

At the time of our writing this report, England remains in a state of lockdown. Mainstream primary and secondary schools have only just welcomed back pupils, on 8 March, having been open for face-to-face teaching only to vulnerable children and the children of key-workers since 5 January. A “roadmap” for exiting this third national lockdown in England has been announced, and we are currently taking the first of four steps. While there is a sense of optimism about the roll-out of the vaccination programme and the possible route out of the most stringent coronavirus-necessitated restrictions, it remains the case that the past twelve months have seen a cycle of lockdowns, with restrictions having to be reimposed to curb increasing transmission and protect against new variants. As we start – and hope to continue – to move out of the third lockdown in England, the experience of the past twelve months, and the fact that the risks posed by the coronavirus pandemic have by no means receded, suggests that now very much *is* the time for lessons to be learned so that worst effects of earlier cycles of restrictions can be mitigated, and that education and children’s services in England can truly “build back better”.

* * *

one hand, and special schools on the other. Many providers of AP, including pupil referral units (PRUs) and AP academies, have also remained largely open during the pandemic due to the fact many if not all their pupils are classed as vulnerable.

Chapter 1: How local areas have responded to the different phases of the pandemic

Local leaders identified four distinct phases in their responses to the pandemic to date

Our engagements with education and children’s services leaders in local systems have suggested that there have been – to date – four distinct phases in local systems’ responses to the pandemic. Despite the difference in the contexts of local areas, descriptions of these four phases, and the focus of activity in each, were remarkably consistent across all the local areas that took part in the research. In setting out these phases, it is important to bear in mind two things.

- a. **These responses are from the perspective of local systems** – they do not attempt to reflect the individual experiences of young people and families, including those with additional needs or who are clinically vulnerable. We recognise that these individual experiences of the past twelve months may look very different.
- b. **This has not been a uniform and linear process for each individual local system** – some local areas were hit earlier and harder by the initial outbreaks in early 2020 and, from June onwards, other local areas have been subject to local lockdowns and the differentiated system of regional tiers. This has meant that, at different times, different local systems have been subject to differing levels of restrictions, which will have influenced their priorities in responding to the pandemic.

Nonetheless, our research suggests, that over the past twelve months and in response to the behaviour of the virus and national policy decisions, there have been distinct foci of local systems’ responses. These fall into four broad phases. The four phases are summarised in the following graphic, and expanded upon below.

Figure 1: Summary of the four phases of local systems' response to the coronavirus pandemic

	Phase 1: Initial response to lockdown	Phase 2: Adapting to lockdown	Phase 3: “New normal”	Phase 4: Return to lockdown
Timeframe	March and early April 2020	May to mid-July 2020	September to mid-December 2020	January to the present time of writing
Focus of local systems’ responses	<p>Focus: Managing implications of the first national lockdown, closure of early years settings and mainstream schools to all but a minority of pupils.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Putting in place systems for keeping “eyes on” vulnerable children. Developing essential structures of system leadership, communications and partnership working. 	<p>Focus: Adapting to conditions of lockdown, planning for the “return” of in-person work.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Refining system-wide communications. Addressing practical challenges – PPE, IT and devices, free school meals. Assessing risk to support return to in-person work. Improving core systems to support recovery. 	<p>Focus: Return to in-person teaching and support for families.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> In-person teaching / visiting resumes – planning and risk assessments meet reality. Responding rapidly to “bubbles bursting”. Identifying and responding to children’s and families’ needs resulting from the first lockdown. 	<p>Focus: Reducing transmission, while maintaining teaching and support for families, drawing on the lessons of the first lockdown.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Delivering a robust offer of remote learning and remote support for families. Balancing continuing education and family support with reducing the risk of transmission.
National context	<p>20 March – early years settings and schools to close except for vulnerable children and the children of key-workers.</p> <p>23 March – “stay at home”, first national lockdown announced.</p>	<p>April-May – flexibility introduced for children’s social care and SEND.</p> <p>June – early years settings re-open. Partial return of primary pupils and secondary pupils in exam years.</p> <p>29 June – local restrictions re-imposed in Leicester.</p>	<p>2 September – 2020/21 academic year begins. Settings, schools fully open.</p> <p>5 November – second national lockdown (to 2 December). Settings, schools remain open to all pupils.</p> <p>8 December – first Covid-19 vaccination.</p>	<p>18 December – term ends. Staggered re-opening of schools announced.</p> <p>4 January – spring term. Settings, majority of primary schools open to all pupils. Third national lockdown: early years settings open. Schools open to vulnerable and keyworker children.</p>

Phase 1: Initial response to lockdown

Local systems described this as a short phase at the end of the spring term 2020. The focus here was on managing the implications of the first national lockdown and the closure of early years settings and mainstream schools to all but a minority of pupils. This phase was characterised by two main sets of activities.

1. **Putting in place systems for keeping “eyes on” vulnerable children.** With most children not in schools or settings, there was a risk that those who were potentially vulnerable would not necessarily be seen daily by a professional (a teacher or an early years worker, for example), and thus the signs of being at risk of harm would not be identified. Through multi-agency risk assessments, liaison structures between education settings and children’s services, and routines for visiting families, local systems developed a set of structures to help them keep track of vulnerable children (and encourage those whom they judged needed to be in a school or setting to attend).
2. **Developing essential structures of system leadership, communications and partnership working to respond to the demands of the pandemic.** Local areas came into the pandemic period with a variety of approaches to strategic partnership working and communication between agencies and across education and children’s services. Some had robust strategic partnerships relating to education (for school, multi-academy trust, diocese, and council leaders), SEND, safeguarding, and health and well-being, on which they could draw. Others had to repurpose or rapidly upgrade existing structures to cope with the requirements of the initial response to the pandemic. In all instances, leaders of local systems described that one of the key tasks of this early phase of the response to the pandemic was agreeing a set of system leadership routines and structures. At a strategic level, these structures were crucial in attempting to shape and co-ordinate a system-wide response – they often involved leaders from education, children’s services, public health and local health-based services. Local education partnerships and networks also played an important role in establishing regular communications routines and networks between the council and schools / settings. These were used to share intelligence, information and local approaches quickly. One local area introduced “school relationship managers” to co-ordinate demands on schools, join-up support from services, and ensure consistent communications and messages. Another local area developed a triage system, with the Assistant Director responsible for education acting as the first point-of-contact for school leaders, to ensure their questions and requests could be directed to the right place and acted on swiftly. Elected members described that, in the initial period of the response to the pandemic, while there remained a framework of democratic oversight, the ordinary democratic decision-making processes had to be altered to keep pace with the pandemic. Councils have adapted their decision-making processes, and elected members have played an important role in scrutinising the local impact of the first national lockdown and the lessons learned for future cycles of lockdown.

Phase 2: Adapting to lockdown

Leaders of local systems described this as a phase that broadly spanned the summer term, from May to mid-July 2020. The focus in this phase was on adapting the work of local education and children’s services systems to the conditions of the first national lockdown – including limited scope for face-to-

face work, social distancing, and the challenges of acquiring PPE – and planning for the lifting of restrictions and the return of children to early years settings and mainstream schools. Leaders of local systems described four main sets of activities that characterised this phase.

1. **Refining system-wide communications about the local system’s response.** During this phase, local areas continued to use the leadership, partnership and communication routines developed in the first phase of the response to the pandemic. Local leaders reflected that, while these routines were refined and their frequency adapted to reflect local priorities, they continued to be a crucial means of enabling children’s services, education and public health leaders to work together to share intelligence, solve problems and shape local responses to the pandemic.
2. **Addressing the practical challenges of the early response to the pandemic.** There was also an important focus on delivering on practical matters such as PPE, free school meal vouchers in holiday periods, IT devices for families without access, and home-to-school transport.
3. **Assessing risk to support the return to in-person teaching and support in the recovery phase.** A key strand of activity during this time for both education settings and children’s services teams was on planning for the return of face-to-face delivery of teaching and support for families – carrying out risk assessments, planning visits and preparing plans for learning and support.
4. **Improving core systems to support the recovery phase.** Several local areas used this period to make progress on pre-pandemic strategic priorities. These priorities included improving decision-making processes relating to access to support for vulnerable young people – the front door to children’s services, EHC needs assessment decision-making panels, inclusion and access to AP. Leaders in local areas reflected that it had been important for work to continue to address pre-pandemic priorities, but equally to ensure these processes were fit-for-purpose and could play a part in the post-lockdown recovery.

Phase 3: “New normal”

Local systems described a third phase in which the planning for the return and recovery phase confronted the reality of attempting to live with the virus. This phase took place during the autumn term, from September to mid-December 2020. This included the second national lockdown in England. Leaders of local systems described three main areas of focus during this phase of the response to the pandemic.

1. **Planning and risks assessments meet reality, as face-to-face teaching and visiting resumed.** While some in-person teaching continued during the summer term (particularly in special schools and AP, and for a minority of children in mainstream schools and early years settings), the start of the new academic year in September 2020 marked the point where, as one LA leader put it, ‘all of our planning and risk assessments met reality’. The focus in the run-up to and start of the autumn term, leaving aside the fall-out from A-level and GCSE grading, was on preparing risk assessments, plans and practical arrangements for settings and schools to operate and to minimise the risk of transmission. Similarly, in children’s services, managers and staff continued the process, begun as the first national lockdown was lifted, of risk-assessing and judging how best to engage with families, and adopting approaches that blended face-to-face visits and contact via remote means.

2. **Responding rapidly to “bubbles bursting”**. Linked to the point above, as the autumn term progressed, schools and early years settings had to contend with the “bursting” of support bubbles in which classes, year-groups, or in some cases whole settings were placed, when a child or member of staff tested positive and those who had been in contact with them had to isolate. Feedback from the local areas we engaged supports analysis of school attendance carried out by the Education Policy Institute, which showed considerable variation in average school attendance and days of learning lost during the autumn term (and indicated that variability between and within schools was likely to be even greater).³ This necessitated the development of capacity within schools and settings to trace contacts for staff and young people who test positive, as well as developing a strong offer of remote learning, alongside face-to-face teaching, for students who are isolating. While the issue of bubbles bursting was an immediate challenge for schools and settings, it also had a knock-on effect on the support plans for children known to children’s services. In instances where a key aspect of a child’s care plan was premised on the child attending a school or a setting, this had to be reworked if a child then had to self-isolate because they or a contact tested positive for Covid-19. This, in turn, placed a greater premium on rapid information sharing between schools and settings, LA leaders and children’s services practitioners. We described above, in relation to Phase 1, one local area where a senior LA education leader acted as a first point-of-contact and triage for school leaders to get in touch: one of the benefits of this arrangement was that it facilitated rapid notification of positive Covid-19 tests in schools and settings.
3. **Identifying and responding to children’s and families’ needs resulting from the first lockdown**. Many local areas did not see an anticipated “spike” in needs after the first national lockdown. Instead, as we describe in Chapter 5, education and children’s services professionals began to uncover the extent of – and the variation in – the impact on children’s learning and wellbeing during the period of the first – and, albeit to a lesser extent, the second – national lockdown in England. A key focus of activity during this third phase of local systems’ responses to the pandemic has been on unpicking and responding to children’s adverse experiences and gaps in their learning, and to the new and increased vulnerabilities of families. Leaders and managers of children’s services described that their focus during this phase was on dealing with a gradual but consistent increase in demand. This rise in demand has come from three sources. First, local areas have seen increased requests for support from families that had not previously been known to services, but were then coming to the attention of, or requesting support directly from, early help. Second, local areas have seen the way in which the first national lockdown has compounded existing vulnerabilities, and are anticipating a similar pattern emerging after the second and third cycles of lockdown. Third, the disruption to patterns of requests for children’s services, for example, because most children had not been in schools and settings since March and delays in the family court system, have led to a concentration of demand, higher caseloads and pressure to find placements for children following the first national lockdown.

Phase 4: Return to lockdown

LA and school leaders described to us a fourth phase of local systems’ responses to the pandemic period. At the time of writing, we are currently in the midst of this phase – we do not know how it will

³ See the Education Policy Institute’s analysis, published 14 January 2021, ‘Changes in school attendance by local authority in England over the 2020 autumn term’ (Weblink [here](#)).

develop or end, and what further phases may follow. This fourth phase relates to the start of a third national lockdown in England, and the second time restrictions on which school-age pupils were eligible to attend schools have been introduced. (Unlike the first national lockdown in England, early years settings have remained open to all children during this period.) While in some ways this has been a return to the level of restrictions familiar from the first national lockdown in England, school and LA leaders emphasised two main ways in which the current phase has been qualitatively different to the initial response to the pandemic and the first lockdown.

