The Impact of Covid-19 on Early Years Transition to School Research Report

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Research Report

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the project

The transition to primary school is a critical period for children and their families. During this time, children experience a novel and qualitatively different environment with increased demands and expectations, which can lead to higher levels of anxiety and stress (Cowan et al., 2005; Pianta, Cox, & Snow, 2007; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003; Ramey & Ramey, 2010). Half of children are reported by their teachers to have difficulty adjusting to formal schooling (DeMeo Cook & Coley, 2017; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta & Cox, 2000). Successful transition predicts later school achievement, socio-emotional outcomes, and well-being with sustained long-term benefits (OECD, 2017; Burrell & Bubb, 2000).

Transition practices are especially critical for children identified as having Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) who need to receive appropriate support during transition tailored to their individual and their families’ needs (Connolly & Gersch, 2016; Rodriguez, Cumming, & Strnadova, 2017). Transition practices therefore must be flexible and appropriate for children with varying profiles.

Currently, there are no existing government guidelines around effective transition practices and no statutory requirement for schools to offer an induction or transition period. As a result, the practice depends on local advice or on the approach of each receiving school (PHE, 2014). This variation could potentially further disadvantage children with SEND who need additional and flexible support to prepare them for school and manage their transition to formal schooling.

1.2 Current Context and Research Rationale

There is an urgent need to understand the impact of COVID-19 on educational institutions and child outcomes. With the first national lockdown in March 2020, the mandated closures of educational settings and social distancing measures, transition practices were severely disrupted and support for the transition of young children from nursery to school was limited. It was hypothesised that closures of educational
institutions and reductions in learning opportunities, family support services and positive transition practices would have a disproportionately negative impact on children with identified SEND and would therefore exacerbate existing educational inequalities.

1.3 Research Aims, Research Questions and Outline of Data Collection

In July 2020, the Bristol City Council Early Years Team commissioned an academic team at the University of Bristol (the first two authors of the current report) to investigate the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on early years transitions to school, with a focus on young children with SEND. The project had three main objectives:

1. Document changes to typical transition practices and explore educational professionals’ perspectives and experiences in the way they navigate the crisis to prepare children in their first year of formal schooling.
2. Investigate how educational professionals can best support the most vulnerable children through their first year of schooling to mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. Inform local decision making about how educational settings can most effectively support transition to school (with a focus on children with SEND) in a situation where normal preparations have been adversely affected.

The project will achieve these aims through focused knowledge exchange and dissemination activities to influence the developing policy-response to Covid-19, the long-term support provided and disseminate good practice around early years transitions in general.

We adopted a sequential mixed-methods research design to provide a more detailed picture of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on early years transitions to enable us to document change over time and from different perspectives. We focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on all children starting school, but particularly children with SEND and explored perspectives of all key stakeholders.

Our research questions were:
1. What are early years settings and primary schools typical transition practices, and how, if at all, are these altered in response to the COVID-19 pandemic for this year’s cohort of children?

2. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, what school transition practices have been positive and should be built upon (with a reference to children with SEND)?

3. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, what are educational professionals’ views on how children (with a reference to children with SEND) can best be prepared and supported in their first year of schooling?

Data collection took place in two phases: Phase 1 took place in the Summer 2020 before children were due to start school (July and August 2020); Phase 2 took place following children starting school (October – December 2020).

Our methods of data collection were as follows:

Phase 1 (July – August 2020):

1. An online survey was sent to Early Years Coordinators/Reception teachers of all 95 Bristol primary schools asking them to report transition practices they typically engage with, how these have been affected to date by the COVID-19 pandemic and how they plan to tailor these for this year’s cohort of children. We probed for practices designed with and without reference to SEND.

2. An online survey was sent to all 23 Children’s Centres and 200 early years settings asking them to share their experiences of supporting children and their families, to report transition practices they typically engage with, how these have been affected to date by the Covid-19 pandemic and how they plan to tailor these for this year’s cohort of children. We probed for practices designed with and without references to SEND.

