

The experience of children, young people and families during the partial closure of education settings (March-July 2020)

PART ONE

Background

Schools were closed to the majority of pupils from March 2020 to reduce the spread of the virus. Parents were asked to keep their children at home, wherever possible, and asked schools to remain open only for those children who absolutely needed to attend.

Schools, and all childcare providers, continued to provide care for a limited number of children - children who were considered vulnerable, or whose parents were critical to the COVID-19 response, so that they could continue to work where alternative childcare arrangements cannot be made.

Vulnerable children included those who had a social worker and those with an Education, Health and Care plan. Children with a social worker include children in need, children who have a child protection plan and those who are Looked After by the local authority.

Attendance (March – September 2020)

Average monthly analysis on attendance at school during Covid-19 lockdown

- March, April and May – critical worker children and vulnerable children only
- June and July – critical worker children, vulnerable children and certain year groups

Month	Average number of pupils attending schools for the month	% of school population attending schools	Average number of pupils with an EHCP attending schools for the month
March	3627	1.6%	197
April	2199	1%	126
May	3101	1.4%	185
June	23,339	10%	1139
July	28,611	13%	1407
September	145,491	89.5%	Not recorded separately.

Changes to the Law

From May 1st 2020 some aspects of the law on Education, Health and Care (EHC) assessments and plans changed temporarily to give local authorities, commissioning health bodies and other bodies who contribute to the EHC process more flexibility in responding to the demands placed on them by COVID-19. The new legislation came into place on May 1st 2020 and affected two aspects of the law:

1. Usually there is an 'absolute duty' on Local Authorities and Health Commissioning Groups to provide what is written in an EHC plan. This duty on local authorities or commissioning health

bodies to secure [or arrange] the provision was temporarily replaced by a duty to use 'reasonable endeavours' to do so. This modification was renewed monthly and ended at the end of July 2020.

2. The second change was to timescales in processes such as EHC Needs Assessments and EHC plans. Where it was not reasonably practicable to meet a time limit for a reason relating to the incidence or transmission of COVID-19, the local authority or other body to whom that deadline applies had to complete the process in line with the requirement specified in the 2020 Regulations (such as 'as soon as is reasonably practicable thereafter'). The timescale amendments were in place until 25 September 2020

The full guidance can be found here.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/changes-to-the-law-on-education-health-and-care-needs-assessments-and-plans-due-to-coronavirus/education-health-and-care-needs-assessments-and-plans-guidance-on-temporary-legislative-changes-relating-to-coronavirus-covid-19>

Implications for Local Authorities

In practice this meant that LAs and health bodies, working with Early Years settings, schools and colleges had to consider for each child and young person with an EHC plan what was reasonable and possible to provide during the notice period. For some, this meant that the provision specified in their EHC plan could continue to be delivered. For others, this resulted in a child or young person's provision being different to that which was set out in their EHC plan, for some, or all, of the time that the notice was in force.

Essex Approach to support all children and young people

From the start of lockdown, communication with children and families was prioritised. All education settings were expected to:

- Complete a **Risk Assessment** for all children with additional needs to determine the safest place for that child or young person. This considered all elements of vulnerability and disadvantage alongside the individual health needs of the child or young person. This risk assessment was continually reviewed at each stage of lockdown as more children and young people were encouraged to return to school.
- Put into place '**Keeping in Touch**' or 'Welfare Checks'.
- Introduce arrangements for learning to continue at home, with personalised learning and support for children and young people with additional needs.

Family experience of each of these elements were gathered through a survey. Their responses and experiences are included in this report (PART 2)

Essex Approach for children and young people with Education, Health and Care Plans

For children with Education, Health and Care Plans additional steps were required to ensure we continued to meet their needs as specified in their plans. The guidance emphasised the need for coproduction and for involving every family and young person in decision making about their

support. We recognised that the decision making process and the plan for each child would be different depending on the current needs of the child or young person, the provision that was in their plan and the specific local circumstance.

Essex produced a Six Step plan to support the LA SEND teams, schools, colleges and Early Years settings to work together to carry out this duty of 'Reasonable Endeavours' with every young person and family. All LA SEND teams received online training using Microsoft TEAMS. Every Early Years setting, school and college was allocated a key LA contact who provided support at every stage of the plan. We are also offered a daily Helpline or Question and Answer session in the early stages to make sure any queries or questions could be answered.

Essex LA wrote to families explaining the changes to the Law, what this meant for their child and what they could expect to happen. This information was shared with families, education settings, on the Local Offer, through the Essex Family Forum and through all Parent Support Groups on their social media channels and platforms.

