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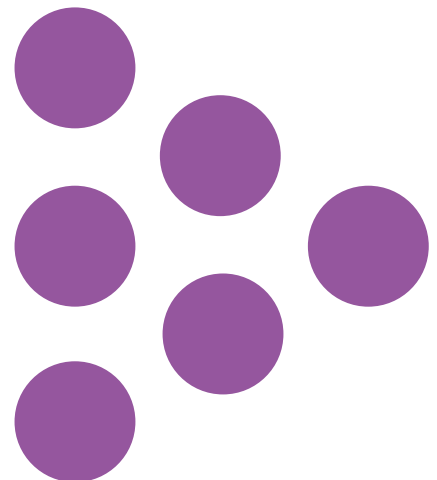
National Foundation for
Educational Research

Report

Recovery during a pandemic: the ongoing impacts of Covid-19 on schools serving deprived communities

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Recovery during a pandemic: the ongoing impacts of Covid-19 on schools serving deprived communities

Julie Nelson
Sarah Lynch
Caroline Sharp

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Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Summary and key messages	ii
Introduction	1
1 Recovering teaching and learning	2
2 Recovering wellbeing and mental health	10
3 Recovering opportunity: education transitions	15
4 Pupils' and schools' support needs	18
References	21
Appendix A Research objectives and methodology	24
Appendix B Data recording and analysis	26
Appendix C Research ethics and data protection	27

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Summary and key messages

This report is based on interviews with 50 senior leaders in mainstream schools largely serving deprived communities. It focused on schools' responses to Covid-19 in May/June 2021.

Schools were adapting their curriculum and pedagogy to help pupils recover

- Most leaders said that their schools had modified the curriculum to help pupils recover and make progress with their learning. The research identified four models: narrow (prioritising literacy and numeracy over other subjects such as arts and languages); focused (prioritising core content within subjects); blended (supporting numeracy and literacy through other subjects); and continuous (covering planned content over a longer period of time). Those adopting the narrow model had done so because of the perceived pressure of external accountability. They tended to regret that their pupils and staff were missing out on wider experiences. Many primary and a few secondary schools had adopted new or evidence-informed pedagogical approaches to support pupils' recovery (including approaches focused on retention, recall and mastery).
- The school leaders we spoke to said they valued the approaches they had used to support pupils learning at home in 2020 and early 2021, but felt these were a poor replacement for face-to-face teaching. Few were using more technology in the classroom but many were making greater use of online platforms for homework and encouraging pupils to use recorded lessons for revision.

Pupils' wellbeing and mental health is an immediate and pressing concern

- Most leaders reported a deterioration in pupils' wellbeing, especially increased anxiety, as a result of the pandemic. A substantial minority – mainly, but not exclusively, secondary leaders – noted an increase in severe mental health issues, including self-harm. Many of those affected had been identified as vulnerable before the pandemic, but leaders were also concerned about pupils with no known vulnerability or previous mental health issues. Primary pupils were reported to be struggling with social skills, confidence and self-esteem. There were also concerns about a deterioration in skills for learning, such as concentration, memory and stamina.
- Schools were finding it very difficult to secure specialist external support. Leaders responded by increasing their own pastoral support and wellbeing activities, including working with other organisations. Some had arranged mental health training and appointed specialist staff, but others were constrained by a lack of funds, capacity and expertise. Leaders called for early intervention and a multi-agency approach to mitigate an escalation in poor mental health and learning incapacity, to support families, and to minimise staff workload and stress.

The pandemic has affected pupils' emotional and academic readiness for transition

- Most senior leaders said that pupils were less well prepared for transition than usual in 2019/20 and 2020/21, both academically and emotionally. This was due to the impact of Covid-19, including the disruption to normal transition events.
- There were particular worries about children moving into Nursery, Reception and Year 1 in 2021/22 because the pandemic has affected such a large proportion of their lives. Some leaders were concerned about the emotional readiness of pupils moving from primary to secondary school, and the academic readiness of pupils in Years 11-13 to progress to the next stage.

School leaders identified urgent and important support needs which they felt must be addressed

- Leaders' most urgent priority was addressing pupils' wellbeing, and they were concerned about a lack of support from specialist services for more severe mental health issues. They want the Government to increase funding for specialist mental health and social care services to ensure pupils can get the support they need in a timely manner.
- Most leaders said that pupils' academic recovery would require continuing support in the medium- to longer-term. Estimates ranged from about another year to seven years or more.
- Leaders wanted the Government to provide sufficient and sustained funding for recovery and to allow schools to use it flexibly, according to their needs. In particular, they wanted to increase staffing to support pupils' wellbeing, engagement, transitions and academic recovery. They called on the Government to take a more holistic and system-wide perspective of recovery in future.

Key messages for policy and practice

Findings from this study and other research, suggest the need for the following actions.

- 1. Immediate increased funding to address pupils' wellbeing and mental health** – both for schools and for specialist services, such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Schools should continue to monitor and support pupils' wellbeing in the coming months and years, including during the transition back to more normal operations from September 2021.
- 2. Recovery measures should balance support for wellbeing and academic 'catch up'.** Government needs to provide adequate funding for recovery in future, and enable senior leaders sufficient flexibility to provide targeted support for wellbeing and enrichment as well as academic 'catch up'. This will enable schools to support pupils appropriately, according to their needs, especially those at key transition points.
- 3. There is an urgent need to tackle widening educational inequality.** There is growing evidence that the pandemic has increased inequality (see Crenna Jennings *et al.*, 2021; Howard *et al.*, 2021; Rose *et al.*, 2021). Measures needed to address this include:
 - a systematic digital access plan (especially as more schools move homework, revision and feedback online). In the medium term, there is a need for Government and schools to continue providing devices and connectivity to pupils who have no remote access. The Government also needs to find a longer-term solution to the digital divide.
 - a renewed focus on supporting vulnerable children and young people, including those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) (see also Skipp *et al.*, 2021).
 - recognition within the accountability system (especially National Curriculum Assessments and Ofsted inspections) for the fact that schools' experiences, and those of their pupils, have been unevenly impacted by the pandemic and that the effects are likely to be felt for a number of years. In addition, allowance should be made within the 2022 exams (and consideration of this in future years) for the fact that while the vast majority of pupils have missed classroom learning, some pupils have missed more than others. Ofqual have recently consulted on potential measures to mitigate these impacts for next year's exams, and schools will need to know the outcome from this process as soon as possible, or they will have insufficient time to support their pupils.

- 4. Although the intention is that schools will resume normal operations from September, they will need to prepare for the potential return of Covid protective measures and/or periods of remote learning.** This will become necessary if there are increases in rates of within-school transmission, or new Covid-19 variants. DfE has issued guidance to schools on how to determine whether protective measures may be needed, by recommending thresholds and courses of action. However, the guidance places decision-making in the hands of schools and local public health teams. It may be that more centralised directives are needed if there is a surge in within-school transmission. DfE should also have a 'Plan B' in place for examinations in 2022, outlining how pupils will be assessed if exams have to be cancelled.



Introduction

This qualitative study set out to investigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on mainstream schools and their pupils in summer 2021. It followed on from two national surveys in 2020 (Nelson and Sharp, 2020; Sharp *et al.*, 2020) which documented a range of negative impacts on pupils’ engagement and learning. Findings indicated that these impacts were more severe for pupils from deprived backgrounds (i.e. individuals eligible for free school meals (FSM)/pupil premium) and for schools serving deprived communities (schools with the highest proportion of pupils eligible for FSM).