1. **Focusing on delivering a robust offer of remote learning and remote support for families.** As we described in relation to Phase 1, school and LA leaders acknowledged that the priority in the initial stage of local systems' responses to the pandemic was ensuring children were safe, which took precedence over considerations of the quality of the education they were receiving. In the third national lockdown, there have been both clearer expectations about the learning offer children should be able to access, and a school system more adept and experienced at using methods of remote learning. School leaders acknowledged that they did not consider that remote learning could make up for the loss of face-to-face teaching, but they did think that the experiences of the first lockdown and of "bubbles bursting" during the autumn term had meant they were better equipped to support remote learning when the third national lockdown was announced. As one school leader put it, 'Last time was childcare, this time it is education.' Similarly, in children's services the reimposition of a national lockdown has seen a return to modes of engagement and support for families developed during the previous cycles of lockdowns.
2. **Balancing continuity of education and support for families with reducing transmission.** During the third national lockdown, early years settings and mainstream schools have been balancing the educational need to ensure continuity of learning for pupils with the public health imperative to reduce contacts and enforce social distancing. This has been a particular challenge during the present period, where early years settings have remained open to all pupils, and where the eligibility of pupils who can attend schools has been expanded (through a broader definition of vulnerable pupils).⁴ DfE data on school attendance show that, while attendance averaged 2% between March and early June 2020, attendance in all state-funded schools started at 13.9% in January 2021, rising to 15.9% by 11 February, immediately before half-term, and reached 18.5% on 24 February and 19.1% on 3 March, before face-to-face teaching resumed for all pupils on 8 March.⁵ While some school and LA leaders welcomed the broader definition of vulnerability and the scope within this to take a risk-based approach to which children should be in school, many highlighted the challenge of balancing the imperative to reduce opportunities for coronavirus transmission with accommodating larger numbers of pupils in schools than in the first national lockdown.

At the same time, schools, settings and local systems have had to develop the capacity to deliver testing and, more recently, to manage the roll-out of the national vaccination programme, which we discuss in more detail in Chapter 4.

⁴ See DfE guidance, 'Children of critical workers and vulnerable children who can access schools or educational settings', updated 8 January 2021 (weblink [here](#)).

⁵ See DfE, 'Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak' (weblink [here](#)).

There has been a “common core” to how local systems have responded to the pandemic, but different implications for individual services and sectors

The unifying nature of the pandemic has meant that there is a “common core” to the way local systems have responded to the pandemic. Nevertheless, delving below the level of a local system, there have been distinct implications and adaptations required for different services and sectors.

Mainstream education for school-age pupils

School and LA leaders described three broad adaptations that mainstream primary and secondary schools have had to make during the pandemic period. First, they described how this experience had, in many cases, strengthened relationships between councils and schools. In some local areas, relationships had been forged where they had not previously been well-developed. Some local systems had, for example, created new leadership networks and clusters for all schools in the local area, regardless of type, sharing information and practice, providing advice from local public health teams and facilitating common access to PPE. In other local areas, the experience of the pandemic had strengthened relationships that were already well developed. In these latter areas, LA officers and school leaders described how the pandemic had necessitated the shift to a more mature, relational mode of engagement, focused on *mutual support* and *respect* for one another’s respective roles, and less on “*challenging*” performance during the height of the crisis.

Second, school leaders also described how the pandemic period had affected their role as a focal point of their local community. Some school leaders saw this very much as a continuation of their existing work with their local communities and families, but all agreed that the pandemic had placed greater emphasis on the role of schools and their staff in supporting the families of their students and the communities in which they operated. This extended to delivering food parcels and providing support to families facing extreme hardship, fundraising to provide access to IT devices for students, and acting as a hub for community services. Regardless of their starting-point and their approach to community relations before the pandemic, most of the school leaders we engaged considered that their relationships with families and communities had been strengthened by the experience of, and gained greater public recognition during, the pandemic period.

Third, mainstream primary and secondary schools have had to take on new roles and develop new practices, particularly in relation to remote working. While all school leaders highlighted the opportunities that had brought, they also recognised the challenges of developing the infrastructure and practice of remote learning, and balancing this alongside face-to-face teaching during the autumn and spring terms. We describe these challenges in more detail in Chapter 4. In the most recent phases of the pandemic response, mainstream schools – and indeed early years settings, special schools and AP providers – have had to get to grips with contact-tracing when children or staff test positive or need to isolate, and with the logistics of mass testing.

Early years education

In terms of the early years sector, there are implications for individual children, as well as for settings and the sector as whole. In terms of individual children, LA leaders described the significant challenges of the loss of learning and social development opportunities. Given that the lasting impact of early years education on a child’s development is well-established, LA leaders were concerned that there would be no easy “catch-up” for the loss of learning suffered by young children of pre-school age.

These concerns are supported by the findings from Ofsted’s thematic reviews, which suggested that children returning to early years settings after the first lockdown were struggling to re-adapt to routines, such as play, that some had had “too much” exposure to smart devices, and that there was some evidence of a regression of core skills.⁶

In terms of individual settings, LA leaders described how early years settings had been in a very difficult position in relation to the risk of a positive case. LA leaders and national bodies described how early years staff had been concerned about the impact of a single child or member of staff testing positive, since, given the size of many early years settings, this would often require that the entire setting be closed. LA leaders and national bodies were concerned about the long-term sustainability of the sector – something corroborated by the Ofsted thematic reviews, which found that one in three providers were worried about having to close. Towards the end of our research, some local areas had suggested that changes made by the DfE to the administration of the early years census – recognising that attendance would be lower due to coronavirus, and that children who would otherwise reasonably be expected to attend a setting could be included in the census, and thus used to calculate a setting’s funding – had provided some degree of reassurance to early years providers.⁷

Throughout the research, LA leaders passed on the concerns of early years providers that the early years sector was not always treated in the same way as schools – for example, in relation to the decision that schools should close to pupils other than vulnerable children and those of keyworkers in the third lockdown, but that early years settings should remain open. The concerns here were more about the rationale behind the decision that schools should limit which pupils to attend, but early years settings should remain open to all, and an appreciation of the role the early years sector plays in early child development, not just providing childcare for parents.

Likewise, there were concerns about the lack of access to PPE, support in dealing with the additional staffing and cleaning costs, and lateral flow testing for early years settings, and a lack of detailed planning for how access to testing for early years settings should be arranged at local level. Fundamentally, LA leaders and early years national bodies expressed concern that national policy responses to the pandemic had viewed the early years sector solely through the prism of providing *childcare* to enable parents to work, rather than as a provider of education vital to a child’s long-term development. They argued that this misunderstanding of the role of the early years sector had led to a lack of clarity in national guidance, and subsequently significant variation in the ways early years providers were drawn into local systems’ responses to the pandemic.

Education for pupils in special schools and AP

Special school and AP leaders identified two ways in which their responses had differed from their mainstream school counterparts. (They also argued that their ability to respond to the pandemic had not always been helped by national announcements referring to “schools” in general, with guidance specific to special schools often provided later than the general guidance relevant to mainstream schools.)

First, special school leaders described the additional challenges of balancing the competing demands of reducing opportunities for transmission with keeping children who were defined as being

⁶ See Ofsted, (November 2020), ‘COVID-19 series: briefing on early years, November 2020’ (weblink [here](#)).

⁷ See the weblink [here](#) for details of the ‘Covid-related support for submitting an early years census return’, provided by the DfE.

vulnerable in school. Special schools, particularly those with specialisms in supporting children with profound and complex needs, including those requiring care for medical needs, described the tension in national policy between, on the one hand, defining children with EHCPs as vulnerable, and thus with an entitlement to be in school, while, on the other, asking people who were clinically vulnerable to remain at home. For special schools with these specialisms, this created a complex situation that required leaders and governors to make risk-based judgements about how their schools could operate in ways that kept children and staff safe. This also required close working with parents, particularly those of children with complex needs, who were anxious about the safety of their children in schools. Special school leaders and governors, therefore, needed to focus their judgements on which children might be at risk of harm if they were *not* in school and those who might be placed at unnecessary risk if they *were* attending school during periods when rates of transmission were high. To a different extent, the pandemic has also required special schools supporting pupils with communication and interaction needs, such as autism, or social, emotional and mental health needs, and AP providers, to rethink how they organise their staffing, use of space, curriculum and support structures to balance continuity of learning with public health, social distancing, and reducing opportunities for the virus to spread.

Second, special school leaders expressed regret at the way the pandemic had caused greater isolation of pupils with SEND. One special school leader described how a significant focus of their work before the pandemic had been on connecting their students to their local community. The aim of this was to enhance students' learning experiences, develop social and independent living skills, combat the isolation experienced by some of their students, as well as to promote visibility, inclusion and positive attitudes towards people with SEND in the community. As a result of the pandemic, special school leaders described how all their wider, community-based learning programmes had been paused, to the detriment of their students' learning and schools' wider aims of promoting inclusion and connection with local communities.

Special school leaders also argued that, for some pupils with specific needs, it was much more difficult to create a remote means of delivering the teaching and support those pupils would ordinarily receive in school. Those special schools had invested time in developing resources and strategies that families could use to support their children's learning at home, but they acknowledged that these required more intensive input from parents and carers. Overall, school and LA leaders considered that it had been harder for schools – both mainstream and special schools – to replicate the learning and support structures for pupils with SEND than for their peers, and that the potential gaps in learning for pupils with SEND following lockdowns would be much greater. Conversely, however, some AP leaders described how some of their pupils had benefitted from changes in the way learning support has been delivered during periods of lockdown, including engaging effectively in remote learning. Overall, however, special school and AP leaders argued that their pupils had faced significant disruption to their learning and support that could not be easily “caught up” and replaced after lockdowns ended.

Children's services and early help

During this research, we have engaged team managers and practitioners from a range of services within early help and children's social care. Within both, there was a strong sense from professionals about the necessity of adapting their practice to the context of coronavirus restrictions. Within children's social care, managers described an initial period of shock, when lockdown and restrictions on in-person contact were first introduced, with teams trying to make sense of the implications for safeguarding practice. In what we have described earlier in this chapter as “Phase 1: Initial response

to lockdown”, social care teams undertook a rapid process of risk-assessing the families known to their teams and developing new support plans based on levels of risk, which families needed to be seen, when and how this could be done. Children’s social care professionals described two main – and largely positively perceived – implications of this period. First, they considered that the pandemic period had placed far greater emphasis on professional judgement in social care practice – deciding which families needed to be engaged and how best to do this. In some local areas, this had given social workers greater discretion to provide the things that they felt the children and families with whom they were working had needed – ranging from necessities, like food parcels and parenting support, to more specific activities based on a child’s interests.⁸

Second, they considered that the pandemic had both required and demanded creativity and flexibility, as a heavily-regulated form of practice based on in-person contact had had to be reimaged to maintain relationships through a range of remote and socially-distanced engagements. As we describe in Chapter 3, children’s social work teams were not alone in describing the potential benefits of Zoom, WhatsApp, garden and walking visits, and other means through which professionals have maintained contact with children and families. Nor were they alone in pointing out that, in the future, such new approaches should be used cautiously to complement, rather than substitute for, face-to-face engagements. In terms of describing the response of local systems to the pandemic and the implications for children’s social care services, it is important to underscore the scale of the adaptation to day-to-day practice that took place in the early phases of the pandemic.

After this initial period of responding to the first national lockdown, over the subsequent phases – what we have called “Adapting to lockdown” and “New normal” – children’s social care teams have adopted a “blended approach” to engaging families. This has involved using remote means of engagement in certain circumstances, but also using PPE and social-distancing to allow for face-to-face work, with families and within teams, where professionals judged that this was necessary. As rates of transmission rose during the autumn and winter, social work team managers described a return to the modes of practice developed during the first national lockdown.⁹

In relation to early help, the implications of the pandemic have differed depending on the nature of the offer of early help and the make-up of the early help system in local areas before the pandemic struck. For example, while some local areas described how the involvement of health-based services – health visitors and school nurses – was affected as health-based staff were redeployed to the front line of the emergency health response, other local areas that had integrated health visiting and school nursing services within their early help services had been able to maintain continuity of support. However local areas configured their early help offer, there was consensus among LA leaders whom we engaged that having the capacity to deploy a flexible, multi-skilled, responsive workforce to support families facing difficulty and hardship has been crucial to their response to the pandemic.

- One local area described how they had paused part of their pre-pandemic offer of early support in the first lockdown, only to see demand for statutory support rise. They had subsequently moved quickly to reinstate their early help offer.

⁸ A similar finding was reported by the University of Birmingham – see Ferguson, H., Kelly, L., and Pink, S., July 2020, *Research Briefing Two: Disruption and renewal of social work and child protection during COVID-19 and beyond* (weblink [here](#)).

⁹ This chimes with the findings reported in the DfE’s most recent summary of their survey of local authorities regarding children’s social care – see *Vulnerable Children and Young People Survey: Summary of returns Waves 1 to 17* (February 2021; weblink [here](#)).

- Another local area described how they had taken the decision to redeploy some of their youth support to local children’s homes in the first lockdown, but had experienced less need for additional capacity in those homes, and more demand for youth support from young people.

As with statutory social care, LA leaders described how early help had had to be adapted and prioritised to respond to the demands of the pandemic. Some early help team managers described how this had empowered staff to focus on providing forms of support that families most needed and that they had not been able to offer previously – for example, some local areas had used children’s centres as hubs for distributing food parcels, clothes and IT devices, or offering remote cooking classes to parents. Some areas had redesigned their routes into early help, recognising that, in the context of the pandemic, more families were willing to self-refer and seek support pro-actively. Some early help team managers described how they had experienced better engagement from fathers, who had been more accessible and willing to engage with family support services. In other local areas, the pandemic has strengthened partnership working with and delivery through the voluntary sector and volunteers, including local citizens who had initially volunteered to support the NHS through the Royal Voluntary Service and the GoodSAM app.