PART TWO: Family Experience

There were two surveys to capture the experiences of parents:

- The survey for parents of children in mainstream settings ran from 01/06/2020 to 25/07/2020. 183 parents of children with Education, Health and Care Plans completed the survey. These parents represented approximately 90 schools, colleges or Early Years settings across Essex.
- The survey for parents of children in special school settings ran from 15/06/2020 to 25/07/2020. 170 parents and carers responded. These parents represented 8 of the special schools in Essex (Castledon School and College, Cedar Hall, Harlow Fields School and College, Market Field School, Pioneer, Ramsden Hall, The Endeavour Co-operative Academy, Wells Park)

Co-production

A key theme throughout the process was co-production. We asked parents how involved they have been in decision making about their child's support during the pandemic. Over 90% of respondents agreed that they have been involved in decision making (strongly agree or agree).

I feel that I was involved in decisions about my child's support during this time.

Mainstream Responses	Total	Percent
Strongly agree	112	61.20%
Agree	54	29.51%
Disagree	11	6.01%
Strongly disagree	6	3.28%

Special School responses	Total (170)	Percent
Yes, I feel fully involved in decision making at this time	108	63.5%
Yes, I feel involved in decision making at this time	45	26.4%

No, I do not feel involved in decision making at this time	17	10.0%
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- “The school was supportive and pro-active in meeting our child's needs and taking on board my own requests as a parent” (*St Thomas Mores*)
- “I felt this was important for my child as I like to be involved as to what help and support my child gets within her school setting” (*Richard de Clare School*)
- “I feel that I have been allowed to voice what I feel is best for my child and supported in a way that I have been able to achieve this.” (*Messing-cum-Inworth*)
- No decision has been made about my child unless I have been involved. (*Market Field*)
- The school have included me at every stage regarding my son. I have even had an annual review of his progress - we are in constant contact. (*Ramsden Hall*)
- We are involved in all decisions made about our son. (*Pioneer*)

Family Experience of Risk Assessment

Did you discuss where you think the best place is for child at the moment- at home or at school? This might have been called a ‘risk assessment’.

Mainstream Responses	Total (183)	Percent
Yes	168	91.80%
No	15	8.20%

Special School Responses	Total (170)	Percent
Yes	143	83.22%
No	27	16.78%
Not Answered	0	0%

How satisfied are you with the decision about the best place for your child? (Mainstream responses)

Mainstream Responses	Total	Percent
Very satisfied	129	70.49%
Satisfied	44	24.04%
Not satisfied	9	4.92%
Not satisfied at all	1	0.55%
Not Answered	0	0%

95% of parents in mainstream schools were satisfied about the decisions made during risk assessments:

- “School have been so accommodating, open to making the right choices with us” (*Chelmsford County High School for Girls*)
- “Everything has been put into place to allow our son to be in the best place to suit him and his needs.” (*Holy Trinity Primary Halstead*)
- “Collaborative working and feel school have best interests of my child in mind.” (*Mildmay Infants School*)

- “SENCO, Headteacher and temporary teacher for child have been incredibly supportive with decisions about our daughter, we have had several Informative meetings and our opinions have completely been taken on board.” (*Buttsbury Junior*)
- “Conversations with all involved including our son we can come to the best conclusion for him” (*USP College*)

How satisfied are you with the decision about the best place for your child? (Special School Responses)

Special School Responses	Total	Percent
Very satisfied	113	66.5%
Satisfied	35	20.6%
Not satisfied	9	5.3%
Not satisfied at all	8	4.7%
Not applicable	5	2.9%

86% of parents in special schools were satisfied about the decisions made during risk assessments:

- The decision was reached after discussing many aspects of my son's welfare. (*Harlow Fields*)
- I was listened to and respected with the decision I made, with full information and openness from the school. (*Market Field*)
- The school are so supportive and put my child's needs first, the school and I agreed together. (*The Endeavour*)
- Harlow Fields have been very supportive and discussed any concerns I had. I feel they have my child's welfare as their priority. (*Harlow Fields*)
- The teacher listens to us and we listen to her and I feel we make the best decisions possible for my child's safety and well-being. (*Pioneer*)