The interviews reported here took place with 50 leaders of mainstream primary and secondary schools in England, most of which were serving disadvantaged areas. By the time the interviews took place (May and June 2021), almost all pupils had returned to school following three periods in which schools nationally were closed to the majority of their pupils: March – May 2020; June – July 2020; and January – March 2021. At the time of the interviews, school staff were observing strict infection control protocols while attempting to help their pupils recover from missed learning. The Government subsequently announced that social distancing measures in England would be lifted from 19 July 2021, though schools could choose to continue to implement them up to the end of the summer term.

The Government provided some funding to schools for general Covid recovery, academic tutoring and summer schools. In addition there was funding to train mental health leads and to establish wellbeing and mental health support teams in some schools. Total Covid-related spending on education between 2020-21 and 2024-25 is estimated to be around £3.1 billion¹ (National Audit Office, 2021).

This report expands on our interim report (Sharp and Nelson, 2021) and focuses on two main areas in particular: teaching and learning; and pupils’ wellbeing and mental health. It also considers how the pandemic has affected educational transition, and identifies pupils’ and schools’ immediate and longer-term support needs.

A separate study, led by ASK Research with support from NFER, has investigated the issues affecting special education (see Skipp *et al.*, 2021).

1 This does not include £195 million for exceptional Covid-19 costs, but it does include £408 million for teacher training and development, which would arguably be needed regardless of the pandemic.

1 Recovering teaching and learning

This section explores how schools were adapting their teaching and learning to help pupils make progress in spring and summer 2021. We identify approaches that could be particularly useful over future months, and years, as part of an education recovery strategy.

In-school social distancing

Most leaders felt that in-school social distancing was detrimental to high quality teaching, learning and wellbeing, and wanted to return to normal as soon as possible.

Our interim report (Sharp and Nelson, 2021) described the challenges schools faced in achieving high-quality teaching and learning while implementing social-distancing measures in classrooms and around their sites. The two-metre teacher-pupil distance rule in secondary schools, and classes seated in front-facing rows from Key Stage 2 upwards, restricted teachers’ ability to differentiate their teaching by ability, or to provide timely individual feedback to pupils about their work. It also limited opportunities for pupils to interact with, and learn from, one another.

Restrictions on movement around the school site, and on mixing class or year-group bubbles, minimised pupils’ access to specialist facilities such as labs or workshops, and to a range of enrichment or extra-curricular activities. Schools also found it difficult to provide targeted intervention work to pupils in need of extra support, because of the need to avoid cross-bubble contamination. In spite of these restrictions, schools developed a variety of creative teaching and learning approaches to try to help pupils recover and make progress.

Modifying the curriculum

Given the complex range of factors affecting education in 2021, it was inevitable that schools could not cover the full curriculum in their usual ways. Many of the leaders we spoke to said that, even with an extension to the length of the school day (which few favoured), this would not be possible.

Most leaders said that their schools were making modifications to the curriculum to make it manageable for pupils, and for teachers. They felt that curriculum modification was not necessarily problematic – if fact, if done well, it could be an effective way of helping pupils recover and move forward with their learning and wellbeing. In guidance to schools published since our interviews, the DfE acknowledged that schools would need to modify their curriculum offer (DfE, 2021).

Schools adopted various approaches to retaining balance in the curriculum, and to some extent in extra-curricular activities, while helping pupils re-connect with core literacy and numeracy skills. The following diagram summarises their approaches.

Four models of learning recovery through curriculum modification

1. Narrow	2. Focused	3. Blended	4. Continuous
Literacy and numeracy prioritised. Some subjects or enrichment activities reduced	All subjects covered. Some prioritisation of content within subjects	All subjects covered. Literacy and numeracy supported through other subjects	All subjects covered, but over a longer time period. Pupils are not bound to age-related targets
These schools 'traded off' subjects. The curriculum was not broad and balanced because they viewed re-claiming maths and literacy as paramount	These schools retained subject breadth by focusing on 'essential content' in each subject. They supported skills development through a reduced range of content examples	These schools viewed the curriculum holistically. Rather than reducing time for other subjects, they used them as a vehicle to develop literacy and/or numeracy	These schools took a non-linear view of the curriculum. It was viewed as a cycle to be constantly revisited. Pupils progress by 'stage, not age'
Common in primary Moderately common in secondary	Common in secondary Moderately common in primary	Moderately common in primary Rare in secondary	Moderately common in primary Rare in secondary

1. The narrow model

In order to concentrate on recovering pupils' core literacy and numeracy skills, schools adopting this model either removed a small number of foundation² subjects from the curriculum (most commonly arts subjects, modern foreign languages and design and technology (D&T)), or reduced time across all foundation subjects by teaching them in rotation/reducing lesson time. However, few restricted PSHE or PE lessons, which many leaders considered vital to pupils' wellbeing.

We're hitting [all subject] areas, but probably not as regularly as we perhaps would have done, because we've added in an extra phonics session here there and everywhere.
(Primary leader)

Secondary schools usually confined this strategy to Key Stage 3 where pupils were not following an exam syllabus.

Many schools had also ceased to offer, or had reduced, their wider enrichment curriculum and extra-curricular activities. This was largely because of social distancing measures, but was sometimes done to make room for catch up in literacy and numeracy.

² Foundation subjects are: art and design, citizenship, computing and information technology, D&T, languages, geography, history, music and PE.

The summer term would usually be more creative, particularly in the arts subjects, or drama would be doing performances... Some of those enrichment and creative aspects were left out [to make room for academic recovery], which was a shame. (Secondary leader)

Senior leaders whose schools adopted a 'narrow' curriculum tended to regret that pupils were missing out and have concerns about staff becoming de-skilled.

Some leaders noted that the reason for giving more time to numeracy and literacy was to ensure they met external accountability measures. On reflection, leaders were concerned that pupils were missing out on the wider curriculum.

There are definitely gaps there which for some children will be life changing... that might have been the beginning of their musical journey... There are significant gaps but not necessarily the ones that are measured by external agencies. (Primary leader)

Several also commented that their pupils were not making as rapid progress as they had hoped because they were not fully engaged. Teachers too suffered from the demands of a restricted curriculum focused on literacy and numeracy. Leaders in this group were most likely to report teacher fatigue and/or workload concerns. In particular, less experienced teachers were said to have reduced opportunities to acquire wider subject knowledge and pedagogical experience, which was demotivating and counter-productive to their development.

We need to look at how we can close the gap in teacher's expertise and teacher knowledge as much closing the children's gaps. (Primary leader)

Schools that adopted the other three models did so in order to retain a breadth of experience for pupils. They viewed it as important for pupils to recover core subject skills and knowledge, but were not prepared to do this at the expense of the wider curriculum.

There's always a perception that maths and English are more important. We've been fighting against that, so we felt it would be counterproductive to give more time to maths and English and tell other subjects they would have less time. (Secondary leader)

2. The focused model

Schools adopting this model gave each subject its usual curriculum time, but typically reduced the amount of subject *content* within that time and focused on essential *skills* within each area.

We're more interested in teaching them 'how to learn' in certain subject areas. It's not so much filling them up with facts, but more: 'If you wanted to know about Henry VIII and his wives, how would you find out about it? How would you know it was an unbiased account?' (Primary leader)

When you look at subjects, there are some essential prerequisites to the next stage of study... We've said to children that the destination is the same but the route we're going to take is different as we have less time to get there. (Secondary leader)

3. The blended model

Schools adopting this model prioritised a cross-curricular (thematic) approach, mostly using foundation subjects as a vehicle for numeracy and literacy. Alternatively, a few schools used core curriculum lessons (such as English, maths and science) to develop skills and knowledge in other subjects.

