

Education providers resilient as COVID challenges continue

Ofsted has today published the [third set of briefings](#) in a series looking at the pandemic's continued impact on education providers.

The 3 reports, which follow on from [those published in April](#), find that most education providers are adapting to life with COVID-19 and focusing on the effectiveness of their recovery strategies. But the legacy of the pandemic and repeated lockdowns continues to affect some children and learners' education and development.

Drawing on evidence from more than 100 inspections carried out in the summer term and multiple focus groups with inspectors, the reports set out how early years settings, schools and further education and skills providers are helping children and learners catch up, while dealing with the ongoing challenges of COVID.

Ofsted Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman, said:

It's clear that education providers are responding to the ongoing challenges of COVID with creativity and resilience. But the pandemic and lockdowns created some distinct problems, which are taking time to shift. Some young children are still behind in their development; older children are experiencing higher levels of exam anxiety than usual, and difficulties recruiting and retaining staff have been exacerbated across all phases of education.

I'm also concerned that some learners in a small minority of further education and skills providers are still not receiving sufficient classroom teaching or off-the-job training. This is narrowing their opportunities to gain practical skills and limiting their social engagement, which could have serious consequences on their readiness for the workplace.

Early years

Young children's communication and language development continues to be affected. An increased number of children have been referred for additional support, but they are having to wait months, sometimes up to a year, for specialist help such as speech and language therapy.

Many children still lack confidence in social settings. Some have taken longer to settle into nursery or with a childminder than would have been expected pre-pandemic.

During the pandemic, children missed out on going to playgrounds and soft-

play areas. As a result, some have not developed the gross motor skills they need. To help children catch up, many providers have thought about how they can use outside space and encourage more physical activity.

Fewer children are ready for the move up to Reception than would otherwise have been expected pre-COVID. Some are still not where they should be in terms of developing independent self-care skills, such as using the toilet and dressing. And because some providers have focused on getting children ready for Reception, it is possible that younger children have missed out on their own learning and development opportunities.

Providers also told inspectors that the take up of funded places for 2-year-olds remains lower than usual. And they said that financial pressures and staffing constraints mean they were not actively promoting places.

Staff recruitment and retention is a persistent issue for the early years sector. Many providers continue to report difficulties in recruiting high-quality staff due to the relatively low pay the sector offers. In a few cases, providers have had to recruit unqualified staff to meet the legal requirement regarding the number of staff per children, per setting.

Despite COVID-19 restrictions being lifted since February, most providers have maintained some restrictions because they do not want to risk staff illness. Parents continue to drop off and pick up at the doorstep, with some telling inspectors they didn't know they could ask to enter the provider's premises. These restrictions potentially create barriers between parents and staff.

Schools

Schools are continuing to work hard to help pupils catch up. However, some pupils are still not as ready for the next stage of their education as they would usually be, particularly children in Reception who had limited pre-school experience.

Inspectors also saw that the pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on some pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Schools with strong systems in place before COVID-19 are continuing to meet the needs of pupils with SEND. But the pandemic has delayed some pupils receiving support from external or specialist services.

School staff noticed higher levels of anxiety around exams than in pre-pandemic times, as pupils prepared to sit external tests for the first time in more than 2 years. While inspectors saw good practice in schools that balanced helping pupils to revise their subject knowledge with preparing them for exams, in some schools the curriculum was being overly narrowed to focus on exam topics, which may affect pupils' readiness for the next stage.

More schools are using tutoring programmes than in the spring and autumn terms, with most opting for the school-led route. Some schools are using the National Tutoring programme to fund their own staff to act as tutors, rather than employing external tutors.

In the summer term, school leaders said that fewer pupils were absent from school because of COVID-19 compared with the spring term. Although some leaders have seen an increase in pupil absence due to families taking rescheduled holidays.

Further education and skills (FES)

Providers have continued to use creative strategies to respond to the challenges of the pandemic and close gaps in learners' practical skills and theoretical knowledge.

A small number of providers have retained or reverted to remote learning. In some industries, and for adults studying for professional qualifications, online learning can have a useful and flexible role to play. However, for younger learners, and those on vocational courses, remote learning narrows opportunities to gain and practice skills. For instance, it is very difficult to teach brick laying or carpentry remotely.

By learning remotely, some learners are also missing out on valuable socialisation and opportunities to develop work-ready behaviours and attitudes. This limited interaction with peers and staff can have a negative impact on learners' experiences and outcomes, and leave them unprepared for their next steps.

Challenges remain for apprentices. While difficulties securing work and training are easing, sectors that were hardest hit by the pandemic continue to be affected, such as health and social care. Some apprentices are not completing meaningful tasks, or are observing rather than gaining practical experience, while the pressures on businesses following the pandemic mean others are not being released for off-the-job training. The disruption to learning has also seen many apprentices remain on their programmes beyond the planned end-point, due to them not being ready for assessment.

The pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges in recruiting and retaining high-quality staff. This is largely due to salaries being incomparable to industry, particularly in sectors like construction and engineering. In some cases, the pandemic has prompted staff to re-consider their careers.

The level of exam anxiety was noted to be higher than pre-pandemic, particularly among learners sitting high-stakes assessments for the first time.

Some providers have compressed English and maths timetabling to increase time for learners to catch up on vocational skills. This does not leave enough time for learners to make good progress in English and maths. And because of business pressures, some employers have decided only to recruit apprentices who already hold the required English and maths qualifications.

The number of adult learners was already decreasing pre-pandemic, but this decline has accelerated. In some cases, courses have closed. Elsewhere though, some providers reported an increased interest in employability courses as adult learners looked to re-train or move jobs.

Many learners with high needs have received extensions to their programmes to help them take part in activities they missed out on at the height of the pandemic. Personal development has been slow to recover and some learners have experienced increased mental health difficulties, or have regressed in their social skills.