- One local area had recruited 92 volunteers who had been providing peer-to-peer, mentoring and practical support to over 100 families facing challenges – the LA considered that this had paid dividends in terms of avoiding issues escalating to the point of referral to statutory services, and improving parenting skills and relationships within families.
- Another local area had used the same pool of volunteers to recruit new foster carers, strengthening the sufficiency of foster care placements in the local area and replacing those placements previously provided by older foster carers who had not been able to offer places on account of being clinically vulnerable and having to shield.

Nevertheless, as with children’s social care, while leaders responsible for early help were positive about the creativity, resilience and adaptive capabilities of professionals working within early help, and some of the possibilities created by virtual working, they were also conscious that this was not always an adequate substitute for face-to-face engagements. Some local areas described how parenting support groups and play-based programmes had seen a decline in engagement from families the longer coronavirus restrictions had lasted, with parents citing fatigue with virtual engagements as a reason for reducing their engagement.

At the same time, the impact of the pandemic period on children has not been uniform

While the focus of local systems has been on trying to keep “eyes on” vulnerable children, and while professionals and services have adapted to the parameters within which they have had to work, LA and school leaders have recognised that, in both education and children’s services, there are aspects of practice for which remote learning or meetings are an imperfect substitute for face-to-face engagements. Local leaders acknowledged that, despite the commitment, creativity and efforts of education and children’s services professionals, there are young people and families with whom professionals have had less direct contact and fewer opportunities to build relationships. They highlighted specifically the families of very young children and adolescents. Likewise, there have been young people, particularly those who are disadvantaged, vulnerable or have SEND, but also those who have experienced periods of isolation, who will have faced significant disruption to their learning. LA and school leaders considered that this has exacerbated inequalities and learning gaps for the most disadvantaged young people.

This is borne out by the evidence gathered by a range of national bodies in recent months. For example, analysis carried out by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner drew attention to the fact that, in October 2020, there remained around 10% of pupils who were not attending school each day and about whom very little was known – for example, whether they were the same children each day and why they were not attending school.¹⁰ Ofsted inspection reports have indicated that school leaders ‘believe that learning lost over the first national lockdown was extensive’, and have raised concerns about risks to children who were out of sight during the first lockdown and the variation in the return to pre-lockdown rates of referrals to children’s services across local areas.¹¹ DfE data collected from LAs suggest that, at the end of 2020, rates of referrals to children’s services were 6% lower in early October 2020, and 12% lower in early November, than at the same times in 2019.¹²

This is not to contradict what we have said about local systems seeking to maintain “eyes on” vulnerable children and families, nor to cast doubts on the effectiveness of this work. Instead, it is to acknowledge that, due to the restrictions of the pandemic period and the adaptations to practice, there remain risks of children experiencing so-called “hidden harms” and disruption to learning, which leaders within local systems are constantly striving to mitigate. The challenges of maintaining care of the most vulnerable and support for disadvantaged young people and those with SEND have been themes that have run throughout our discussions with leaders of local systems. We expand on these challenges in Chapter 4, and explore the long-term impact on young people and the implications for building back from the pandemic period in Chapter 5. We mention this point here because the varied experiences of young people and families during the pandemic are an important caveat to the overall picture we have described about the phases of local systems’ responses to the pandemic. Saying that these local systems have sought to maintain “eyes on” vulnerable children is not to deny that, unfortunately, there have been negative effects on young people’s learning and wellbeing.

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¹⁰ See the October 2020 briefing produced by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner, ‘School return: Covid-19 and school attendance’ (Weblink [here](#)).

¹¹ See Ofsted’s thematic ‘Covid-19 series: Briefing on schools’ for October and November 2020. (Weblinks for October’s briefing [here](#), and November’s briefing [here](#).)

¹² See the DfE’s *Vulnerable Children and Young People Survey: Summary of returns Waves 1 to 12* (weblink [here](#)) for data from mid-October, and *Vulnerable Children and Young People Survey: Summary of returns Waves 1 to 14* (weblink [here](#)) for data from mid-November.

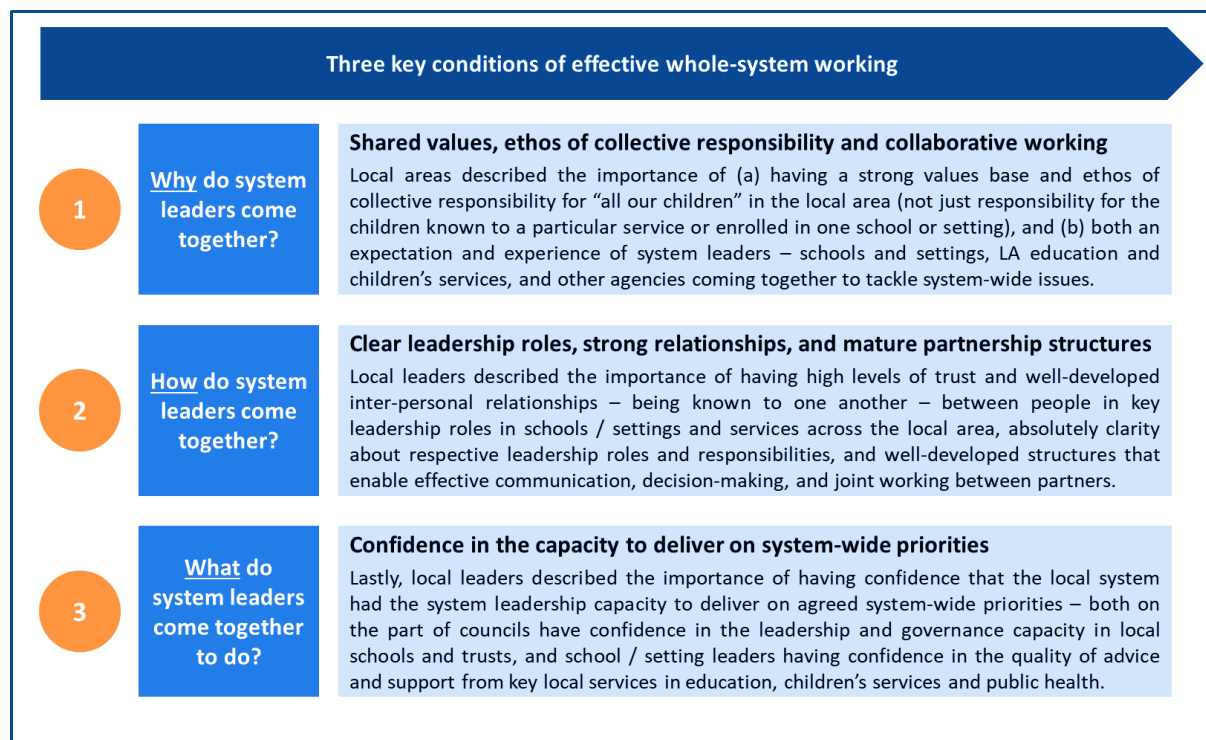
Chapter 2: Factors that have shaped local areas' responses

Local areas that were most positive about their system's response to the pandemic described three key conditions that had helped them to mount their response

In Chapter 1, we described that there was a common core to the ways local education and children's services systems had responded to the different phases of the pandemic period to date. While our research has suggested that there have been similarities in *what* local systems have focused on in responding to the pandemic, we wanted to explore *how* local systems have responded, specifically the extent to which some local areas had been able to respond to the pandemic more quickly or effectively. The lack and bluntness of data mean that it is difficult to answer this question from an analytical standpoint. Instead, for the purposes of this research, we considered which local areas were most positive about their response to the pandemic, and where those views were shared by senior LA leaders, frontline professionals, school leaders and partners. Specifically, we considered local areas where school leaders spoke positively about being listened to, supported and engaged in two-way, co-productive dialogue by the council and its constituent services.

In the local areas where there was this consensus, LA and school leaders identified three key conditions that they considered had helped the local system to mount a swift and effective response to the challenges of the pandemic. These conditions are, first, having a strong set of shared values and an expectation of collaborative working on system-wide issues, second, having high levels of trust and strong inter-personal relationships backed up by effective local partnership structures, and third, having confidence in the track-record and capacity of leaders of the system to deliver on identified, strategic, system-wide priorities. These three conditions are summarised in the graphic below.

Figure 2: Three key conditions of effective whole-system working



As one school leader put it, 'We are a collective team of people trying to sort out education for all of the children in [our local area].' One senior LA leader summarised the council's response in the context of the local system thus: 'We provided strong strategic guidance, strong supporting activity, but also

clarity about where responsibilities lay ... If we ask schools in this area to come together for something to benefit all [local area] children, they come.'

Having these three conditions in place meant that those local systems' responses to the pandemic required an *evolution*, rather than the *creation* of an entirely new way of working

As one LA leader put it, the pandemic 'was a test for our approach, but it did not cause us to create something we had not done before. It disrupted granular practice, but it did not disrupt our aims, our values, and the direction of the local system.' For local areas that had these conditions in place before the pandemic, these provided the foundations on which their response to the pandemic was built. Those local areas have had to adapt their approaches, but this has not required them to create something new from scratch. In these local areas, school leaders and bodies representing other sectors, such as early years settings, have reflected on the speed of communications, the helpfulness of advice, the collegiality of networks, and the practical support with things like staffing and cleaning costs, PPE and lateral flow testing.

As we described in Chapter 1, while not completely uniform, there has been a common core to how local areas have had to adapt their education and children's services systems to the demands of the pandemic. For other local areas that have not had these conditions in place, it has been necessary, therefore, to create systems and ways of working across council services, with partner agencies, or with settings and schools, which did not exist before the pandemic. For example, some local areas have developed new leadership networks to share information, intelligence and good practice with school and setting leaders.

What LA and school leaders in all the local areas with whom we have engaged have recognised, however, is that the pandemic has required a system-wide response. Local areas that had these three conditions of effective whole-system working in place at the start of the pandemic appear to have had an advantage in being able to mount a system-wide response. They have, consequently, experienced a more straightforward transition to dealing with the challenges of the pandemic than those that have had to create new infrastructure to enable system-wide working during the pandemic.

In addition, there were also important practical enablers of local systems' responses to the pandemic

Leaders in local areas highlighted three main practical enablers that had helped them to mount what they saw as a swift and effective response to the pandemic.

1. **Strong business continuity systems** – leaders from several councils reflected positively that time had been invested before the pandemic on developing and testing robust business continuity systems. This gave them confidence that they could continue to lead their organisations and their local systems when the pandemic began to unfold. In these local areas, staff had been trained, the supporting systems to maintain business continuity had been tried and tested, and leaders (both elected members and senior officers) had confidence that they could continue the important day-to-day work despite the restrictions brought about by the pandemic.
2. **An existing IT infrastructure that could support flexible working** – before the pandemic, many councils had gone through upgrades to their IT infrastructure and instituted policies to

support staff to work flexibly. Of the eight local areas we engaged in the research, it would be fair to say that different local areas were at different stages in the development of their support for flexible and remote working. Nevertheless, those that had been through a process of rolling out laptops and mobile devices to enable staff to work remotely, and had strong systems for hosting virtual meetings, considered that they had had a significant advantage in being able to make the shift to remote working without any “down time” while a new IT infrastructure was created to support staff to work virtually.

3. **Capacity to develop robust processes and protocols to support professionals in their day-to-day work during the pandemic** – some professionals, particularly those in social work and early help teams, commented positively on the corporate support they had received in agreeing day-to-day processes to allow staff to work together safely. This included, for example, having agreed processes and systems for using shared office spaces – including the use of one-way systems, socially-distanced office space, hand sanitizer stations and suchlike.

By contrast, professionals in some local areas considered that, while the response to the pandemic of individual teams and services had been strong, there had not been a co-ordinated corporate approach to the use of office space, protocols for safe working practices and the rollout of devices to enable staff to make phone-calls and work from home. In children’s social care specifically, team managers considered that this put them in a difficult position of having to take decisions about safe working practices for their teams, or of staff having to use personal mobiles to make work calls to vulnerable children and families.

One LA senior leader explained how these sets of factors – values, clear roles, and robust systems – came together to enable the response that their local system had been able to mount.

‘We adopted a values-based response (“these are all our children”), a role-based response (we all knew our role within the local system), and a systems-based response (we knew our business continuity systems, they clicked into place well.) The combination of the three meant that, even if people did not know what they should be doing, the values meant they knew in what direction they should be pointing, and the relationships meant they knew where to go to get support, while the systems gave us a playbook.’

As one secondary school leader from the same local area explained it,

‘[The local system] works so well because there is a spirit of co-operation, but fundamentally there is a spirit of teamwork. We are not divided along the lines of academies and maintained schools because we understand the dynamics of our local communities. It was a really well coordinated effort throughout.’