A cross-curricular approach to maths recovery

Primary school C ran a whole-school D&T week, which they used to develop maths skills including spatial awareness, rotation and shape. There had not been time to develop these skills within maths lessons, because teachers had spent much time helping pupils recover core number skills. This strategy had been developed to enable pupils to develop critical maths skills, whilst working on an extended D&T project.

A cross-curricular approach to wellbeing recovery

Primary school D used a 'big book' approach to help pupils talk about their feelings, while developing core literacy skills. Teachers planned a whole-school (Years 1-6) programme based around the same book. Staff used the book in lessons, to develop literacy, but also to help pupils feel connected to other children in the school, and as a vehicle for discussing issues related to the return to school, anxieties, and how to deal with these. The 'big book' approach successfully combined literacy and Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) content.

4. The continuous model

This approach was related to the pedagogic approach of 'sequencing and mastery' (outlined below). Schools using it focused on the stage of learning, rather than the age of the pupil. They believed that pupils' learning was rarely linear, with pupils often taking a few steps back, or reaching a plateau, before moving forward. These schools worked to ensure that pupils had mastered their current learning objectives before moving on to new ones. They took a longer-term view of the curriculum, working out which concepts were critical for pupils to master now, and which could be addressed at a later date.

We created a two-year plan – we figured it would probably take two years... We have a very clearly planned sequence of learning, so we know what has to be done first. For instance, in science, before you can do states of matter you've got to make sure they understand solids, liquids and gasses. (Primary leader)

They tended to have a whole-school approach, with year group teams keeping records about individual pupils' achievements and sharing these with colleagues. This approach tended to focus on 'phases of learning', rather than setting goals for each year group.

Leaders whose schools adopted a 'focused', 'blended' or 'continuous' curriculum, identified positive benefits such as a greater understanding of how pupils learn and improved teaching quality.

Leaders of schools which resisted narrowing their curriculum offer said that their modifications had helped staff understand the importance of clarity and precision in their teaching, to ensure that

pupils understood lesson objectives and key content before progressing; and the importance of revisiting key concepts regularly. They were said to be becoming better teachers as a result.

It's helped teachers reflect on what the most important things are that we're teaching and what to spend our time on. It's really helped the staff reflect on how we're delivering lessons... ensuring the children are active learners. (Primary leader)

Curriculum modification is inevitable in the current circumstances. Our findings suggest that there are different ways of doing this, and that some may be more effective than others – not just in retaining curriculum breadth, but also in achieving a positive experience for pupils and staff.

Other approaches

A small minority of schools (mainly primaries) had increased the amount of time spent on the core curriculum by **extending school hours**. They used catch-up funding to pay teachers or additional staff. In the case of **pupils identified as requiring additional support**, school leaders generally accepted that they would have to lose some curriculum time to receive targeted maths and literacy interventions. School leaders felt this was necessary because these pupils would be unable to access the wider curriculum without such support.

A few leaders had chosen not to make widespread changes to the curriculum because they had already adopted cross-curricular approaches pre-pandemic, had teachers experienced in helping children with learning gaps to recover, or their pupils had relatively less ground to make up. A few commented that they were unwilling to prioritise academic 'catch up' at the expense of the rest of the curriculum, or their pupils' wellbeing.

It would be interesting to monitor the longer-term implications of schools adopting these different curriculum models on pupils' progress and outcomes.

Modifying pedagogy

Many primary, and a few secondary, schools adjusted their pedagogy when pupils returned to school in March, in response to the large differences in pupils' knowledge and skills following the remote teaching period³.

Some primary schools had initially **slowed the pace of teaching** to help pupils re-acclimatise to school and learning and to avoid cognitive overload. They typically inserted short breaks into lessons so that content was delivered in manageable 'chunks' with fewer instructions. This built up pupils' stamina gradually, kept them engaged, and provided an opportunity for physical activity during breaks. Most leaders adopting this approach felt it was an essential measure for initial recovery but did not intend to retain it in the long term.

Other school leaders (both primary and secondary) said teachers had made changes to their pedagogy on the basis of the **evidence on how pupils learn**. Several were using sequencing and mastery approaches (Ofsted, 2019; EEF, 2021) while others were focusing on retrieval practice (Coe, 2019), helping pupils to recall and retain content from their remote learning, as well as to

³ A small number of leaders said they had not made any pedagogical adjustments, mainly because they felt their pre-existing strategies were already attuned to supporting pupils with large learning gaps.

acquire and embed new knowledge. These schools were typically applying curriculum models 2-4 (especially the continuous model) and most intended to retain these pedagogies.

Some leaders said that their modifications meant that staff were developing a more nuanced understanding of how pupils learn. Leaders also said that staff now really understood how to support the retention of knowledge in children's longer-term memory. One primary leader commented that staff had learned how long young children can truly concentrate, adding that their school would retain these approaches in future.

The biggest thing that we've learnt is that the constant reminding, repetition, re-visiting that we can do in a classroom, it really is the key to deep learning. (Primary leader)

Another added that their pupils were already making rapid progress:

Looking in the [children's] books, progress has been massive for virtually all of the children. Certainly, in terms of any worries about presentation or handwriting, they are not an issue at all now. (Primary leader)

Sequencing and mastery

In primary school E, teachers deliberately used sequencing to respond to the differences in pupils' engagement with lessons during remote teaching. They revisited lesson plans to build in new sequences to ensure that pupils were mastering key skills. But they were also responsive to pupil fatigue within lessons, by inserting breaks, dividing content into smaller chunks, or revising objectives, as needed.

The leader of primary school F explained their approach to mastery: *We've moved to journaling with the children, which is working really well... It's getting the children to think about the methodology and their explanations of their work... Those discussions bring to the front any misconceptions, which is what we needed after lockdown.*

Recalling and retaining new information

Some schools were using cognitive strategies such as repetition and quizzing to help pupils retrieve knowledge. They also used tools such as knowledge organisers and key vocabulary prompts to help pupils move knowledge from short- to long-term memory.

Teachers in primary school C already used a number of strategies to support memory recall. Since the start of the pandemic, the school provided teachers with enhanced training on the subject, which enabled them to support pupils with a wide range of learning needs. The school's leader said: *Pedagogically, what it is doing is making us much clearer about the subject-specific content, how we're teaching it, how we're making sure the children know it... the pandemic has shone a light that this work was really necessary.*

Most of the remote teaching and learning approaches used between January and March 2021 were not carried forward into class teaching.

There has been some speculation about the impact of Covid-19 on schools' adoption of technology and remote learning in future (see APPG for Education Technology, 2020; Fullan *et al.*, 2020;

Gibb, 2021). The school leaders we spoke to said they valued the approaches they had used to support pupils learning from home, but felt these were a poor replacement for face-to-face teaching. A few schools were choosing to use technologies they had adopted for remote teaching within the classroom. Examples included introducing more computer literacy work, using online resources to support in-class differentiation, providing opportunities for pupils to work on documents collaboratively, and more use of visualisers. Although many schools had used online resources for enrichment (for example, making virtual museum visits) or held assemblies online to ensure social distancing, they had no desire to retain these once normal operations resumed.

Though few were using more technology in the classroom, many schools, especially primaries⁴ were making greater use of online platforms for **homework** (setting, completing and submitting work), while others were making greater use of remote resources (such as recorded lessons) to support **revision**.