Phase 2 (September – December 2020):

3. Semi-structured interviews with 10 Early Years Coordinators/Reception Teachers inviting them to document their experiences of transition and reflect on what transition practices were positive and should be built upon. We probed for positive practices with and without reference to SEND. We also explored their views about children’s adjustment to formal schooling and the impact of Covid-19 on children’s development.
Participants were identified by asking respondents to the Phase 1 schools’ online survey above to indicate their willingness to participate in a future interview.

### 2. Results from Phase 1

#### 2.1 Early Years Settings Survey Results

##### 2.1.1 Early Years Settings Demographics

Between July and September 2020, 24 early years settings completed the online survey. Respondents worked in a nursery within a primary school ($N=7$, 29%), a private early years setting ($N=12$, 40%), or a voluntary and independent setting ($N=5$, 23%).

In the academic year 2019-2020, 13 settings (56.5%) reported that they had more than 30 children enrolled in the preschool year group, 3 settings (13%) reported that they had 11 to 15 children enrolled in the preschool year group, 2 settings (9%) reported that they had 16-20 children enrolled in the preschool year group, 2 settings (9%) reported that they had 20-25 children enrolled in the preschool year group, 2 settings (9%) reported that they had 25-30 children enrolled in the preschool year group, and 1 setting (4%) reported that they had fewer than 10 children enrolled in the preschool year group. The remaining settings did not answer this question.

11 settings had one preschool class in their setting (50%), 8 settings had two preschool classes in their setting (36%), and one setting had three preschool classes in their setting (4%). The remaining settings did not answer this question.

##### 2.1.2 Typical and Unique Transition Practices from Nursery to Reception for Early Years Settings

Practitioners were asked to state the most widely used transition practices they use under normal (non-pandemic) circumstances as well as in September 2020.
Table 1 Typical and Unique Transition Practices Employed by Early Years Settings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity/Practice</th>
<th>Typical</th>
<th>September 2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gather information from parents about which school their child will attend</td>
<td>24 (100%)</td>
<td>20 (83%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liaise with Early Years Coordinators/Reception Class Teacher from LOCAL schools about a child from your setting moving into school</td>
<td>22 (92%)</td>
<td>16 (67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liaise with Early Years Coordinators/Reception Class Teacher from ALL schools about a child from your setting moving into their school</td>
<td>24 (100%)</td>
<td>17 (71%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send information about the child’s development to the school’s Early Years Coordinator/Reception Class Teacher</td>
<td>24 (100%)</td>
<td>20 (83%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invite Early Years Coordinator/Reception Class Teacher from LOCAL schools to meet the child prior to starting school</td>
<td>22 (92%)</td>
<td>3 (12.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invite Early Years Coordinator/Reception Class Teacher from ALL schools to meet the child prior to starting school</td>
<td>22 (92%)</td>
<td>3 (12.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hold meetings with Early Years Coordinator/Reception Class Teacher to discuss the child prior to the start of the school year</td>
<td>24 (100%)</td>
<td>10 (42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invite parents to the setting for an information event about how the transition to school is managed</td>
<td>11 (46%)</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send strategies and personalised resources to parents to use at home to help prepare their child for transition to school</td>
<td>18 (75%)</td>
<td>18 (75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organise activities for pre-schoolers to facilitate talking about transitioning to school</td>
<td>24 (100%)</td>
<td>14 (58%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to the typical transition practices listed above, three respondents added that they typically attend **Network Transfer events** which are organised by the Local Authority and give practitioners from both settings (Nursery and Reception) the opportunity to meet and discuss children moving to primary school. Respondents
commented how useful these events have been to hand over important information about the children in a safe and less time-consuming way.

**Visiting children at their primary school in Term 2** once they have settled in was also mentioned by one respondent. Finally, one respondent mentioned that a typical transition activity for them is to **hold events at the local primary schools** *(like Sports Day)* during the Summer Term.

Respondents were asked to report any additional practices that have not employed previously that they are planning to introduce for the cohort of children starting in Reception classes in September 2020. Respondents from Early Years Settings talked about providing information to parents online about getting their child ready for school with links from Bristol’s Children Centre Hubs and popular websites (Twinkl).

One respondent also talked about facilitating **telephone calls** between children in their setting and Reception class teachers in the Summer Term or asking Reception class teachers to send a little **introductory video** of themselves and their classroom so they can show it to children while at nursery.