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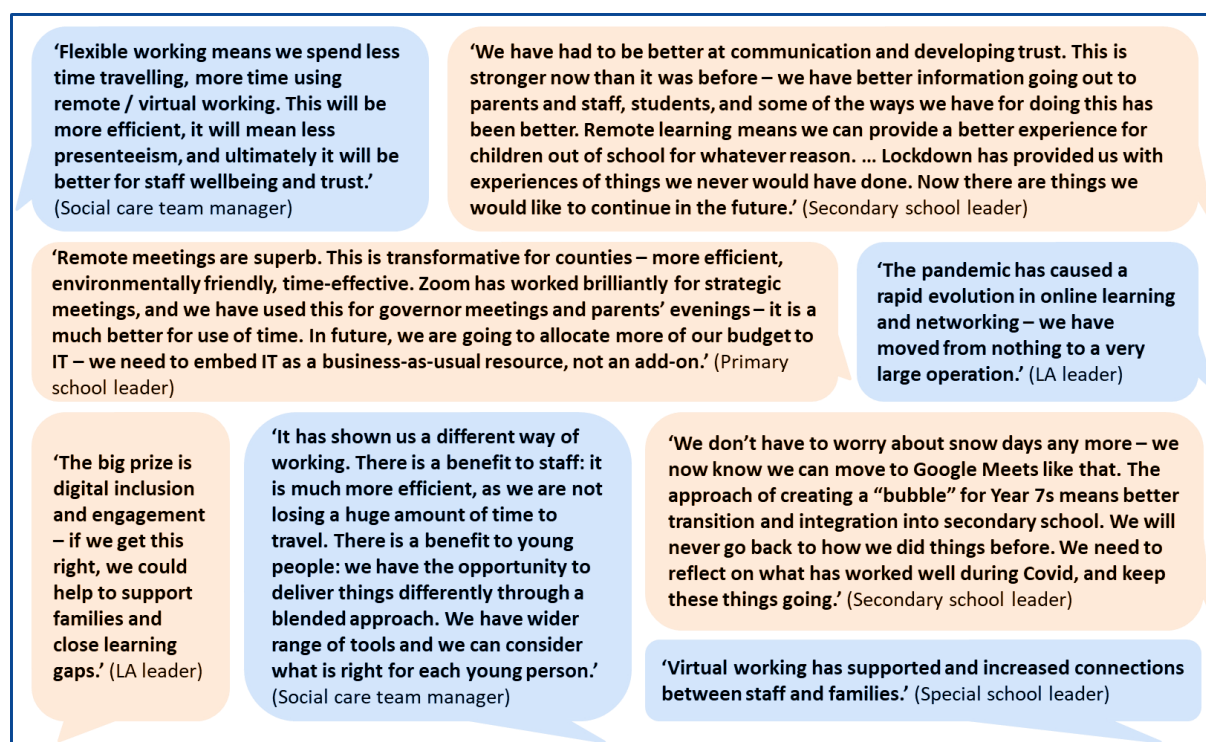
Chapter 3: Opportunities arising from the pandemic period

LA and school leaders identified three broad types of opportunities that had arisen during – and indeed been necessitated by – the pandemic period. These are detailed here, not in an attempt to draw positives from this period, but rather to capture aspects of practice that have been developed to respond to the crisis and that leaders of local systems did not want to lose once the immediate challenges of the pandemic recede.

There was strong consensus among LA and school leaders that the pandemic had necessitated a rapid expansion of virtual working that has been critical to the pandemic response and should form part of the toolkit for education and children’s services in future

Throughout our engagements with school and LA leaders, there was a strong consensus that the response to the pandemic had necessitated the development of practices and tools that had been crucial to maintaining education and children’s services during the pandemic, and that should be maintained as “part of the toolkit” after the pandemic period. The main opportunity that LA and school leaders highlighted was the development of virtual working. The graphic below includes a sample of quotes from professionals in senior leadership and team management roles within LA services, and across primary, secondary and special schools.

Figure 3: Quotes from LA and school leaders describing the benefits of virtual working



At a strategic level, LA and school leaders considered that virtual working had enabled a new approach to managing strategic partnership and network meetings. Particularly, but not exclusively, for those working in large shire counties, where locality or county-wide meetings were held in central locations and took up significant travel time, the development of virtual meetings had been welcomed as a means of enabling a more efficient way for LA and school leaders, and strategic partner agencies, to convene. Local areas also recognised the value of virtual interactions in bringing together staff from

across different agencies to discuss children at risk. Leaders and children's services managers from local areas commented, for example, that team-around-the-family meetings and child protection conferences had been better attended by partners when held virtually than in person.

Virtual meetings had been used in the early phases of the pandemic for meetings related directly to the local system's response to the pandemic, but over time have been used for a range of regular leadership, governance and network meetings –

- cabinet meetings;
- meetings of strategic partnership boards (e.g., local education partnerships or fora for the chief executives of local multi-academy trusts);
- operational decision-making panels (e.g., EHC panels, inclusion and AP panels);
- school leader briefings;
- meetings of the local schools forum; and
- continuous professional development workshops.

School leaders described a range of ways in which virtual working had been used in the day-to-day work of schools over the last twelve months.

- **Blended learning / engagement with certain pupils** – while recognising the additional workload for staff and the fact that remote working did not suit every pupil, school leaders also recognised that being able to offer blended learning had created opportunities to engage pupils differently and to keep engaged those who may be out of school temporarily – pupils on a fixed-period exclusion, school-refusing pupils, and pupils in off-site AP. School leaders reported several examples where remote learning had helped them to engage pupils who had previously had difficulties in school – removing sensory pressures and distractions.
- **Engagement with families** – schools described a range of ways they had sought to compensate for the loss of face-to-face contact with families through virtual means. This included developing better, more personalised, and more effective communications for parents – for example, one school leader provided weekly video messages to parents, which had resulted in an increase in uptake on calls to action for parents and positive feedback from the community about the leadership and reassurance that the school had provided to families. One LA agreed that all schools in the local area would make contact, either by phone or through a virtual platform, with every family at least once a week throughout the period in which schools were not open to all pupils. This enabled ongoing supportive discussions about learning as well as a back-up check that children and young people were safe.
- **Interactive assemblies** – even in periods where schools had been operating normally in the autumn term, the development of virtual working technology meant schools reported delivering whole-school assemblies in individual classrooms, with greater interactivity for staff and students.
- **Parents' evenings** – school leaders described a virtual system, with set times for appointments, as more efficient and focused.
- **Governor meetings** – schools described how governing body meetings had taken place remotely, with strong attendance and flexibility to call governors together at short notice during the pandemic.

School leaders highlighted, however, that virtual working was not without its drawbacks. They highlighted –

- the loss of impromptu conversations with colleagues at the margins of larger meetings;
- the fact that it was easier, as one school leader put it, to “sit back” and not take part actively in strategic partnership meetings held virtually than those held face-to-face;
- challenges for leaders around establishing an ethos and a consistent quality of practice where recruitment and induction of new staff was being carried out online, and where leaders were not able to be in classrooms observing and developing practice in the same way as they had been before the pandemic; and
- the differential impact of lockdowns on families who could provide their children with space to work, laptops / devices and access to Wi-Fi, and those children who were in families where the lack of these things created significant barriers to their learning.

Similarly, colleagues in children’s services described two main ways that virtual working had benefitted the work of their teams. These generally related to teams supporting children on child protection plans, children in care, fostering and adoption, and care-leavers – in most local areas, the “front door” teams dealing with contacts and referrals have continued to operate in-person, albeit with new procedures in place to ensure social distancing.

1. **Engaging professionals in multi-agency meetings** – all local areas reported better engagement from professionals across a range of agencies at care planning meetings. They considered that, as a tool for engaging professionals in an efficient and effective manner, virtual working should form part of a blended approach to safeguarding practice in the future.
2. **Managing engagements flexibly to suit young people and staff** – virtual working had enabled staff to take a more flexible approach to engaging young people at times and in ways that suited them. They recognised that remote meetings were not suitable for every young person, but team managers considered that the pandemic had required staff to be creative in engaging young people through WhatsApp, Zoom, FaceTime, and walking visits. In some instances, this had secured better engagement and fostered better relationships with young people, for example allowing professionals to engage young people around their work or school commitments, and creating alternatives to meetings with older children in care or care-leavers in their accommodation. Team managers also reported better engagement when family time was held virtually for older children (less so for younger children), and better placement stability and stronger relationships with foster carers (due to less tension relating to the child’s experience at school).

Like their counterparts in schools, leaders and managers in children’s services recognised that virtual working was not a universal panacea and needed to be used in the right circumstances. They highlighted the following three concerns about the inappropriate use of virtual working.

1. **Being able to reach families and engage them effectively** – for every example of positive engagements with young people, children’s services team managers had corresponding examples where virtual engagements had been an inadequate substitute for face-to-face meetings. Teams described challenges in maintaining engagements and intervention programmes with children on the edge of care, or with older children in care and care-leavers reporting isolation, loneliness, and needing support with the cost-of-living, or in managing prospective adoption cases through virtual means. Team managers also described the difficulties of engaging families who did not have smart devices, reliable access to Wi-Fi, or

were struggling with the cost of mobile data. (Team managers also raised concerns that some families had used digital access as an excuse not to engage with children’s services.)

2. **Forming judgements about family networks** – children’s services professionals also commented on the fact that virtual engagements carried with them risks of privacy (when talking to or messaging a young person, it was not possible to know who else could hear or read what was being said). They reflected that it was often hard to “read a room” and to observe the way children and adults interacted in a home situation. As one LA senior leader put it, ‘How can you be restorative on a Zoom call? How do you check out if everything is alright for child if family is in the room? Our staff have been really creative, for example, using treasure hunts to have a look at a child’s room, or finding ways to have private conversations, but this remains a challenge.’ Children’s services professionals also noted that they had had to rethink child protection plans that drew heavily on the family network, since these could not always operate in the same way given restrictions on households mixing.
3. **Supervision and support for staff** – team managers also reflected on the challenges faced by staff, particularly in terms of being isolated and the loss of peer support from colleagues when dealing with complex and emotionally challenging situations. This applied to younger and less experienced staff, those living alone, but also those finding it hard to create a separation between the issues they were dealing with when working and their home or family life.

Overall, leaders in local education and children’s services systems recognised that virtual working had enabled a more effective and safer response to the pandemic, and that there were potential benefits of continuing to use a blended approach in the future. They also recognised that virtual working was complementary to, rather than a substitute for, face-to-face engagements, especially in education, safeguarding and support for families, which are inherently relationship-based. They concluded that the use of virtual working would need to be evaluated and codified so that there were common expectations and standards about how it could be used appropriately, to complement in-person work, in education and children’s services. Rather than a *universal panacea*, virtual working should be seen as a potentially welcome *addition* to the toolkit and professional practices of practitioners working in education and children’s services.

Local systems have used this period to continue or pursue transformative projects to support the response to the pandemic

Leaders in some local systems described how they had used time during lockdowns to embed new decision-making processes and ways of working that were both long-standing strategic priorities but could also contribute to the system’s recovery from periods of lockdown. These areas have seized this time, particularly during the first national lockdown, as an opportunity to “reset” some services and approaches to enable a more pro-active, preventative form of support. For example –

- one local area had continued a transformation project to bring together early help and children’s social care in an integrated front door;
- one local area had overhauled its decision-making processes around requests for statutory assessments for SEN and deciding whether to issue EHCPs;
- one local area had found that the first national lockdown had led to a pause in permanent exclusions, and had used this to create capacity within local AP to offer a more preventative, therapeutic, turnaround-style offer of support (as opposed to AP being used mainly when the system was reacting to a child being permanently excluded); and

- similarly, other local areas had used this period to redevelop their decision-making processes for accessing inclusion support, AP and dealing with instances of exclusion.

The pandemic has brought about a more sophisticated, shared understanding of “vulnerability” and responsibility for vulnerable children

Leaders in local areas considered that the pandemic period has helped to strengthen relationships between schools and settings, with parents and communities, and with councils. Specifically, the pandemic had placed a greater emphasis not just on *labels* of potential vulnerability, but on the *determinants* of actual vulnerability and risk of harm. The process of risk-assessing support for children, deciding which families should be visited, identifying children who were “out of sight” of services, working with families who had been placed into conditions of hardship by the pandemic in the first lockdown has sharpened understanding of “vulnerability”, risk and the necessity of joint working. Deciding which children were potentially at risk of harm or of loss of learning and need to be in school in the third lockdown has done much the same. This had, in turn fostered stronger information sharing and joint working to support vulnerable families, and less working in organisational silos.