We now have a vast bank of resources that we have built up over time for our students, which is already proving useful for revision, particularly for our Year 11s and our Year 13s.
(Secondary leader)

Some were also using online platforms to give pupils **feedback on classroom learning** (an approach adopted since March 2021, to avoid the risk of transmitting Covid-19 through teachers handling pupils' books).

Schools were also attempting to provide education for pupils who were learning at home (largely because they were self-isolating), though doing so while teaching other pupils in person was a considerable challenge. Secondary schools tended to use live streaming to enable pupils to join lessons virtually. Some primary schools enabled whole bubbles of isolating pupils to do this, but rarely offered live lessons to individual pupils or small groups. Both primary and secondary leaders said their schools made materials available online for pupils who were learning at home, with some schools supplying pupils with digital devices and/or sending paper materials to pupils' homes.

The main use of remote technology was for meetings, rather than for teaching and learning. Many schools intended to retain **virtual parents' evenings** in future because they considered them less onerous for staff and parents than face-to-face meetings. Some leaders also said they intended to continue with **virtual staff, governor or partnership meetings** because this improved staff work-life balance and avoided the need for travel.

Implications

All of the leaders we spoke to were tackling a complex challenge – their schools were attempting to support learning and wellbeing recovery while also helping pupils to make progress. Many developed creative solutions without compromising on curriculum breadth. However, a minority chose to narrow their curriculum to focus on core subjects at the expense of the wider curriculum. School leaders rarely found this choice desirable, but often saw it as a necessary short-term response, driven by accountability concerns. The DfE and Ofsted will wish to reflect on whether the balance of incentives created by national assessments and the Ofsted inspection

⁴ Many secondary schools already used online platforms for homework tasks before the pandemic.

framework are creating the right environment to enable schools to deliver the best recovery approaches for their pupils.

The schools in our study which developed ‘focused’, ‘blended’ and ‘continuous’ curriculum approaches, and those using evidence-informed pedagogies, offer some interesting insights that may be of use to other schools as they consider how they will support pupils next year.

The different ways in which schools are seeking to tackle the challenges created by missed learning warrants a more detailed study to understand the relative impacts on children’s progress. While many of our schools’ curriculum and pedagogic approaches align with elements of the DfE’s guidance on teaching a broad and balanced curriculum (DfE, 2021), a sizeable proportion did not.

The variety of adaptations schools were using means that pupils have covered different aspects of the curriculum in different levels of depth, which has implications for individual pupils, schools and the education system as a whole – as well as for pupils’ transitions beyond secondary school and the on-going support they may need.

Although most schools were not using technology more in class teaching, there was an increased use of remote technology for homework and revision. Pupils will therefore need access to digital devices and internet connectivity in order to take part in these essential activities.

2 Recovering wellbeing and mental health

There is a body of quantitative research indicating an increase in wellbeing and mental health issues among children and young people since the pandemic (see Blanden *et al.*, 2020; NHS Digital, 2020; EIF, 2021a; Paul *et al.*, 2021). This chapter offers a deeper dive into the effects of Covid-19 on these issues, reported by 50 senior leaders in primary and secondary schools. It builds on the findings summarised in our interim report, published in July (Sharp and Nelson, 2021).

Most senior leaders were very concerned about wellbeing and mental health issues affecting their pupils, with many reporting an escalation as a result of the pandemic.⁵

Leaders felt the wellbeing and mental health of their pupils had deteriorated since the pandemic. **The most common symptom was anxiety.** Pupils were anxious about the dangers of Covid-19, for themselves and their families. Some pupils were experiencing separation anxiety: they were worried about leaving their parents and a few were refusing to attend school altogether (particularly pupils with SEND). Secondary leaders in particular said that some of their pupils were experiencing performance anxiety (fear of failure), were worried by the uncertainties surrounding national assessments, and had concerns about what their future held.

A substantial minority of senior leaders reported an increase in more severe mental health issues, resulting in threatened or actual self-harm, including attempted suicide.

Severe mental health issues were more commonly reported among older pupils, but were not confined to secondary schools.

The leader of Primary School A said the pandemic had exacerbated some pupils' problems. One pupil had previously suffered from low self-esteem, but this had escalated to talking about suicide. The school was providing as much support as possible to the pupil and their parents, but realised that external specialist support was required. The leader said: *'[It's] knowing where to signpost [parents] to and knowing that if you signpost to another service it's not going to be a six-month wait. [CAMHS] takes a really long time... We frequently get told: 'The child doesn't meet threshold'. We find that really disturbing: why do we have to wait until the child reaches a crisis point to meet threshold?'*

Secondary School A had 43 pupils on the mental health register, at different levels of severity and for a variety of reasons. This included a student who was seriously self-harming in school and staff were having to dress their deep cuts. Some students had been particularly affected by witnessing another pupil's suicide attempt. Staff were not able to support students to process their reactions to this incident as the school went into partial closure shortly after it happened. The senior leader was critical of external support: *'We refer to CAMHS but because of the waiting list they're pointless. If you've got to wait six months to support a child who is suicidal it's just no good. The CAMHS provision is so variable'*. The school increased its focus on mental health, including: having a mental health team and counsellors on-site; taking part in a pilot

⁵ Though most interviewees reported negative impacts on pupils' wellbeing and mental health, a minority said that smaller classes and social distancing had been positive for some pupils' wellbeing.

project with a mental health charity; training staff in how to support pupils; and holding assemblies and PSHE sessions on mental health.

Covid-19 increased the needs of pupils with existing vulnerabilities, but leaders also had concerns about pupils with no previous history of such issues.

We have seen children that have never historically had any concerns or inclinations that they will struggle with their mental health, or socially or emotionally, who are now an issue and have struggled immensely throughout the pandemic and coming back into school. (Primary leader)

Senior leaders also noticed an impact on pupils’ social skills, confidence and self-esteem.

Senior leaders, from primary schools in particular, had concerns about the impact of partial school closures and social isolation rules in schools on pupils’ social skills. This included pupils’ ability to maintain friendships and resolve conflicts.

It's really important to remember that that this pandemic has affected the core of humanity - the social interaction. We've noticed quite significantly that the social interaction and the way of relating to feelings to others has been affected. (Primary leader)

Leaders also described some pupils as withdrawn and not wanting to speak out in class. These pupils were said to be more emotional and less resilient, seeking reassurance from adults, and unlikely to take risks or even try hard due to fear of failure.

Some pupils had thrived during partial school closures but were struggling to adapt to larger groups.

Some senior leaders commented that pupils who attended school between January and March 2021 (especially vulnerable pupils and pupils with SEND) had temporarily ‘prospered’ due to continued routines, having more one-to-one support, and working in smaller groups. However, some pupils with SEND were reported to have struggled with the return to school since March 2021. This included both pupils who stayed at home and those who had attended school during the periods of partial school closure.

For the SEND children, actually, they did really well in lockdown, it's coming back that's been difficult because the rest of the class have returned and they've gone from being in a small group with their teacher and a teaching assistant who never left them, to being in a full class again. They've found it hard. (Primary leader)

The pandemic has also affected pupils’ physical health and skills for learning.

Some senior leaders, especially in primary schools, expressed concerns about pupils’ physical health, including weight gain, lack of fitness and fatigue. Some pupils were also showing signs of developmental delays (including speech and language development) and lacking ‘skills for learning’ (such as sitting still, listening and concentrating). This is discussed further in Section 3.

School leaders identified a range of Covid-related reasons for the escalation in issues.

According to senior leaders, the reasons for an increase in wellbeing issues included: social isolation during partial school closures; deprivation (such as living in poor, cramped conditions with no access to outside space); pupils’ exposure to inappropriate content on social media and the

internet; illness and death in the family; and increased parental anxiety, job insecurity and domestic conflict.