Finally, one respondent talked about producing **photographic albums** of the different local primary schools so that the children can use them to become familiar with the setting they will be attending.

### 2.1.3 Transition Practices for Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Employed by Early Years Settings

There was a consensus from all Early Years Settings respondents that **communication with the Reception class teacher and Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENDCo)** of the primary school was necessary for children with SEND and was reported as the main additional strategy used to support transition. This communication included invitations for school staff to attend **progress meetings** in the Summer Term and regular **liaison between professionals**.

**Additional visits to the school** with the main keyworker from the early years settings was also cited by 7 respondents. One respondent reported **organising transition packs and**
sending support plans to the receiving school as an additional strategy used to support the transition to school for children with SEND. Finally, using documents created by Bristol Early Years Team to support transfer of children with SEND was mentioned by one respondent.

2.1.3.1 Impact of Covid-19 and Unique Transitions for Children with SEND for Early Years Settings

There were only 4 responses to the question about additional strategies or approaches used for the transition of children with SEND in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically, for children with SEND transitioning to primary school in September 2020, respondents mentioned that all forms of communication took place online (for example through Zoom meetings) or on the phone.

One respondent reported that they managed to arrange a socially distanced meeting in the primary school’s garden.

2.1.4 Key Challenges When Planning for Transition in September 2020 for Early Years Settings

The most mentioned factor (70% n=14) was the reduction or disappearance of face-to-face contact because of the amount of time children were in the setting. Reasons given for this were: reduced opening times for settings; limited available times because of ‘bubbles’; some families chose not to send children to the early years setting; a child was medically vulnerable. Of concern to respondents was the problems this created for preparing children for transition, and in particular for delivering Individual Education Plans and other special activities, including face-to-face interventions from other professional or agencies. This had an impact on updating key developmental information and reporting:

‘Because of lock down and bubbles we had much less time to spend with children and help them prepare’ (EY Setting 24)

‘Uncertain about whether speech and language interventions have taken place. Can’t update IEPs’ (EY Setting 6)
‘Providing accurate and up-to-date information on progress has been challenging. Lack of face-to-face interventions from other professionals means it’s not always possible to have accurate medical or SALT reports to hand onto the school’. (EY Setting 15)

‘With children not attending we can’t deliver their IEP and other activities to support development’. (EY Setting 23)

‘Not seeing children in the setting for three months we have less understanding of their progress’ (EY Setting 24)

‘Not all SEND children were able to attend – we worry about regression’. (EY Setting 14)

The next factor most frequently mentioned (55% n=11) was that there were no opportunities to visit the receiving school.

‘The lack of visits to school – usually we have personal transition plans to support the change’. (EY Setting 4)

‘No school visits. These usually happen 3-5 times in Term 6. Also usually in Term 6 in our wellbeing group we have daily conversation and stories about transition, making, or not making, friends’. (EY Setting 18)

About a third of responses mentioned difficulties in accessing a SENDCo. In some cases, this was the early years setting’s own SENDCo who was quarantined, or working from home with no access to documents, or in another bubble and difficult to contact. In some cases, the challenge reported was the SENDCo of the receiving school who was hard to get hold of.

Three respondents felt that lack of multi-disciplinary meetings has made things more difficult. Another three found the move to online communication was more complicated in scheduling dates and times for meetings with teams and external professionals. One respondent felt that meeting with parents via zoom or phone was not ideal.

There was concern from one respondent that the setting’s ability to support parents over transition:
‘We could offer no day-to-day support for parents. We tried weekly phone calls to help with queries or worries. Many had yet to hear anything about starting in September.’ (EY Setting 18)

Another was concerned about parents’ access to teachers in receiving schools. A third respondent said a parents’ reluctance or refusal to share information with the school was a difficulty.

Two respondents mentioned government regulations. One felt that the lack of clarity about applying regulations to Early Years, and the poor timing created difficulties. The other thought that ‘teachers were preoccupied with regulations and reluctant to engage with transition of children joining in September.’ (EY Setting 11)

One respondent mentioned financial difficulties for SEND created by the Covid-19 pandemic. Another mentioned a problem because there was no school available in September for a child in the setting.