It had also, in some cases, brought out into the open levels of deprivation and hardship that were previously hidden to settings / schools and services. As one school leader explained, ‘I knew [our local area] was poor, but I have been shocked. I have learned how poor some people in our community really are.’ One potential consequence of the pandemic might be a greater understanding of the depth of the divide within communities, particularly in relation to access to digital devices and online facilities, and of the scale of hardship faced by some families. Many school leaders described how the pandemic has changed their priorities and their understanding of the purpose of education and the role of schools. As one school leader summarised it,

‘Strategically, the pandemic has changed my life as a school leader. Our school is regularly in the top 5% of schools in all levels – progress, attainment. If there is going to be a league table, I want to be at the top – this has been my approach to headship. The only way children at my school will get on is if they achieve a decent set of qualifications. Now, we are not even thinking about exams next summer – we do not care now about league tables. The priority at the moment is to look after the children and keep them safe. I have really recognised that this is what teaching is all about. When I look back on my career, when people ask me what body of work I am most proud of, it will be the work I have done between March and now. Strategically, our whole focus has shifted.’

Two other school leaders explained how the experience of responding to the pandemic had helped to strengthen relationships between the school and families.

‘We always had good relationships with families, but this has gone to a whole new level – the work we are doing to support what happens in the home, for example teachers and therapists providing strategies and working with families to support learning at home. This has strengthened relationships and helped to ensure that what happens at home will be more consistently applied.’ (Special school leader)

‘In terms of our relationships with families, I thought we would have struggled, but these are stronger than they have ever been. I have been doing video letters, recorded on a Sunday and

sent out to parents. The rate of responses to calls for action is much higher, and the positive feedback from parents has been huge.’ (Primary school leader)

The strengthening of collective understanding and partnership working around vulnerable children and families has not been confined to the public sector alone. Several LA leaders described a growth in grassroots community action and neighbourhood organisation. They had also seen a growth in existing voluntary and community sector organisations, support bodies and food banks. These local areas had seen the voluntary and community sector coming to the fore and working with children’s services, schools and settings as part of a more joined-up, locality-wide response to supporting vulnerable families in the pandemic. We described in Chapter 1 some of the ways LAs had recruited volunteers through the GoodSAM app to support vulnerable children and families.

* * *

Chapter 4: Challenges arising from the pandemic period

LA and school leaders identified three broad sets of challenges that they had experienced in developing their local systems' responses to the pandemic.

First, local leaders described a strained relationship between central and local government, which has not been characterised by genuine partnership working and mutual trust

It is important to say at the outset that LA and school leaders welcomed many of the opportunities for dialogue with representatives of national government that have been established anew or utilised for novel purposes since the start of the pandemic. These include regular engagements between school and LA leaders and the officials working on behalf of the RSCs, and dialogue with DfE ministers and officials through the national reference groups and regional networks run or attended by organisations like ASCL, NAHT, ADCS and the LGA.

What we describe in this section should not be read as a criticism of individual officials, teams or government departments, nor that leaders within local systems have not made mistakes in their response to the pandemic. Instead, it should be read as a reflection on a fundamental imbalance in the relationship between central government and the leaders of local systems of education and children's services – including school and setting leaders, and councils.

An overly centralised approach to forming plans and announcing policy

Many LA and school leaders considered that central government's response to the pandemic, specifically in relation to education and children's services, had been overly centralised, lacking in mutual trust and a spirit of genuine partnership. Local system leaders felt that, too often, plans – including those with significant implications for local government – had been developed unilaterally and without genuine co-production and testing with LA and school leaders. As a result of this, policy announcements were made to which local leaders had to scramble to respond. Council leaders felt that they had been seen by central government as “tools” in the latter's plans, rather than as equal partners in shaping a joint response to a national crisis.

School and LA leaders recognised the pressures that central government departments were under in responding to rapidly-changing circumstances and unprecedented challenges, and that advice and guidance was being produced at speed and was liable to change. The sheer scale of the guidance was a challenge, but one that LA and school leaders recognised could not be helped – although instances where guidance issued by different national bodies was contradictory was a source of frustration.¹³ As one school leader explained,

‘It is the sheer scale of the guidance – from the DfE, from Ofsted, from Public Health England, from the NHS, from the Health & Safety Executive. Trying to keep on top of that is massively challenging. There is enormous pressure to read and interpret all of this. More than 90% of

¹³ The recent study, published by the National Audit Office, of the DfE response to the early stages of the pandemic, *Support for children's education during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic*, makes a similar set of points. It notes the unprecedented nature of national disruption to education, and consequently the reactive nature of the Department's response. It includes an estimate from the DfE that, between mid-March and 28 April, there were 150 new documents or updates to existing material published by the DfE. (The weblink to the report is [here](#).)

my time is completely engulfed by the pandemic. Trying to get anywhere near normal operating – school improvement, peer support – is impossible.’

What school and LA leaders found most frustrating was guidance being released on a Friday evening, or over a weekend, or at the end of term, adding to the pressure on LA and school leaders to interpret and implement the guidance at short notice. As one LA leader responsible for education put it, ‘Issuing guidance at 5pm on a Friday afternoon, you could not design a system less supportive of school leaders.’ While LA and school leaders understood the reasons for changes being made to national guidance, they found it added to pressure and stress that changes made to existing guidance were not flagged up, meaning they had to comb through large documents, comparing against previous versions, to identify a change that had implications for their decision-making and practice. School leaders also commented that it was not acceptable for them to hear rumours of policy announcements that had been trailed to journalists through Twitter – they considered this a most unsatisfactory manner to organise communications with schools and settings during a public health emergency. As we described in Chapter 1, early years and special school leaders often felt that guidance was overly focused on mainstream schools, and was not always based on a sound understanding of their sectors.

The lack of notice in issuing guidance had another consequence for local education systems: LA and school leaders commented that they had often felt penalised for being pro-active and trying to get ahead of the curve. They described examples where LA and school leaders had designed local initiatives, which then had to be changed at the last minute when national guidance was produced. As another LA leader put it, ‘Giving strategic leadership when there has been no pattern or logic to the guidance has been a challenge. We have tried to plan and communicate, but then the guidance would change completely.’

In our most recent engagements, LA and school leaders commented positively on the speed and efficiency of the vaccination programme to date. They reflected, however, that the speed of the roll-out had helped to paper over aspects of the programme where the national guidance was silent, and left considerable room for interpretation and local discretion. The consequence of this had been that local areas had taken different decisions about which staff within education and children’s services should have early access to vaccines. This had meant that, in certain densely populated regions and areas spanning LA borders, staff in early years settings, schools, children’s homes and children’s services were aware of different approaches being taken by different local systems. Differing interpretations of the national guidance about whether frontline children’s social care staff should be prioritised for the vaccine or not had, at times, created tensions and anxieties within the workforce, particularly if staff in one area of service were not given access to the vaccine while professionals in equivalent teams in neighbouring local areas were. In certain schools, settings and services where staff had been given the vaccine, leaders commented that this had provided a considerable boost to staff morale.

Leaders reflected, overall, that the speed of the vaccination programme and the increasing focus on age, rather than occupation, as the main eligibility criteria had meant these issues had not become a source of tension in the longer-term. Nevertheless, the fact that these questions had arisen underscored the lesson that a clear, consistent and effectively communicated national policy position was a vital pre-condition for effective local delivery in the response to the pandemic.

The demand for data

While many local leaders commented positively on the insights that had been gleaned through initiatives like the DfE’s vulnerable children and young people survey and data on attendance in early years settings and schools, some school and LA leaders questioned the value of some of the data that had been requested by central government.¹⁴ While recognising the way in which data on pupil and staff attendance had been used to provide insights into the impact of the pandemic, by bodies like the Education Policy Institute, they considered that the focus on collecting these data reflected the need to retain an impression of control of the system, rather than being used in partnership with local systems to improve support for young people.¹⁵ For example, LA leaders described examples where central government had collected data from schools and settings, LAs had not been given access to this, but LAs had then been challenged by officials from central government about their response to the data. Some LA leaders described how they had taken decisions within their local partnerships to avoid their decision-making and practice being dictated by the demands for data from central government. Instead, they had sought to maintain an approach based on assessment of risk and professional judgement about how to ensure the right children and families were engaged in the right way and at the right time, rather than being driven by the need to report on the *number* of children and families who had been seen face-to-face.

Aside from these examples reflecting the perception that the partnership between central and local government has not always been one of a shared endeavour based on mutual trust, the irony of schools being told to “ask your LA” and LAs being challenged on matters that they had previously been told were not the responsibility of local government was not lost on school or LA leaders.

The damage done to the relationship between central government and local systems by the decisions taken concerning the end of the autumn term and the start of the spring term

Without wanting to hyperbolise about the events surrounding the final weeks of the autumn term and the start of the spring term, it would be remiss if we did not describe the strength of feeling about this issue that we encountered from the school and LA leaders whom we engaged during this period. This came within a term of the fall-out from the A-level and GCSE grading debate. Many of the school leaders we engaged during the autumn term referred to exam grading, voicing their concerns about how this had been handled and the impact on their students. In early December, the school leaders we engaged were already pointing to the rising rates of transmission and urging the need for careful thought about how to balance face-to-face teaching with remote learning in the final weeks of the autumn term.

In those final weeks of term, Greenwich and Islington Councils, having been considering moving to remote learning for the explicit purpose of balancing continuing education with the safety of staff and students, were threatened with legal action to compel them to maintain face-to-face teaching by the

¹⁴ See the weblink to the vulnerable children and young people survey [here](#). See the weblink to the *Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak* [here](#). This was also a theme in our discussions with the ICHA, who reported that many of the children’s homes that they represent had been asked for large amounts of data and information from LAs, without necessarily having a clear sense of how this would be used.

¹⁵ See, for example, *Changes in school attendance by local authority in England over the 2020 autumn term (14 Jan 2021)*, weblink [here](#).

DfE.¹⁶ An announcement was then made on 17 December that secondary schools would re-open on staggered basis on 4 January, followed by a statement in the House of Commons confirming this and explaining that primary schools in the areas of the highest rates of infections would only open to vulnerable and key-worker children.¹⁷ On Sunday 3 January, the Prime Minister underscored his belief that schools were safe, and that primary schools should open as planned the following day. In a televised interview, the Prime Minister stated,

‘Schools are safe. Very, very important to stress that and that the threats to – the risk to kids, to young people is really very, very, very small. ... I’d advise all parents thinking about what to do, look at where your area is: overwhelmingly you’ll be in a part of the country where primary schools tomorrow will be open.’¹⁸

On the evening of 4 January, in a televised address to the country, the Prime Minister then announced a third national lockdown in England, which would include the closure of primary and secondary schools to all but vulnerable and key-worker children. (Early years settings were to remain open to all children.)

In our engagements with LA and school leaders in January and early February, this was described as a ‘schism’, ‘a breach of the social contract’, and the nadir of mistrust between central government and the education system in England. As one primary school leader put it, ‘How can schools be safe on Sunday and vectors of transmission on Monday? That is not right.’ In the virtual roundtable event that we held for LA leaders to test our emerging findings in early February, one LA leader explained the strength of feeling in the following terms – the sentiment was shared by all LA colleagues at the event.

‘There was a fundamental schism in January. Schools stopped trusting government, following LAs being crucified for moving to remote learning. This is a fundamental issue of trust between government and schools; it is beyond relationships. You cannot do one over on LAs before Christmas because they are trying to keep children safe, and then open schools for a day, and then shut them, and still retain trust.’

As we described in Chapter 1, LA leaders and national bodies described that this announcement, and specifically the fact that early years settings were to remain open to all pupils, reflected a narrow view of the role of the early years sector. Leaders did not consider that an evidence-informed public health rationale, or even a rationale about the value of early child development, was put forward for the decision to treat early years settings differently to mainstream primary and secondary schools. Indeed, the perception was that the decision had been taken on the basis that early years settings functioned mainly to enable parents of young children to work. This created further distrust between leaders within local systems, including early years settings and local education systems, and central government.

¹⁶ See, Weale, S, *The Guardian*, ‘Heads angry after two councils forced to back down over Covid school closures’, 15 December 2020, as an example of how this was covered at the time (weblink [here](#)).

¹⁷ The Secretary of State for Education’s statement in the House of Commons can be found [here](#),

¹⁸ The Prime Minister’s interview with Andrew Marr on 3 January can be found [here](#), with a written transcript [here](#).

The need to reforge the partnership between central and local government in relation to education and children's services

Throughout our engagements, leaders of local systems have reflected on lessons that they have learned, missteps that they have had to correct, and aspects of their response to the pandemic that have not worked as envisaged. For example –

- some local areas had experienced challenges in joining up support for vulnerable families and avoiding duplication of visits and engagements;
- others described the need to tackle myths and misconceptions, and in some cases differing practices (around PPE or the use of office space) across teams and services in education and children's services;
- challenges of maintaining integrated and joined-up working, particularly in areas where decisions were made to halt certain services or redeploy staff (commonly, but not in every local area, the decision to redeploy health visitors from early help to the frontline of the emergency medical response); and
- a lack of strong partnership working with providers deemed to be “independent” of the LA, but who play a key role in supporting the local area's children – for example, private, voluntary or independent early years settings and independent children's homes.

Our aim has not been to suggest that local systems' responses to the pandemic have been flawless, and faults are only to be found at the level of central government. Rather, our aim has been to underscore the need and desire for a stronger partnership between central government and local systems, built around co-production and two-way dialogue – not central government officials declaring themselves to be in “listening mode”, as some LA leaders have described. Local leaders commented positively on the way some government departments had engaged with local systems, and would welcome such an approach with central government in relation to education and children's services. One department highlighted as having attempted to work in this way was the Ministry for Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG).