Wellbeing and mental health issues need to be addressed so pupils can learn.

Senior leaders emphasised the interrelationship between wellbeing and learning (see Smith *et al.*, 2021 and Wickersham *et al.*, 2021, for evidence of the relationship between mental health issues and poor academic performance). Many leaders said they needed to focus on wellbeing first, before academic learning could take place. One primary leader said: ‘Physical and mental wellbeing are really linked, teaching and learning and wellbeing, I can’t quite separate them’.

As outlined in our interim report (Sharp and Nelson, 2021), **staff wellbeing** was an issue too. Senior leaders were worried about the cumulative impacts of the pandemic on their staff.

Some senior leaders reported that pupils’ behaviour was good or better than before the pandemic whereas others said that some pupils’ behaviour had deteriorated.

Improved behaviour was said to result from pupils being happy to be back in school; getting back to routines; and being back in their safe place.

They have had their ultimate dream haven’t they... not having to get up for school... then they realise it’s pretty boring. Kids value being in school far more. (Secondary leader)

Some leaders said pupils benefited from fewer arguments because they were physically separated due to social distancing and remaining in bubbles. Behaviour was said to have improved for some pupils with SEND and those at risk of exclusion in particular, because they felt more secure working in bubbles with less movement around the school.

Senior leaders who identified an increase in poor behaviour often linked this with wellbeing and mental health issues.

We know that some of our students have lived through really difficult times... that issue of not being able to get out and away from it [because they were constantly at home during lockdown]... can lead to behaviour issues, but we know that underneath it, it’s their wellbeing that is the problem. (Secondary leader)

A few senior leaders described examples of social distancing measures leading to altercations, because pupils were spending so much time with the same classmates. Examples of more extreme behaviour reported by a minority included use of inappropriate or sexualised language and more severe cases of aggression. However, the majority of leaders said they were no more likely to use permanent exclusion than they had been pre-pandemic.

Schools prioritised providing support for pupils, and their families.

Several senior leaders said they were unable to get the professional help their pupils needed. Primary and secondary leaders wanted external support for pupils with more severe issues, including mental health needs. As one leader commented, ‘It is those extremes that we are not trained to deal with’. There was frustration with CAMHS in particular, with reports of high thresholds, long waiting lists, and inadequate provision.

There needs to be a significant improvement in CAMHS because children currently either need to have attempted or be close to suicide to be able to access support from them.
(Primary leader)

Making a referral to CAMHS these days is almost impossible. They don't have the capacity to help. (Secondary leader)

Some senior leaders expressed frustration with other services, including educational psychologists, speech and language therapists, special needs teams and social care – mainly due to a lack of capacity to meet demand, causing long delays in children getting support, but also due to a suspension of face-to-face provision to avoid spreading the virus. However, there were a few positive examples of schools accessing specialist external support for pupils' mental health and wellbeing through multi-agency working.

Primary School B was involved in a pilot project with CAMHS, who were running group sessions for pupils on anxiety management. Some vulnerable pupils were also attending play theory sessions run by a local charity.

Secondary School B used outside agencies who provided counselling and mentoring for pupils. They also accessed a local violence reduction unit, which provided counselling to children who were at risk of criminal exploitation.

Our interim report (Sharp and Nelson, 2021) described the ways in which schools themselves were supporting pupils and families. Some adopted a whole-school approach with a member of staff responsible for wellbeing/mental health. They often used similar strategies to address behaviour, wellbeing and less severe mental health concerns. Leaders described how, once pupils returned to school, staff worked hard to re-create a calm and positive environment, re-establish routines, reinforce social skills, and provide enrichment activities (including Physical Education (PE) and outdoor learning). A few primary leaders mentioned that their adjustments were influenced by the principles of the 'Recovery Curriculum' advocated by Carpenter and Carpenter (2021). Some had carried out wellbeing assessments or surveys with pupils, and occasionally with parents, to identify pupils' wellbeing, engagement and readiness for learning.

Most leaders had increased their whole-school pastoral support and made additional time for PSHE and wellbeing activities, such as class assemblies and/or circle time. Several leaders emphasised the importance of talking to pupils about their feelings and needs: 'It's something we talk about. It's important they talk'. Schools had invested in staff training on mental health, including the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences and how to support pupils' wellbeing. Some were employing specialist staff, including: emotional literacy support assistants (ELSAs); learning and engagement mentors; mental health first aiders; counsellors; psychotherapists; and family support workers. There were many examples of schools increasing their work with families.

Primary School C had increased the time staff were spending supporting families, because they found it difficult to access social care services: 'We are lucky to have a learning mentor who can provide this support, but this takes her away from providing academic support to the children. There used to be other services that would provide this support to families'.

Secondary School C had increased specialist provision on site. The senior leader explained: 'Covid has put mental health much more as a central focus on the agenda. It was relatively easy

for me to prove I needed to spend £60k on getting a psychotherapist on site five days a week from September. We have a school counsellor anyway but it wasn't enough'. The school had also created new engagement mentors to re-engage pupils, trained staff on how to support pupils who had experienced trauma, and increased support for staff wellbeing.

Some senior leaders commented that it was hard to provide wellbeing support for their pupils, due to a lack of funding and expertise, or concerns about staff workload and capacity to meet increasing demands. Covid-19 restrictions also meant that some strategies were not possible, because specialist staff could not work across bubbles, or use shared spaces (such as inclusion units or therapy rooms).

A recent review (Clarke *et al.* 2021) provides evidence of the effectiveness of interventions to address pupils' mental health in secondary schools. The review found that whole-school, curriculum-based social and emotional learning interventions can have a positive impact on the development of pupils' social and emotional skills, which were found to act as a shield for mental health problems and other negative outcomes later in life. For pupils with symptoms of depression and/or anxiety, cognitive behaviour therapy interventions delivered by professionals were found to have the most positive impact. The report identifies the need for schools to develop strong links with mental health services to support the most vulnerable young people.

Implications

Since all pupils returned to school in March 2021, there has been an increase in concerns about pupils' wellbeing and mental health. The schools in our study are working hard to support pupils, and their families, and several increased their focus on wellbeing and created internal staff capacity in the absence of specialist external support. However, schools need a multi-agency approach, as they do not have the funds, expertise or time to meet increasing demands or support specialist needs. Yet not enough external support is available.

Early intervention is critical to avoid escalation (see EIF, 2021b; Social Mobility Commission, 2021). The potential impacts of failing to address these issues are:

- a continuation of negative impacts on children's health and wellbeing
- an escalation of anxiety, emotional and behavioural issues into more severe mental health issues
- an ongoing inability of pupils to engage effectively in learning
- a negative impact on parents, families and other pupils
- an increase in staff workload and stress, which could also impact on staff retention.

For certain individuals, their wellbeing has benefitted from establishing routines and remaining in a bubble. The return to 'normal' will therefore need careful management in schools.

3 Recovering opportunity: education transitions

Education transition offers new opportunities, but it can also be an unsettling time for pupils, especially for those who are vulnerable (Evans *et al.*, 2010). It is particularly important for pupils to establish positive relationships with new peers and staff (Jindal-Snape *et al.*, 2020). Teachers are experienced in supporting transition but the pandemic has disrupted their usual expectations and activities. This section explores the transition issues that schools and pupils were experiencing.

Almost all the leaders we interviewed thought that transition year groups had not made as good a transition as usual in 2020 and predicted this would also be the case in 2021.