Where families were dissatisfied, they cited

- It has been made extremely difficult to return to school. I don't think there has been any understanding of our circumstances.
- I requested a place as a key worker but this was discouraged.
- I have been left to look after my child with no help from the school as a single parent I was told there was no place for my child at school as these were reserved for children of key workers only.
- I would like my child to be in school, but she has not yet been offered anything. I was told she might get some school offered by the end of June, but this was not definite, and the school staff advised me not to send her to school as the provision on offer would not be suitable for her needs. I am very unhappy about this as my child needs to be in school.
- I appreciate it's difficult to respond to ever shifting official advice, union pressure, etc. and get kids back to school. However, the overall impression is that the decision was made from the start that home was the best place for all the children. This might be the case for some with particular health needs but assumptions have been made rather than proper, individualised assessments done. Our child is not learning or being challenged in the same way as they are at school, they are losing social skills by not interacting with others at all and becoming hyper anxious and unpredictably behaved as a result. We are expected by our employers to work at home regardless of whether we have a child with disabilities to look after. Whilst this isn't the fault of the school and they have difficult decisions to make, the impression is that we have rather been left to get on with it with minimal support. And when this is added to the removal of

all other sources of respite and support: grandparents, clubs etc. it contributes to making the situation almost unbearable at times.

Family Experience of 'Keeping in touch' or 'Welfare Calls' (Special School survey only)

Have you had (or are you having) conversations with someone from your child's school to keep in touch?

Option	Total (170)	Percent
Yes	168	98.8%
No	2	1.2%

How satisfied are you with these 'keeping in touch' conversations?

Option	Total (170)	Percent
Very satisfied	112	65.9%
Satisfied	41	24.1%
Not satisfied	8	4.7%
Not satisfied at all	7	4.1%
Not applicable	2	1.2%

- I felt the level communication was just right, open door if we were having any difficulties but also if things were going well left us to it. Like I said just right. (*Cedar Hall*)
- Always asks how we are doing, if there is anything they can do further to help. Always on the end of the phone if we need anything. (*Harlow Fields*)
- I have had weekly phone calls from the school to check how we are and if we need anything. Have been able to email or call anytime if I have needed anything. We also stay in touch via Tapestry. Have felt very supported during this difficult time. (*Pioneer*)
- I can honestly say the school have been faultless in their support and have been in regular weekly contact both on a health and welfare and educational basis. (*Ramsden Hall*)
- The school as a whole, but especially my child's teacher has been incredible and very understanding of the demands of being at home. Nothing has been too much trouble and they are always there to discuss concerns. (*Market Field*)
- I know that if I need to speak anyone within the school, I can just pick up the phone and I will get support, advice, reassurance and kindness. To have these "keeping in touch" conversations is reassuring because I know personally that the support is still there. (*Harlow Fields*)
- My daughter and I have received a level of support online and via telephone that has been consistent, beyond any expectations and holistically supportive. My daughter's needs are far more than just academic and I continue to be struck by just how lucky she is - she's really cared for by this amazing team. (*The Endeavour*)

Where families were dissatisfied, they cited

- The conversations were good when they happened but it would have been useful if they had come at the start of lock down rather than halfway through.
- Conversations are very brief and do not really offer me anything useful.
- Didn't hear from anyone for weeks, then the phone calls I did receive were not very useful.

Family Experience of 'Reasonable Endeavours'

Have you had a conversation with someone from your child's early years setting, school or college about what support can be offered at the moment – that is reasonable and possible? This might have been called a 'Reasonable Endeavours' conversation.

Mainstream Responses	Total (183)	Percent
Yes	179	97.81%
No	4	2.19%

Special School Responses	Total (170)	Percent
Yes	143	84.1%
No	27	15.9%

How satisfied are you with the conversation? (Mainstream only)

Mainstream Responses	Total	Percent
Very satisfied	131	71.58%
Satisfied	37	20.22%
Not satisfied	9	4.92%
Not satisfied at all	3	1.64%
Not applicable	3	1.64%

- "Very clear & informative conversation - my points were addressed & listened to. We had a good conversation & covered all areas." (*Birchanger Primary School*)
- "We discussed all available options, and all our questions and queries were answered. The school have been incredibly helpful and supportive during this pandemic." (*Holy Trinity Primary, Halstead*)
- "All parts of his plan were discussed and agreed as to how his targets could still be met during Covid. Plans were in place from the first week of lockdown to support him, even while at home." (*Lawford Mead Primary*)
- "My son is 22yrs with SEN. He has had exceptional support during this lockdown period, with a minimum of twice weekly contact, key activities and learning through email correspondence. To and fro of pictorial evidence and the availability of the staff for him to contact them freely by text message should he need assistance has been brilliant. This has been a great source of reassurance to me as a parent." (*USP/SEEVIC college Benfleet*)
- "The staff are extremely helpful, regularly contacting us and ensuring that my son has telephone conversations with members of staff that he particularly responds to. There has also been the opportunity to talk to staff and other parents online. I am also regularly kept in contact by email. Communication is particularly good." (*Harlow College*)
- "He has been given the most support he has ever received in all his educational life. We have felt that they actually care about him personally, he's not just any student, he's someone that matters, and they want to help him achieve his potential but most importantly they want him to feel safe and happy. Personally, I have felt extremely supported by the team, and been reassured that I am doing a good job with my son." (*Braintree College*)