Second, local leaders described the challenge of balancing an ever-increasing number of competing priorities during the pandemic period

Local leaders described the challenges of balancing a significant number of competing priorities, in particular, maintaining the appropriate balance between care and education. As we described in Chapter 1, school and LA leaders described that there has been greater emphasis and clearer expectations about the continuity of education during the third national lockdown when compared to the first. Reflecting on the first national lockdown, LA and school leaders recognised that the emphasis during this period was very much on children's safety: carrying out “safe and well” checks, ensuring children who were vulnerable were in school and being seen by professionals, and providing support to families and IT devices to children. They recognised that there had been limited capacity to focus on the quality of learning, with the effectiveness of remote learning having been variable.

In the third national lockdown, there has been greater “know-how” and system capacity for remote learning and clearer expectations about the continuity of education. This has, however, brought with it new challenges, not least the workload pressure on school staff to provide in-person and remote learning in parallel. Layered on top of this, school staff have also been trying to balance remote and in-person learning with support for sport and physical activity, mental health and wellbeing, and now

the management of testing, contact tracing – ‘At the moment, I am test-and-trace for my school’s community’, one school leader told us – and the vaccination roll-out.

LA and school leaders also described their concerns at the scale of the learning gaps – both the loss of learning, but also the gaps in learning between pupils – from the first national lockdown and the pressure they were under to apply the lessons from the first lockdown and restrictions on school attendance to the current period. LA and school leaders were both optimistic about the resilience of pupils and the efficacy of the teaching and support that schools and settings had put in place to enable pupils to re-learn skills that they may have lost during the summer term. Nevertheless, LA and school leaders highlighted the concerns about the scale of these gaps in learning in general, and specifically for children with SEND and those who had other vulnerabilities. As we described in Chapter 1, LA and school leaders were concerned how children with SEND had been separated from their usual support structures, and this had meant that they had fared less well than their peers during periods out of school.¹⁹ School leaders emphasised that the challenges thrown up by the pandemic, and cycles of lockdown, had not necessarily created new needs, but rather had exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and widened learning gaps. The challenge, as they saw it, was ensuring that decision-makers did not think the after-effects of lockdowns and pupils being out of school could be solved by a quick “catch-up” initiative. Instead, the challenge for the education and children’s services system at both local and national level was to create a sustainable, long-term offer of pro-active, preventative, intensive, holistic and joined-up support for families at risk and those who are potentially vulnerable.

On a different scale, LA leaders also described some of the challenges that they have had in balancing what would have been business-as-usual activities, such as school place-planning, with the response to the pandemic. The disruption to education and the diminished capacity in many LA education services has meant that some LAs have had to delay important, but non-urgent, activities since their focus has had to be on the immediate response to the pandemic.

Third, as a result, local leaders described extreme fatigue, the risk of burnout, and the strain on local resources, both human and financial

‘Everyone is exhausted’ (Secondary school leader)

LA and school leaders paid tribute to the resilience, fortitude and creativity that staff across education and children’s services had demonstrated during this period, but also underscored the fragility and fatigue of the workforce. School leaders described the challenge of dealing with a high volume and ceaseless flow of high-stakes decisions, and of the pressure of doing so at a time when capacity within schools was being reduced due to staff isolation and illness, and of the need to provide reassurance to and maintain the trust of staff, parents and carers, and the local community. ‘Absolutely relentless’ was how one special school leader described it – ‘Parents expect us to have all the answers as soon as

¹⁹ Sibieta, L. and Cottell, J., 2020, *Education policy responses across the UK to the pandemic* (Education Policy Institute, weblink [here](#)) found that children with SEND were less likely to be well supported during the first series of lockdowns across the UK, with support varying from LA to LA. In November 2020, Ofsted reported, in its COVID-19 series: briefing on special educational needs and disabilities provision, November 2020 (weblink [here](#)) that children with SEND had been less likely to attend school and less likely to access the full curriculum during the autumn term (in spite of many staff from across agencies who had ‘gone the extra mile’. Research undertaken by the National Foundation for Educational Research on behalf of the Nuffield Foundation found, based on a survey of almost 3,000 school leaders and teachers in England, that leaders reported 28% of pupils having limited access to IT at home.

the guidance is published, but they do not always appreciate that we have found out at exactly the same time as them.’

‘There is a really significant responsibility for school leaders. It is not helped when we get mixed messages – we are told by DfE that schools are safe, and told by public health that they are not. There is huge expectation from parents. We have to try to ensure parents understand and have trust in us. This is the community’s school and they need to have faith in us.’ (Primary school leader)

‘The decisions required, and the speed needed to react, is incredible. It is almost an unacceptable, unreasonable pressure. We are making decisions quickly about incredibly difficult issues of safety – we are having to react all the time. There is constant pressure – we are worried about getting decisions wrong, about potentially catastrophic consequences.’ (Special school leader)

Team managers in children’s services described a similar challenge. They spoke of the difficulties of remaining connected to their teams – as one manager put it, ‘I feel like I have lost my eyes and ears’ – and knowing which staff were struggling and needed support. They considered that staff morale had held up well so far, but drew attention to the challenge of doing this at the time when there had been little certainty about the way out of the pandemic and the timescales for exiting restrictions.

The leadership and practitioner pipeline

A related, but broader, challenge that local systems reported was that of recruitment, staff development and succession planning. Team managers in children’s services reported mixed experiences of recruitment during the pandemic. Some local areas had found it easier to recruit staff, particularly in areas where staff would not need to relocate. Other local areas had found it harder, particularly where staff would have to relocate and were unwilling to move in the middle of a pandemic. Team managers also reported challenges in providing induction and support for new staff. School leaders reported similar concerns about leadership succession in their schools – some school leaders describing how they had postponed decisions to retire to see schools through the pandemic, or brought forward those decisions so that they would retire once the pandemic period was over. They also voiced concerns about whether middle and senior leaders would want to step into headship positions, having seen the demands the pandemic had placed on school leaders.²⁰

Pressure on financial, as well as human, resources

LA and school leaders also reported significant pressures on budgets as a direct result of the pandemic. This related to all levels of the system.

1. For **individual families**, LAs reported seeing increases in families experiencing financial hardship. One LA described how they had seen a 30% increase in eligibility for free school

²⁰ This chimes with findings from a survey of over 2,000 school leaders carried out by the NAHT in October 2020. This suggested that 47% of school leaders reported that they were less likely to remain in headship because of the pandemic, that they were less likely to remain in school leadership as long as they had initially planned, and that more than two thirds (70%) reported being less or much less satisfied in their current role than a year previously. (The weblink to the survey is [here](#).)

meals during the pandemic. Another LA described that eligibility for the holiday voucher scheme was 28% up on the average number of families usually eligible for free school meals.

2. For **schools**, leaders reported increased costs for items like IT, supply staff, cleaning, signage and administrative staff to manage test-and-trace. Several school leaders described having to set deficit budgets. As one school leader put, 'It [the pandemic response] has absolutely zapped our budget.'²¹ This reflected feedback from early years organisations, and feedback gathered by ICHA, which found that its members were also experiencing increasing costs in terms of staffing and insurance premiums, directly related to the pandemic.
3. For **LAs**, as with other organisations, there were also costs in terms of IT, PPE and devices, and managing the additional demands on services. In addition, LAs described the challenge in children's services of a greater concentration of demand for foster placements, children staying in placements for longer due to delays in the courts and decisions not to move children during the pandemic, a reduction in available foster placements (for example, as some older people who foster children have had to shield during the pandemic) and places in children's homes, leading to greater reliance on and demand for placements in independent children's homes.

* * *

²¹ This chimes with a study published in December 2020 by the Education Policy Institute. Based on a survey of 700 schools in November 2020, this found that around two thirds of the cost of the pandemic will not be covered by the exceptional costs fund set up by national government, that 57% of schools were using reserves to cover extra costs, and that half of the schools did not expect to have a balanced budget by the end of the 2020-21 financial year. See Mills, B., and Andrews, J., 2020, *Assessing Covid-19 cost pressures on England's schools* (Education Policy Institute, weblink [here](#)).

Chapter 5: Implications of the pandemic period so far and recommendations if local education and children’s services are genuinely to “build back better”

For many people, the direct implications of the pandemic period will be ones of hardship, of illness, of loss and of bereavement. In addition to those, what our research has explored has been not only what the pandemic has *caused*, but also what it has *revealed*, within the systems of support that educate our children and support our most vulnerable and at-risk families. A strong message throughout the research has been that those children and young people who were already vulnerable, either in terms of their engagement with learning or their family lives, have been most negatively affected by the pandemic. According to the LA and school leaders whom we have engaged through this work, while some families have become newly vulnerable as a direct result of the pandemic, one of the main implications of the pandemic period is what it has revealed about existing inequalities and how the experience of the past twelve months has exacerbated underlying needs. As one primary school leader put it,

‘It is some of the most vulnerable children and families who have struggled the most, and who had the greatest gaps in their learning after the first lockdown. But then they would not have been getting this support before the pandemic ... Three months out of school is small fry compared to the vulnerability in their lives before this.’

In this final chapter, we describe what our research has suggested are some of the key implications of the pandemic period. First, we describe what LA and school leaders have seen as the needs of children and families that have been caused, revealed and exacerbated by the past twelve months. These are what our education and children’s services system in England will need to continue to respond to over the coming months and years if we are genuinely to “build back better”, rather than simply re-create the pre-pandemic status quo. Second, we describe what the pandemic period has revealed about the importance of local systems, not as marriages of proximity, but as essential partnerships of education, children’s and family services, public health, the voluntary sector, community groups and other partners that work with and support local communities. We make two recommendations, responding to each of these two themes respectively – first, about what is needed to create robust local and national systems of education and support for families, to create resilient communities and support vulnerable families, to close gaps in learning and child development, and, second, to “build back better” from the pandemic period.

The response to the pandemic period must acknowledge and address the direct impact on children and families, but also the exacerbation of underlying inequalities and vulnerabilities

During the first national lockdown, a great deal of attention was focused on planning how to recover lost ground in learning, address learning gaps between pupils that may have widened, and deal with the needs that may have emerged or been exacerbated during the time when most children were not in settings or schools. As we began this research, many local areas were starting to draw together evidence about the nature of needs that local education and children’s services systems were facing in the aftermath of the first national lockdown and the ongoing challenges of adapting to conditions of living under a pandemic. There were six main areas of increased need that LA and school leaders highlighted to us.

Families facing financial hardship and poverty

As we described in Chapters 3 and 4, while the pandemic has strengthened relationships between families and schools / settings, it has also revealed levels of hardship and deprivation that was previously not always apparent to school and setting leaders. The local areas we engaged reported significant increases in families experiencing financial hardship as a direct result of the pandemic. One local area reported a 30% increase in families claiming free school meals, alongside increased eligibility for home-to-school transport due to low income and for the free entitlement for childcare for two-year-olds (which is for parents in receipt of state benefits, or if children are in or have left care, have an EHCP, or receive disability living allowance).²²

Early help and support for vulnerable families

Linked to this, many local areas reported a significant increase in demand for early help support. One local area described demand for support from early help as being ‘through the roof’, with rates of requests for early help doubling between the start of the pandemic and the autumn of 2020. Two other LAs that we engaged had seen a fourfold increase in families requiring support. In some instances, families were being referred by external partners, including the police (during the first national lockdown) and schools (when all pupils returned in September 2020). There was also, however, an increase in self-referrals from families. LA leaders described seeing increased demand from families who would not have been on the radar of early help, facing difficulties and encountering financial hardship because of the pandemic, and being more willing to seek support from early help. One local leader described how, ‘Some families received help from early help that they did not expect – they saw us as helpful rather than unwanted. This demonstrated that the council can be a force for good.’ By contrast, at the start of the pandemic, another local area had paused their early help offer and redeployed staff to other parts of the response to the pandemic. They had reversed this decision when they recognised the scale of the demand for support for families.

Before the pandemic, research into early help would often be asked to consider the efficacy of early help: whether it was possible to demonstrate the impact of system-wide way of working that was designed to prevent needs from reaching crisis-point.²³ What the pandemic period has demonstrated has been the need for local areas to have a robust, multi-skilled, system-wide approach (that involves early help *services*, but also a wider range of public and community sector partners), that can be deployed flexibly to respond to families’ needs. Local areas that have had well-developed early help offers have seen demand for this support increase exponentially. Local areas that have not had a strong early help offer in place, or may have deprioritised this when the pandemic began to unfold, very quickly realised the necessity of keeping such an offer in place.

²² A recent report from Little Village, *It takes a village*, supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, found that two in five (38%) families with one child under the age of five had experienced a reduction in earnings due to the pandemic (weblink [here](#).)

²³ Parish, N, and Bryant, B, 2019, *The key enablers of developing an effective partnership-based offer of early help*, Local Government Association (weblink [here](#)).