Transition to Nursery, Reception and Year 1

Primary leaders were concerned about the emotional and academic readiness of their youngest pupils because the pandemic represents a large proportion of their lives. Some children had not attended pre-school toddler groups and had missed opportunities to develop social and relationship-building skills before starting school. Leaders noticed an increase in Reception pupils lacking social skills and independence.

A few primary leaders mentioned an increase in children starting Nursery and, even Reception, without being toilet trained⁶. One explained the practical implications of this.

[It takes] learning time away, because an adult has to go and support a child who needs to be changed... The [other] children are having to stop whatever activities they're doing... We've got one child who needs changing a number of times throughout the day. If each of those is 10 minutes, there's an hour a day lost. (Primary leader).

Concerns about **academic readiness** included poor speech and language, a lack of concentration and, for Reception children, not being ready to move to more formal learning. Many primary leaders said their Reception children were not meeting their expected Early Learning Goals (this was also reported in research by Nash *et al.*, 2021).

In that summer term [Reception children, normally] start spending more time independently learning and spending more time maybe sitting and writing for longer periods of time.... all of those sorts of stages in development seem to have sort of hit a hiatus. (Primary leader).

Year 1 pupils were said to have poor stamina for learning and to lack word recognition or the ability to write simple letters. Some leaders said they intended to carry the Foundation Stage curriculum forward into Year 1, in order to support children's transition to more formal learning.

A minority of primary leaders said children's transition experience was not affected because they provided all-through education from Nursery to Reception on one site. This meant that Nursery pupils were already sharing facilities with Reception pupils and were familiar with staff and routines. It was more difficult for schools drawing Nursery pupils from several settings to arrange a smooth transition. One school had offered free Nursery places to parents of pupils who were due to join Reception in the following September, to help children become familiar with the school.

⁶ We did not ask about this topic directly – these interviewees chose to raise this issue with us.

Transition between Year 6 and Year 7

The main concern about transition to secondary school was that pupils were not **emotionally prepared**. The primary and secondary leaders we spoke to believed that prolonged periods of isolation had been detrimental to pupils in Years 6 and 7. Many primary leaders told us that their Year 6 pupils were unusually anxious about the move to secondary school and some were feeling overwhelmed by the move. This was exacerbated when pupils were unable to visit the school they would be moving to, or had only had a virtual transition event.

We're getting the communication through from the secondaries now about transitional arrangements [online only]. It doesn't sound very inspiring, which I know isn't anybody's fault. It's not going to do the job it needs to do. I do think there will be pupils who turn up to their new schools not feeling the most confident. (Primary leader)

However, in recognition of these concerns, several secondary leaders said they had made Covid-safe arrangements for their teachers to visit primary schools and for primary pupils to visit their schools. A few mentioned prioritising vulnerable pupils for additional support (for example, through individual transition plans, visits and/or inviting them to a summer school⁷).

As noted earlier, several secondary leaders said that their current Year 7 pupils' behaviour had been more challenging, or that pupils lacked maturity, independence and even good manners.

They haven't learned what it's like to belong to [our school] in Year 7 because they haven't been in school for a significant part of Year 7. So, we haven't got the culture and ethos embedded in them in the way that we would want to do. (Secondary leader)

Although some Year 7 pupils were said to have benefitted from staying in a year-group bubble, this had delayed their socialisation with older pupils. Schools will need to support these pupils to mix with others as the bubble system is removed.

Only a small minority of primary and secondary leaders raised concerns about pupils' academic readiness to move to secondary school. They acknowledged some content gaps, but felt that these could be made up during Key Stage 3. Also, the removal of National Curriculum Assessments had given schools time to focus on recovering learning (as distinct from preparing for tests). Primary leaders were typically more concerned about pupils' maturity and independence.

Year 6, I think they're going to have quite a wake-up organisationally and motivationally. I think they will be ready to go [to secondary school], but I think their ability to organise themselves and manage a more rigorous timetable will be challenging, and just their stamina for learning. (Primary leader)

Transition in Year 11 and Year 13

Secondary leaders were divided on whether they thought older pupils were well prepared for transition. Due to the removal of national examinations in 2020 and 2021, pupils in Years 11, 12 and 13 were said to lack **examination practice** (including learning to deal with pressure and developing resilience) **and also analytic skills**. Some senior leaders were concerned that their pupils were not well prepared for the move to the sixth form, or university.

⁷ The DfE made £200m funding available to secondary and special schools to run a summer school in 2021.

They're not ready [Year 11s]. Them, and Year 12s... the fact that the first time they will sit public exams will be A Levels, which are really the first high stakes exams they do, is very scary. (Secondary leader)

Year 13s aren't ready for the next step. A Levels are so challenging. They have missed out on developing essay skills, enquiry skills... they've just not had that. I don't think they're ready for university... I worry for them. (Secondary leader)

Leaders reported that pupils were anxious because of a lack of clarity about assessments in 2022.

I'd like to have thought that someone who was in a position of authority thought 'well, what might happen if we're in a similar position as we were last summer, with no public examinations?'. (Secondary leader)

Secondary leaders were also concerned about pupils moving on to FE colleges or work-based learning. A few predicted a rise in the number of pupils who might become NEET (not in education, employment or training). For example, one said five per cent of their Year 11 pupils were NEET in 2020 compared to none in previous years.

Leaders who had fewer concerns about Year 11-13 pupils' readiness for transition expressed a relative, rather than an absolute, lack of concern. They explained that these pupils had often coped better with remote learning than younger children, because they were more independent, and had more advanced study skills. They were also able to engage better with virtual transition events. Secondary schools were supporting Year 11-13 pupils in various ways. These included catch-up tutoring, and the provision of online 'next steps' preparation activities such as virtual careers adviser meetings, work experience tasters, university interviews, and alumni and employer talks.

Implications

The pandemic has made it more difficult for pupils to make positive transitions, and to develop as confident, well-rounded young people. Despite schools' best efforts, many pupils have experienced a reduced transition offer which has, at best, left them ill-prepared and, at worst, anxious or lacking in confidence.

Provided that the removal of all Covid-19 restrictions is sustained in the 2021/22 academic year, these challenges will hopefully become a thing of the past for new cohorts of pupils. However, schools will need to be aware of the continuing Covid-related wellbeing issues – as well as any gaps in children's academic learning – and be prepared to offer higher levels of wellbeing and learning support than usual, particularly to cohorts of pupils who made their transitions in September 2020 and 2021.

While Year 11-13 pupils have generally coped better with transition than younger pupils, some are still anxious about their futures. One driver is the lack of clarity of expectation around public examinations and the transition to further and higher education and employment next year and beyond.

4 Pupils' and schools' support needs

We asked senior leaders for their views on the most immediate and medium- to longer-term support needs for their pupils and schools.

Leaders wanted to get back to normal and called for clarity on curriculum and assessment.

Leaders felt the immediate priority was to get back to normal as soon as possible, by creating predictable routines and establishing positive learning environments for pupils.

We need to get back to basics. We need students to get used to taking part again in a high quality way and to get used to learning again. That's the short-term. Back to normal is what we need. (Secondary leader)

At the time of the interviews (May/June 2021), leaders urgently wanted clarity from Government about the focus of the curriculum, assessments and examinations. The subsequent guidance on the recovery curriculum (DfE, 2021) and the consultation on assessment arrangements in 2022 (Ofqual and DfE, 2021) will no doubt be welcomed by leaders, but they really wanted this information much sooner.