- “Knowing that the school were continuing support my child's needs during a difficult time was reassuring and it then helped me to support my child at home”. (*King Harold Academy*)

How satisfied are you with the RE plan to support your child? (Mainstream Responses)

I am satisfied with the plan that we made to support my child	Total	Percent
Strongly agree	94	51.37%
Agree	72	39.34%
Disagree	6	3.28%
Strongly disagree	7	3.83%
Not applicable	4	2.19%

Over 90% of families in mainstream schools were satisfied/very satisfied with the temporary reasonable endeavours plan.

- “All her needs were met in this plan... and very helpful ways forward to help her to learn and to make it fun.” (*South Benfleet Primary*)
- “The temporary plan looked at all aspect of my son’s needs. The school ensured that all his needs are been met and he can safely be managed in the school setting, with minimal disruption to him and also keeps him fully informed and involved in the process.” (*Lawford Mead Primary*)
- “Becket Keys and us as a family have set out the best possible plan for learning at home and we are more than happy with the plan set out” (*Becket Keys*).
- The plan that was set out for my child, including both my thoughts and feelings and ideas along with the school input and the educational team support. The plan met all my child's needs and offered the correct support during the current crisis. (*Woodham Ley*)

How satisfied are you with the RE plan to support your child? (Special School Responses)

Special School responses	Total	Percent
Very satisfied	101	59.4%
Satisfied	42	24.7%
Not satisfied	13	7.6%
Not satisfied at all	8	4.7%
Not applicable	5	2.9%
Not Answered	1	0.7%

Over 84% of families with children in special schools were satisfied/very satisfied with the temporary reasonable endeavours plan:

- We completed this over the phone and it took about 40 mins. Both the teacher and I contributed and I was very pleased with the outcome. (*Pioneer*)
- I have been asked all the right questions to see if support was needed in ways that maybe I hadn’t thought of - I feel that school were supporting me to make sure I was ok to and able to do my best for my young adult. (*Harlow Fields*)
- The adjustments work well and we both inputted and I was allowed to be fully engaged (*Pioneer*)

Where families were dissatisfied, they cited

- “Trying to understand all the information.”
- “My young person was in a complete meltdown when the call occurred. I couldn't concentrate on what was being said, and although my husband was trying to calm our child, I really wasn't taking in any of the information. What I should have done is suggested either I or the school call back later.”
- “I felt the school has to be "pushed" to provide opportunity and strategy for my son.”
- “I feel the options are limited and they were as proactive about the "what" as I feel they could be.”
- “Child is not having an education as not in a school and unable to have home tutoring -library is unavailable as of lockdown. Request for more testing work to be given has taken the whole of lockdown to finally be sent out.”
- “I do not have a clue on how to deliver the specialised learning plans for my child. I am overwhelmed and confused, as I really have no idea how to achieve the targets set with resources sent home, without a basic training or supervision.”
- “I have discussed concerns about behaviour previously but there was no support offered around this. This is also the reason why I requested a place at school during lockdown as it was increasingly difficult to manage at home.”
- “The school offered online resources and activities however I am a single parent of 3 children and have been working full time and have not been in a position to provide one to one support.”

Next Steps: Planned recovery actions

- All schools, colleges and early years settings were supported by the LA Education directorate to undertake a thorough risk assessment process to inform their approach to safely re-open fully.
- ‘Back to School with Confidence’ social media campaign – resources launched as part of the councils Every Family Matters campaign.
- School Effectiveness Team will undertake their usual visits with schools virtually to support and influence schools around safety, rebuilding, re-engagement and resilience
- SEND services will continue to support schools to develop their whole school approach to inclusion and accurate assessment of needs, taking into account the impact of Covid-19
- To further support the wellbeing of children, young people and school staff, the SEMH team have developed the Recovery and Return to Educational Settings package of support which has been very well received to date.
- The [Essex Local Offer website](#) created a Coronavirus section for parents and carers of children with SEND to provide information for families including transitioning into schools, wellbeing and mental health as well as helplines and advice