Children’s social care

The local areas we engaged reported an increase in pressure on and a concentration of demand for statutory children’s social care. Most local areas reported a drop in contacts, referrals and children coming into the statutory system during the first national lockdown, followed by a compensating increase in the autumn term. LA leaders and team managers argued that they were not seeing the “spike” in referrals in September and October that had been anticipated. Instead, they were seeing the impact of a backlog of demand that would ordinarily have been spread across a year concentrated into the months after all pupils returned to settings and schools. Added to this has been the impact of the slowdown in the family courts, meaning more children remaining in care and fewer moving on to permanency via adoption or special guardianship orders. These messages were echoed in feedback gathered by ICHA. They reported that while some young people had benefitted from more stable relationships with staff in children’s homes, and while both homes and LAs had reported a reduction in instances of challenging behaviour and children going missing, there was also the challenge of children not being able to move on to their next planned placement. The latter has had implications for the young people’s mental wellbeing and for children’s homes’ ability to manage their capacity and the demand for placements.

LA leaders and team managers also reflected on the fact that they were seeing an increase in the complexity of needs of children coming into the care system, as well as an increase in young babies and older teenagers – particularly in contextual safeguarding risks, relating to county lines, substance abuse, mental health needs – coming into care.²⁴ LA leaders and team managers reported that this combination of a concentration of demand and of the complexity of need was creating considerable pressure on children’s services teams.

Elective home education

Most of the local areas we engaged reported having seen an increase in elective home education. One local area estimated that children in elective home education had risen by 40%, another that it had more than doubled since the previous year. In some cases, this related to parents making positive choices following their experience of home learning during the first national lockdown – in these instances, local areas were confident that they had good relationships with the families and that children were receiving suitable education. In many instances, however, LA leaders described how parents’ decisions to educate their children at home were taken because of fear about the risks of their child contracting Covid-19 and/or the risks of the child bringing Covid-19 home and placing the parents or carers at risk.²⁵

²⁴ These findings chime with those of the DfE’s Vulnerable Children and Young People Survey, which has shown a pattern of lower rates of referrals to children’s social care, lower rates of children coming into care, but higher numbers overall of children in the case system. The reports from [waves 1-12](#) and [waves 1-14](#) show a reduction of 6% and 12% in referrals, a reduction of 29% and 28% in children coming into care, but an increase of 7% in the number of child in care in October and November 2020 compared to the same points in the year in 2019.

²⁵ What we found echoes the findings of Ofsted’s thematic reports. For example, in November, Ofsted reported that, ‘Almost three fifths of schools had had at least one pupil whose parents had removed them from school to electively home educate them since the start of the autumn term.’ (Weblink [here](#).)

Growth in mental ill health among young people

LA and school leaders emphasised that there had been a significant growth in mental ill health, across all ages, in both children and adults, and at all levels of severity during the pandemic period. Reviews of cases that were being referred through schools and settings, to early help and to children's social care, showed that mental health was becoming an increasingly common theme in the experiences of children and young people. The impact of isolation of families, including those with new babies or very young children, issues of parental conflict, the impact of adult mental ill health, substance abuse and domestic violence, coupled with young people's own feelings of anxiety and isolation, are now feeding through into the cases coming to the attention of early help and statutory social care.²⁶ The impact of bereavement and loss were strong themes in our discussions with practitioners across children's services and education settings. This was echoed by many of the national organisations to whom we spoke, including the ICHA. According to the ICHA, children's homes were reporting increased mental ill health at all levels, from the most acute needs (young people who had been discharged from psychiatric units having to be re-admitted) to the most common levels of need (the impact of having to isolate for 14 days upon arrival in a home). Several local areas drew attention to the impact of the pandemic on young carers, and the added burden placed on them and the cost to their mental wellbeing because of the reduction in support and services for their parents.

Learning gaps, especially for pupils with SEND and those who are vulnerable

Lastly, as we have described in Chapter 1, LA and school leaders were concerned at the scale of the learning gaps for some pupils that had resulted from the first national lockdown, notably children with SEND and other vulnerabilities. During periods of remote learning, particularly during the third national lockdown, the level of parental engagement with and support for learning has been an even greater determinant of a child's learning. LA and school leaders described to us the concerns that they had about the gaps in learning that they were seeing in children whose parents have not been able to support their child's learning, either because of their own levels of education, not valuing education, pressures of work, financial hardship, caring responsibilities, or physical and mental ill health. A recent study from the Education Policy Institute and Renaissance Learning, commissioned by the DfE, found that pupils have experienced learning losses of between 1.6 and 2 months in reading, but with greater learning losses in schools in more disadvantaged areas.²⁷ As well as the long-term impact on students whose learning has been disrupted, there were particular concerns about the rises in levels of young people who are NEET, particularly young people with SEND and care-leavers, given the way the pandemic has restricted opportunities for apprenticeships, work-based learning and other supported routes into the world of work.²⁸ Some LA leaders also expressed concerns about children who had stopped attending school, in person or virtually, during lockdowns, and were potentially missing out on and disengaged from education.

²⁶ This chimes with the recent findings from Ofsted's thematic reports about mental ill health in young people following the first national lockdown, including anxiety about contracting Covid-19, greater exposure to devices (for younger children), and anxiety about exams (for older children). See Ofsted's thematic report on schools from November 2020 (weblink [here](#)). It also chimes with the recently published, *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2020: Wave 1 follow up to the 2017 survey*, which found that one in six young people aged 5-16 had a probable mental health illness in October 2020, up from one in nine in 2017. (Weblink [here](#).)

²⁷ See Renaissance Learning and the Education Policy Institute, 2021, '*Understanding progress in the 2020/21 academic year: Interim findings, January 2021*' (DfE, weblink [here](#)).

²⁸ See data produced by the Office for National Statistics, 'Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET)' (weblink [here](#), last updated 4 March 2021).

Recommendation 1: There needs to be a long-term strategy for “building back better” in education and children’s services, agreed between central government and local systems

LA and school leaders emphasised the need to balance being positive about what could be done to reclaim lost ground and being honest about the scale of learning losses and risks experienced by more vulnerable young people

On the one hand, some school and LA leaders noted the positive impact that the return to schools and settings after the first national lockdown had on children – both in terms of the mental wellbeing and in terms of recovering ground and re-learning skills on which pupils may not have focused during time spent out of school. School leaders were particularly keen to caution against overplaying the impact of the pandemic on all children, for fear of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy about children falling behind. Some school leaders put this in a more positive light, arguing that, given that we remained in the pandemic period, it was within the gift of local system leaders to seek to mitigate the worse effects of the pandemic. Several local areas described how they were using the reflection and evaluation exercises that individual services had done after the first national lockdown, and applying the lessons in the third. For example, one local area that had reflected on the impact of the first national lockdown on pupils with SEND had started a piece of work to apply the learning from that experience to strengthen support for children with SEND when England’s mainstream schools closed to most pupils in January 2021.

On the other hand, LA, school and early years leaders had reflected on the loss of learning and the disproportionate impact of coronavirus restrictions on face-to-face teaching on certain groups of pupils, including those with SEND, those who are vulnerable, and those without adequate means to learn at home. They also emphasised the way in which the pandemic had exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, which they regretted were likely to endure after the third lockdown and the current period of coronavirus restrictions comes to an end. Overall, therefore, LA and school leaders argued for an honest appreciation of both what education and children’s services could achieve in terms of mitigating some of the effects of the pandemic period and the cycle of lockdowns, but also of the scale of the needs that the pandemic had revealed and exacerbated, and the long-term action that would be required to address these.

There was a strong consensus among the LA and school leaders that the concept of “catch-up” did not do justice to what was needed to build back better

Instead, LA and school leaders argued strongly that what was needed was a highly targeted, long-term strategy and streams of funding that would focus resources in the most vulnerable communities and to the most disadvantaged pupils, and would enable a holistic approach to education, early help, family support and other approaches that mitigate the determinants of disadvantage. This would build on the broader definitions of potential vulnerabilities that have emerged from the pandemic period, as we described in Chapter 3. This strategy would need to be co-produced by national government, including the DfE, DHSC, and the Treasury, LAs, and school and setting leaders. Such a strategy should focus on enabling long-term and sustainable local delivery of –

- a holistic approach to education, early help, family support and other approaches that mitigate the determinants of disadvantage;

- a robust early help offer, with agreement at national and local level that this is an essential part of a flexible, pro-active, multi-disciplinary approach to supporting potentially vulnerable families;
- a comprehensive offer of support for school improvement, school leadership and governance, and academic and pastoral interventions, including recognition of the need for a broader curriculum offer to engage and support all young people in a school’s community;
- a holistic strategy for early years education, recognising this as an essential public service that provides high-quality early education and child development in the most formative years of a child’s life, rather than being seen in terms of how it assists parents to return to work;
- a stronger offer of emotional wellbeing and mental health support, including capacity-building within schools, a focus on mental health in professional development, and greater access to support for mental ill health for young people and staff; and
- an evaluation and formalisation of good practice in the use of remote learning and virtual working in education and children’s services so that this can be used safely and effectively to engage young people and families where appropriate.

Local leaders were clear that piecemeal solutions, tied to short-term initiatives and narrow funding streams would not provide what was needed. To this end, it was welcome that Sir Kevan Collins, the Government’s Education Recovery Commissioner, acknowledged in response to the announcement of the expansion of the national tutoring programme, summer schools, and a £300m “recovery premium” that,

‘We know that ensuring all children and young people can make up for lost learning will be a long-term challenge, and the range of measures announced [on 24 February] are an important next step. But this is just the beginning ...’²⁹

In our discussions with LA and school leaders about what was needed to address the fallout from the pandemic period and to build back better, there were strong views about the necessity of there being dedicated – and potentially ring-fenced – funding for early intervention. LA and school leaders argued this needed to be heavily weighted towards indicators of disadvantage, given the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on vulnerable families. They also argued strongly that long-term funding needed to be provided to LAs, schools and early years settings, enabling them to build long-term capacity for flexible, responsive, early intervention and restorative support, as opposed to short-term funding routed through national programmes.

In responding to the pandemic period, it also essential to recognise the importance of local systems, not as marriages of proximity, but as essential partnerships supporting local communities

The pandemic has provided a stark reminder about the inter-connected nature of local systems.

As we described in Chapter 2, the response to the pandemic has required a system-wide response to education, to keeping children safe, and to supporting vulnerable families. LA and school leaders highlighted numerous examples of where a local system response had been invaluable during the

²⁹ See Weale, S., ‘England’s Covid catch-up plan for pupils: summer schools and tutoring’, *The Guardian*, 24 February 2021 (weblink [here](#)).

pandemic – these have implications not only for the pandemic response, but also for the work of local systems beyond the pandemic.

- **The approach to ensuring that there were “eyes on” vulnerable children** during the first national lockdown, and subsequent work to track children who are potentially vulnerable and those at risk during subsequent cycles of lockdown.
- **Convening school leaders to share practice and agree common approaches in relation to maintaining education during periods of lockdown** – school leaders in some local areas described how the local system had been forward-thinking and started to prepare school leaders for the need to develop remote learning platforms and practice, well before the first national lockdown was announced. Leaders in other local areas described routine sharing of practice around remote learning, risk assessments, and engagement with families. As one primary school leader put it, ‘Local systems are a partnership between schools and LA. This is vital. For example, the LA did some local research into approaches to remote learning, bringing schools together, and then providing support, advice and ideas that we all benefitted from. This was a collegiate approach focused on how we could get the best professional development for all.’
- **Convening education, children’s services and public health leaders to ensure school and setting leaders could take informed approaches based on the latest local information.** Many school leaders spoke positively about the support and advice that they received from local public health officers, particularly in relation to localised patterns of transmission and “hot-spots”, how to reduce the risk of transmission in schools and settings, and in tracing contacts of children or staff who had tested positive for Covid-19. As one special school leader reflected, ‘The LA have been extremely supportive, especially public health and the health and safety team. They have been outstanding. The LA have pulled out all of the stops on this.’ LA leaders reflected on the strength and future potential of closer joint working between education, children’s services and public health leaders within LAs. They saw a role here not only in responding to the day-to-day challenges of the pandemic, but also in informing more tailored approaches to initiatives such as Healthy Schools and tackling the social, education and health determinants of poverty and deprivation. For example, in one local area, the LA routinely shared public health information to inform schools and settings about local risk factors affecting children in their local communities – obesity, dental health checks, violent crime – and to enable schools and settings to tailor their curricula and pastoral support accordingly.

LA leaders underscored the fact that, throughout the pandemic, advice from central government has often been for schools and settings to seek advice or support from their LAs. Likewise, data collected about support for vulnerable children have relied on LAs carrying out these tasks, knowing their schools and communities, and being able to provide information to central government to inform decision-making.³⁰ As one Director of Children’s Services put it, ‘Never has it been so apparent that the education system needs a degree of co-ordination.’ In the words of a counterpart from another local area, ‘However centralised the DfE have tried to be, schools would not have been sustained without the role of the LA.’