We need an urgent discussion about how we're going to move forward with pupil learning and pupil curriculum. Until that happens, we are all in a ridiculous situation where we are all trying to second guess what might or might not happen. (Secondary leader)

Senior leaders identified wellbeing and mental health as needing the most urgent support.

Addressing pupils' wellbeing and mental health was leaders' top priority, to ensure pupils were able to learn and to prevent any longer-term harm.

If you talk in broad economic terms for the future, the more likelihood that we can't sort out the wellbeing now, the more likelihood is that there will be future support needed for whatever reason, whether it be teenage CAHMS, whether it be adult mental health, whether they're not fulfilling their earning potential which then doesn't bring in the taxes... We do need a long-term view. (Primary leader)

However, as explained in Section 2, leaders faced obstacles in trying to support pupils' mental health – particularly in the more extreme cases which they identified as 'beyond our remit'. Given their experience of insufficient external specialist support, leaders wanted more Government investment in specialist services, such as CAMHS and social care.

We need a significant step-up of investment to deal with the impact of the short-term social and emotional difficulties. That could be an increase in capacity or funding for schools to access specialist counselling services, but also ensuring the NHS statutory services, like CAMHS and social workers, are fully present to support young people's needs. (Secondary leader)

Leaders also said they needed more funding to train their existing staff and to recruit more specialist staff to support pupils' wellbeing.

Most leaders thought academic recovery was an ongoing issue that would continue to require support in the medium/longer-term.

School leaders set out their ongoing priorities for supporting learning. Primary leaders, for instance, talked about the urgent need for pupils to recover and develop basic skills (such as reading, writing, and language development). However, leaders viewed the Government's emphasis on academic 'catch up' as unhelpful and wanted a holistic approach, with an equal focus on emotional recovery and enrichment alongside academic support.

I am concerned that the Government's academic 'catch-up' focus is moving a lot of resource into that area at the expense of the work we need to do with them [pupils] to build whole, rounded, young people. (Secondary leader)

Leaders stressed that the extent of recovery was considerable and would not be 'a quick fix'. Estimates ranged from about another year (i.e. until the end of the 2021/22 academic year), a further two or three years (i.e. within a key stage), to seven years or more. One secondary leader predicted that there will still be an impact in ten years' time, when pupils in the early years of primary school will be completing their secondary education.

Leaders also pointed out that the length of recovery will vary for individual pupils, depending on: the extent of pupils' engagement with learning during the period of partial school closure; pupils' home lives and how much they have been affected during the pandemic; and pupils' individual needs including SEND and mental health.

Most schools were continuing to face specific obstacles in recovering from the pandemic.

As described in Section 1, schools had a variety of recovery strategies in place. However, most leaders also identified considerable obstacles to recovery. Primary leaders in particular talked about the substantial challenge of addressing learning gaps across an already over-crowded curriculum, though several commented that they were not in favour of extending the school day to make room for catch up (this echoes national survey findings – see Nelson *et al.*, 2021).

We're talking 12 to 14 subjects and it's just trying to fit it in. I know the response will be to have a longer school day, but these children are tired by 3:30pm. We can't cram anything more into them that way. (Primary leader)

As described in Section 1, some schools had narrowed the curriculum to focus on the core subjects, due to concerns about accountability. Leaders felt that **accountability** measures should take account of the fact that schools have been differently impacted by the pandemic and many will still be in recovery for years to come. They wanted Government to acknowledge that pupils could not be immediately expected to reach pre-pandemic attainment levels.

The Year 5 class [who] are going to become Year 6 missed out on Year 4 and Year 5 aspects. But we're still expecting them to be at a Year 6 level by next May [for National Curriculum Assessments]. How long that's going to take to catch up I just don't know. (Primary leader)

Several leaders also called for inspections to be suspended.

Ofsted are a huge barrier at the moment, as we are trying to come to terms what our problems are. We need to re-socialise [the students]. There is just groundwork that needs to be done before we even need to begin to think about a new [inspection] framework.

Leaders said that a lack of funding was a considerable barrier to recovery.

Several of the leaders we interviewed said that their school finances were in deficit. This is not surprising, given the existing pressures on school budgets, especially in schools serving deprived communities (Julius *et al.*, 2021). Many leaders said their schools' finances had suffered during the pandemic from additional expenditure to make schools Covid-secure, and a reduction in income (for example, from school meals and extra-curricular activities). Some had also lost income due to recent changes in school funding.

We're making cuts to our staffing because we can't afford it because the fairer funding formula has absolutely annihilated us. Also the change from the pupil premium not being done in January⁸ has lost me about ninety thousand pounds, which is two full time teachers.
(Primary leader)

Leaders felt that the Government's 'catch-up' funding was insufficient. Senior leaders wanted adequate funding for recovery which they could deploy flexibly to meet the needs of their pupils. Many leaders said they would have preferred to spend funds on increasing their own staff capacity to support individuals or small groups of pupil with specific needs, rather than on external tutors through the National Tuition Programme (NTP).

I would like to be able to use some of the funds currently available from Government in ways that I think are in the best interests of my students and my school. (Secondary leader)

I didn't want to throw my money at some online tutor... they are not the right people to be tutoring the children. (Primary leader)

Implications

In identifying pupils' and schools' immediate and longer-term support needs, leaders reiterated that their priorities are to get back to normal as soon as possible, to adopt a holistic approach to emotional, academic and enrichment recovery and to achieve the right levels of wellbeing and mental-health support for their pupils.

They have serious concerns about achieving such recovery however, given their perception that the curriculum is over-crowded, and the constraints posed by restricted or deficit budgets. They would like the Government to acknowledge that it will take time for pupils to achieve their pre-pandemic attainment levels, and to allow for this in the accountability system, particularly in Ofsted inspection arrangements. They call for an urgent increase in funding (both for schools and support services), and for flexibly in funding arrangements so that school leaders can deploy resources based on the specific needs of pupils and staff in their schools).

⁸ In 2020, the DfE changed their calculation of pupil premium funding from using the number of pupils eligible in January to using the number eligible in the previous October. This meant that pupils who became eligible between October 2020 and January 2021 were not included in the 2021 funding allocations.

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Appendix A Research objectives and methodology

Research objectives and themes of enquiry

This qualitative research was part of a larger study, jointly funded by the Nuffield Foundation and NFER. It builds on findings from two national surveys of mainstream primary and secondary schools, administered in May and July 2020⁹. The qualitative phase explored the continuing impact of Covid-19 on schools and pupils in England. It had three research objectives (ROs):

- **RO1:** Identify the immediate and medium/longer-term impacts of the pandemic on teaching and learning, and on pupils’ wellbeing and mental health.
- **RO2:** Identify priorities for schools and pupils as they emerge from the pandemic, including support needs in the immediate and medium/longer-term, and positive developments that should be capitalised on.
- **RO3:** Consider how the sector can best prepare itself for future shocks, preserve high quality teaching and learning and protect pupils’ wellbeing and mental health.

Research questions were structured around two themes of enquiry (TE):

- **TE1 –Teaching and learning:** Changes to curriculum and pedagogy since the return of all pupils to school in March 2021; impacts of in-school social distancing; retention of remote teaching and learning approaches; and support for self-isolating pupils.
- **TE2 – Wellbeing:** Effects of the pandemic on pupils’ wellbeing, mental health and behaviour; effects on pupils’ preparedness for their next steps; how schools are supporting pupils; what additional support they need; and barriers to achieving that support.

The qualitative phase of the research focused on schools serving deprived populations because we knew from our previous research and other evidence that these schools and pupils have been most seriously affected by the pandemic (see Andrew *et al.*, 2020; Nelson and Sharp, 2020; Sharp *et al.*, 2020).