We have heard a similar sentiment from many school leaders in local areas that have had in place the conditions for mounting an effective system-wide response that we described in Chapter 2. As one

³⁰ See the weblink to the vulnerable children and young people survey [here](#).

special school leader reflected, ‘If the structure is fragmented, it is difficult to really influence the greater good.’³¹ In one local area, two schools had reflected on the experience of being part of a system-wide response to the pandemic, and had reversed their decisions to convert to become academies, preferring to remain as schools maintained by the LA. In areas where there had been strong partnership working between the LA and the early years sector, we heard similar themes about the importance of bringing leaders together, sharing information, and being willing to provide practical support to settings to enable them to work safely and effectively in supporting young children. Our research has highlighted the vital role played by local systems. In continuing to respond to the pandemic and in the post-pandemic future, local systems need to be seen as essential partnerships between schools, settings and LAs, and between education, children’s services, public health and other partners. Working as part of a local system must not be seen as an optional add-on.

A central element of a strong local system is there being a clear role – and the capacity to play that role – for LAs, and an understanding of the way the role of the LA complements those of school and setting leaders, and regional and national partners

In a previous research project into the evolving role of LAs in education, published in 2012 and undertaken in response to the shift towards a more diverse and devolved education system, we described three broad roles that LAs were playing: as a champion of children and communities, as a convener of partnerships, and as a commissioner of services.³² In our present research, we found a strong echo of these three roles in the roles LAs were playing as one of the leaders of their local systems’ response to the pandemic. Some LA leaders explicitly referenced this work and this description of the LA’s role in how they had conceptualised the LA’s response to the pandemic.

- **Champion of children and communities** – as we described in Chapter 1, throughout the pandemic, LAs have played a central role in trying to maintain “eyes on” vulnerable children, and co-ordinating support from across the local system to vulnerable families.
- **Convener of partnerships** – as we described in Chapter 2, the pandemic has required a whole-system response within local areas. In all the local areas we engaged, the LA had played a central role in convening partnership discussions with schools and settings, across children’s services, education, public health, or across community and voluntary sector bodies. In some local areas, there were already strong education strategic partnerships – of school leaders, LA officers and members, and other partners. In these areas, the role of the LA had been crucial in establishing those partnerships and in playing an active role as one of its partners.
- **Commissioner of services** – throughout the phases of the pandemic described in Chapter 1, there has been the need to ensure a consistent system-wide response to immediate priorities such as the need for PPE, laptops and devices, school meal vouchers, the roll-out of testing, and now the vaccination programme. In each example, school and LA leaders have described how the LA has acted as a lynchpin in the local system, not always through direct delivery, but more often through harnessing its collective capacity of the system to deliver consistently across the local areas.

³¹ The theme of fragmentation came up in our discussions about children’s homes, and the need for greater join-up in work between LAs and children’s homes, and in planning sufficient care placements.

³² See Parish, N., Sandals, L., and Baxter, 2012, A., *Action research into the evolving role of the local authority in education* (DfE, weblink [here](#)).

School and LA leaders reflected that LAs alone have the potential to bring together education, children’s services, public health, plus other services such as transport, procurement, health and safety, and legal support, all of which have been crucial in the pandemic. This role complements the work of other partnerships, such as clusters of schools / settings, multi-academy trusts, or local area strategic education partnerships. During our research, we heard many examples of the important work of partnerships of schools and settings in sharing practice and providing peer-to-peer advice, particularly in relation to day-to-day practice. The pandemic has shown that, properly conceived, the roles of the LA and the role of schools and settings, clusters and multi-academy trusts, are complementary and mutually reinforcing. LAs cannot stand in for the intensive work that takes place to support leaders, staff and pupils within clusters and multi-academy trusts. Neither, however, can multi-academy trusts and clusters replicate the connections between education, children’s services, public health and other services that the pandemic has shown are crucial to mounting effective system-wide support for all children and families.

In drawing these reflections, LA and school leaders were not seeking a return to an era of the all-powerful “local education authority” – if such an era ever truly existed. Instead, they wanted to highlight the important role of well-functioning local systems in responding to the pandemic, and consequently the need for the roles and responsibilities within local systems to be re-articulated. Within this, they argued, there needs to be a recognition of the unique role of the LA, alongside the roles of other partners in a local system, such as schools, early years settings, independent service providers, and other agencies.

This is not to say that all LAs have been in a position to play this role

Some LAs were better placed before the pandemic, in terms of having more of the conditions we described in Chapter 2 and capacity in place to act in this way when the pandemic started to unfold. Some LA leaders reflected to us that they have not had sufficient capacity in education or early help roles at the start of the pandemic to respond as they would have wanted. Even in the local areas where LA and school leaders were most positive about the local system’s response to the pandemic, those leaders recognised the strains placed on existing capacity by reductions in budgets over the past decade.

Where local system leaders considered that the LA has been able to play this role effectively, however, they have highlighted the importance of two-way dialogue, informed planning and developing shared solutions to system-wide issues. In many instances, they have contrasted this approach and the relationship within local systems to the approach taken by central government and its relationship with local systems in planning responses to the different phases of the pandemic. We have included below some quotes from school leaders relating to the role they see LAs have played in the response to the pandemic.

‘[The Council’s] leadership during this period has been supportive, compassionate and effective.’ (Primary school leader)

‘We feel lucky, very well supported. This has been vital – you cannot put a price on it.’ (Primary school leader)

‘Schools working effectively with LAs is absolutely fundamental. ... When [the Director of Children’s Services] was making decisions, they took advice from headteachers. There has been outstanding leadership from [the LA] – it has been based on dialogue. ... There was a

huge amount of cooperation between the schools and the LA, and the sharing of good practice around contingency planning. ... Covid-19 has highlighted the success of [our local system]. The key is that this is a partnership.’ (Secondary school leader)

Recommendation 2: Central and local government should jointly re-articulate the importance of local education and children’s services systems, agree how local government can be enabled to fulfil its role within local systems, and develop a more co-productive relationship between central and local government

Re-articulate the importance of, and complementary roles within, local systems of education and children’s services

There needs to be recognition, at a national and local level, that local systems are essential and inter-dependent partnerships, not optional marriages of proximity between autonomous actors. They are essential and joint enterprises for providing education and support for children and families. The pandemic has demonstrated the importance and necessity of local, whole-system responses to children’s services and education. As we described in Chapter 2, some local areas have sustained an ethos of whole-system working in the past decade, as new forms of school and partnership structures have become more widespread. Not all local areas, however, have been able to maintain a robust “local family of schools” and sustain an approach that connects schools and settings to system-wide education and children’s services. It is important to recognise that systems that have done this have done so despite the national rhetoric of school autonomy and policy around reducing LAs’ direct role in education and support for school improvement. As one secondary school leader put it, these conditions cannot be created from scratch.

‘The key conditions that we had in place and that have shaped our response to the pandemic have been strong collaborative working, trust, relationships, communications. It is really difficult to create these from scratch – they need to be worked on. If you had these in place, you could switch this to use in responding to any situation – including the pandemic.’

Despite the necessity of the pandemic having helped to improve relationships between schools, settings and LAs in some local areas, “building back better” after the pandemic cannot be achieved without fundamentally rethinking the complementary and connected roles of schools, settings and LAs. Just because some local areas had maintained these conditions despite national policy before the pandemic does not mean they will be able to sustain those conditions, nor that others will be able to create them, after the pandemic.

Furthermore, this “rethinking” of the roles within local systems cannot simply be a rhetorical exercise. Nevertheless, clear and consistent national rhetoric is needed. This needs to come from the DfE and across central government, but be part of a joint narrative with bodies representing school and setting leaders and local government. This rhetoric needs to capture the essential role of local systems and system-wide approaches in delivering education and support for vulnerable children and families, the essential role of LAs in a well-functioning education system, and the complementary roles of LAs, schools and settings, and other local partners such as the RSCs. We have heard throughout the pandemic that the virus “does not discriminate”. In many of the local systems with whom we have worked, their approaches have not discriminated either, especially not on the basis of the type of school a child attends. Creating a national system in which there are clear, complementary and aligned roles and responsibilities of schools and settings, regardless of status, LAs and RSCs, is essential to

building on and maintaining the system-wide approaches that have been at the heart of local education and children's services systems responses to the pandemic.

As one secondary school leader put it,

'It is not about [different types of schools], it is about [the local area's] children. It is not about competition, but about things we can do that are complementary – what adds to the whole. There needs to be clarity about the roles and responsibilities of schools and LAs, as well as RSCs and national government. Our system nationally is fractured ... LAs have a significant role to play in education. They need to be recognised for that – this has sort of been recognised in the pandemic, but I am not sure that the government recognise that the role needs to be linked to education as business-as-usual.'

The need for a joined-up, whole-system approach applies as much to local education systems as it does to children's services – both in terms of the role of early help, but also the need to have a more joined-up approach to planning and organising foster placements and placements in children's homes.

Ensure that local government has the powers and capacity to fulfil its role effectively

National rhetoric that acknowledges the role that local systems and their leaders have played in the pandemic, and the importance of their role in the future, is a start, but it is not sufficient if the lessons of the pandemic are to be learned and applied. Instead, what is required is to ensure that local government has the powers and capacity to undertake its role effectively. If this role includes support for vulnerable children, then the responsibilities, powers and capacity needed for this role must be aligned. As LA leaders emphasised to us, it cannot be the case that local government has an essential role to play in keeping children safe and preventing families from becoming vulnerable, and yet is expected to achieve this in a context of growing need and reducing budgets. Likewise, LAs cannot be commissioners of services for vulnerable children if they lack the powers to open and reshape provisions, including AP and specialist SEND provision, to reflect the needs of local communities. As one Director of Children's Services put it, 'I don't want to be a "champion" if that means being a cheerleader from the side lines. Being a champion involves having power and influence.'

In responding to the pandemic and the beyond, LAs will need the power and capacity to act as –

- a convener of partnerships – to convene all system leaders to initiate system-wide initiatives around education and support for vulnerable children and families, not as optional add-ons, but as business-as-usual for all settings and school leaders;
- a champion of vulnerable children – to have the power to challenge and address non-inclusive practice within settings and schools towards children from deprived backgrounds, those with SEND, or those with other vulnerabilities; and
- a commissioner of services – with the power to create and reshape provision for vulnerable children and families, including AP and specialist SEND provision, to reflect local needs.

This will require work between the DfE and local government, alongside other partners within and beyond central government, to agree what is needed to enable local government to fulfil these roles and help to shape effective local education and children's services systems. There are precedents to this approach already. For example, there are expectations that there are system-wide approaches to the use of education funding (agreed by a local schools forum), or the application of fair access protocols (although these are under pressure in many local areas). Our recommendation is that the DfE, local government and bodies representing school and setting leaders, should agree a set of clear

expectations of whole-system approaches and co-operation between LAs and schools / settings. These should relate specifically to support for vulnerable children, admissions and fair access, SEND, AP and other children who are vulnerable and at-risk of harm. Such approaches should require the engagement of all schools and settings. LAs should have the power and capacity to support such system-wide approaches and to challenge in instances of poor practice or non-engagement. Support for vulnerable children and families is not an optional add-on: it is the essential task of all partners within a local education and children’s services system.

In responding to the pandemic now and in a post-pandemic future, the partnership between central and local government in relation to education and children’s services needs to be re-cast

A new relationship between central and local government is needed. This must be built on an appreciation of the respective roles of each, on mutual trust, and on co-productive dialogue. LA and school leaders argued that many of the challenges described in Chapter 4 related, in part, to a lack of trust and co-productive engagement to test and agree shared solutions between central and local government. They argued that many of the points where local education and children’s services systems have been under greatest strain and where there has been the greatest dissent towards national policy directives in the last twelve months had, at their core, a lack of willingness on the part of central government to listen to leaders of local systems and to engage in shaping solutions together. LA and school leaders welcomed recent attempts by DfE ministers and senior officials to meet with and listen to leaders of local systems. They argued, however, that there was a difference to engaging in “listening mode”, and engaging in genuine two-way *dialogue* to share, test and develop policy so that there was the best chance for it to be delivered effectively at local level. Our recommendation is that the DfE and representatives of local government agree a new way of working, based on dialogue and co-production, that can deliver a clear national parameters and outcomes for education and children’s services, while creating the conditions for effective delivery by local systems.

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The pandemic period is not behind us. While this research was commissioned after the first national lockdown was lifted, during the period of this research there have been two further cycles of lockdowns, one of which remains in place at the time of writing. The fact that the return of all pupils to schools earlier this month has been accompanied by mass testing and face coverings should serve as a reminder that coronavirus remains very much with us.

In this research, we have sought to capture the learning, about the challenges that the pandemic has thrown up, and the needs it has exacerbated and revealed, but also what has helped local education and children’s services to respond to these. Given the pandemic and its attendant restrictions remain with us, we would argue that now *is* very much the time to start drawing lessons from this period – as many schools, settings and local services have done between each cycle of lockdown. These lessons need to be applied at both national and local levels in order to strengthen local education and children’s services systems for the task of recovering lost ground and building back better. We hope that wealth of knowledge and reflections gathered from leaders of local systems and presented in this report can help in some small way with this enormous, but essential, task.

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