Methodology and interviewee selection

Approach

The qualitative phase comprised in-depth interviews (undertaken by telephone or video call) with 50 senior leaders across schools in England. The research team used interviews for this part of the study in order to enable a detailed exploration of the complex issues involved. Telephone/video was selected rather than face-to-face interviews, as we have previously established that this method is less time-consuming and more convenient for school staff. However, in this case, interviews had to be conducted remotely, due to the infection control measures in place at the time. Interviews took place in May and June 2021 and each lasted around 45 minutes. All interviewees were trained and experienced qualitative researchers who received a detailed briefing before contacting schools.

The participating leaders had taken part in one or both of the 2020 surveys, and had given their permission to be contacted again. Interviewees were headteachers and principals, deputy

⁹ See: <http://www.nfer.ac.uk/news-events/nfer-spotlight/covid-19-recovery/>

headteachers or assistant headteachers. We asked all interviewees a common set of questions from a semi-structured interview schedule. To minimise burden, we presented them with the option of spending more time talking about either teaching and learning, or pupils’ wellbeing, ensuring that the final 50 interviews had an even balance across the themes.

Interviewee selection

The table below shows the key variables for interviewee selection. These were: phase (primary/secondary); and level of school deprivation (measured by quintile of school-level FSM eligibility). The table shows that the achieved interviewee selection was in line with the selection criteria.

Table 1.1. Selection criteria and achieved interviewee selection

Selection criteria	Achieved selection
Approximately two primary leaders to every secondary leader (these proportions mirrored responses by phase in the 2020 surveys)	Primary leaders = 34 Secondary leaders = 16 Total = 50
All leaders to represent schools in the highest, second highest or middle FSM quintile	Highest quintile = 22 Second highest quintile = 27 Middle quintile = 1 ¹⁰ Total = 50

The research team used an ‘over-sampling’ approach, to allow for non-response, refusal and drop out. There was a relatively large pool to draw from of 334 senior leaders who had completed one or both of the 2020 surveys, and had agreed to be re-contacted: 240 of these were primary leaders, 89 were secondary leaders and five worked in ‘all-through’ schools.

The team developed separate selection frames for primary and secondary leaders. Within each frame we created ‘clusters’ of three potential interviewees. These comprised:

1. a preferred interviewee (usually someone working in a highest-FSM quintile school)
2. a first reserve interviewee (usually someone working in a highest or second highest, FSM quintile school)
3. a second reserve interviewee (usually someone working in a second highest or middle, FSM quintile school).

We contacted potential interviewees by email and telephone, with the intention of working through each cluster of three until we achieved a booking. However, if the ‘preferred’ contact in one cluster was quick to agree to an interview, the second reserve contact in another cluster could be substituted with the first reserve contact from the achieved cluster, in order to maximise the number of achieved interviews from the most deprived schools. Our achieved interviewee selection was as follows: 30 preferred interviewees (19 primary; 11 secondary); 19 first reserves (14 primary; five secondary); and one second reserve (a primary).

¹⁰ When this senior leader completed the 2020 survey, they were working in a school with a higher level of FSM. In September 2020 they moved to a school in the middle quintile of FSM and responded in relation to their new school.

Interviewees were geographically distributed, with eight regions of England represented. Almost two-thirds were based in schools in Yorkshire and the Humber, the North West, and London. This pattern reflects the national distribution of deprivation, with these regions having higher than average levels of deprivation compared to the rest of England. Disadvantaged populations also tend to be located in urban areas. The majority of interviewees were working in urban schools, though the sample included three leaders of primary schools in rural areas.

Study limitations

As this phase of the study is qualitative and relatively small in scale, the findings are not necessarily typical of leaders of disadvantaged schools nationally. Also, information on pupils' needs is based on senior leaders' views and does not necessarily reflect the views of pupils themselves. We did not collect data direct from the young people themselves or their parents.

Appendix B Data recording and analysis

Recording

The research team audio recorded all interviews with school senior leaders. The researcher took detailed notes in script form, accompanied by verbatim quotations, using the recording to ensure accuracy. In addition to compiling detailed interview scripts, the team produced a summary of each interview, which identified key findings against the thematic areas (TEs) (see Appendix A). These summaries supported drafting of the interim report, while the coding frame for full analysis was under development. Both interview scripts and summaries were subjected to quality assessment by the Principal Investigator or project leader, to ensure consistency between interviewers. The team held regular meetings during data collection and analysis so that any questions or issues could be resolved and communicated across the team.

Analysis

Analysis was undertaken in two, overlapping, phases.

In phase 1, the summaries were grouped into themes and sub-question areas, using Excel, and then key points were extracted and synthesised. This process included frequent references to the full interview scripts for clarification and to ensure consistency between summaries. In Phase 2, we developed a detailed coding frame within the software package MAXQDA, for analysis of the full interview scripts. The summary analysis, and coding frame development took place concurrently, with the two developments informing one another.

The research team conducted the main analysis within MAXQDA. First, we imported approximately half of the scripts, and used these to develop the detailed coding frame. The frame was developed both deductively and inductively. We developed high-level pre-populated codes, which aligned with the TEs; then we developed a range of detailed sub-codes, which were driven by the content of the scripts. The project leader developed the coding frame, and the Principal Investigator verified it. Once all scripts were imported into MAXQDA, the research team coded each script consistently, assigning relevant codes and sub-codes to each segment of text. A small number of new sub-codes were identified during this process. These were discussed by the team, approved by the

project leader and applied consistently by all members of the research team. Finally, analysis was undertaken thematically by both overarching TEs, and sub-codes.

Appendix C Research ethics and data protection

Ethics

The research team carefully considered the ethical issues associated with this study.

All prospective interviewees were volunteers and the research team avoided putting them under pressure to take part. Our selection criteria (see Appendix A) enabled us to contact a reserve interviewee quickly if the preferred interviewee did not respond to initial requests.

The invitation email informed interviewees about the study's purpose and intended outcomes. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher stated the aims and objectives of the research, and the way in which data would be reported. Researchers explained that all comments would be treated in strictest confidence, with no individuals (or schools) identified in any study outputs.

Researchers also explained how the interview would proceed, making sure participants were aware that it was voluntary and that they could stop at any time. Interviewees were reminded of the time requirement, and asked for their consent to have the interview recorded. Recording only went ahead if the interviewee consented (all interviewees did so). Researchers checked that each participant was happy with these points before proceeding with the interview.

The team sent a summary of initial findings, and a link to the published interim report, to all senior leaders who took part. We will follow the same process on publication of this full research report.

Data protection

The research study was fully compliant with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). All prospective interviewees were sent a link to the study's privacy notice¹¹ in the invitation email. This outlined how participants' personal data would be lawfully collected, processed, stored and destroyed.

We stored details of our interviewee sampling pool and achieved interviewee selection in a protected area of NFER's IT system, which was inaccessible to staff outside the research team. All interview voice recordings were saved in the same site. Interview notes and summaries were written up using ID numbers (rather than the names of the interviewees or their schools) so that comments could not be traced back to individuals. Any potentially disclosive information (such as people's names) was removed from scripts.

NFER did not identify any participating schools or individuals to anyone outside the research team, or outside of NFER.

¹¹ See: https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/4421/cvqu_privacy_notice.pdf

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The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berks SL1 2DQ
T: +44 (0)1753 574123 • F: +44 (0)1753 691632 • enquiries@nfer.ac.uk

www.nfer.ac.uk

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