2.1.5 Key Facilitators When Planning for Transition in September 2020 for Early Years Settings

The factor mentioned as most helpful (50% n=8) was the exchange of information and/or guidance via documents.

‘Up-to-date and informative information in teachers’ paperwork’ (EY Setting 11)

‘Transition documents and guidance’ (EY Setting 17)

‘Guidance from the Early Years Team’ (EY Setting 19)

‘Information from the Inclusion Team and BAT’ (EY Setting 21)

The necessary move online and increased dependence on electronic communication was seen as generally helpful by half the respondents.

‘Adapting to online by all’ (EY Setting 17)

‘Virtual meetings with pre-school SENDCOs and with primary schools generally – changes to workloads during reduced school opening increased availability’. (EY Setting 4)
‘EHC process has benefited from online approach in most case for us as we were far along the graduated response for our children’. (EY Setting 17)

‘Sending information by email – less paperwork’. (EY Setting 21)

‘Zoom for SENDCo cluster meetings’ (EY Setting 19)

‘Communication with parents via phone or online meetings’: (EY Setting 8)

Having **good established links and good relationships with parents** was mentioned as helpful, as was having **‘pro-active’ parents** or those willing to provide information. Changes in Covid-19 regulations which enabled children to attend settings, and for physical (as opposed to virtual) meetings with schools and teachers to take place were included in more than a third of early years survey responses (38% n=6).

‘Being able to provide children with SEND a place during lockdown supported transition’ (EY Setting 4)

‘Having all our SEND children in when we re-opened in June’ (EY Setting 18)

‘Being able to open again before school starts’ (EY Setting 21)

‘Handover meetings with lead SENDCo and Reception teachers’ (EY Setting 8)

**Pre-existing strong relationships with primary schools** and having started planning earlier in the year were also mentioned.

‘Links with local schools, having a named SENDCo and a willingness to ‘make it work’. (EY Setting 15)

### 2.2 Primary School Settings Survey Results

#### 2.2.1 Primary School Settings Demographics

Between July and September 2020, 33 primary school settings completed the online survey. Of the 33 respondents, 24 (73%) were Reception Class teachers. Of these: 19 (79%) described themselves as EYFS Lead, four of whom were also SLT members. One was EYFS/Phase1 Lead. One was Phase 1 Lead. One was a Deputy Head. Two described themselves as Reception Lead or Co-ordinator. Four respondents (12%) were Nursery Class teachers, three of whom were EYFS Lead. Five respondents (15%) were not in class: three Head Teachers, one Deputy Head, one EYFS Lead.
The primary schools were located across 11 postal areas of the city.

Just more than half (52% N=18) had two Reception Classes. About a quarter (24% N=8) had one Reception Class. Six of the responding schools had three Reception Classes and the two largest had four.

When asked how many children were enrolled in their Reception Class(es) at the start of the 2019/2020 academic year, 20 respondents reported that it was more than 30 children (64.5%), 9 settings reported that it was between 25-30 children (29%), 1 setting reported that it was between 20-25 children (3%) and one setting said that it was fewer than 15 children (3%).

Survey respondents were also asked to provide information about the type of early years setting and context the majority of the children joining Reception in their school experienced. Fifteen of the schools (46%) had Nursery Classes which provided all or most of the entry into Reception. The main source of new entries for thirteen schools (39%) was PVIs. Three schools (9%) sourced children mainly from Children's Centres; two schools (6%) drew mainly on Playgroups.

2.2.2 Typical and Unique Transition Practices from Nursery to Reception for Primary School Settings

The survey provided a list of twelve activities that typically might be included in a school’s transition practice, for children moving from pre-school provision into a Reception Class. Respondents were asked to indicate which practices were typical for their school, and which they thought they would be able to sustain in September 2020. From Table 2 below it can be seen that the most widely used typical and unique transition practices used by primary school practitioners are to gather information from parents about which school their child will attend, to send information about the child’s development to the school’s Early Years Coordinator/Reception Class Teacher and to liaise with them about the child from their setting moving into their school:
Table 2 Typical and Unique Transition Practices Employed by Primary School Settings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity/Practice</th>
<th>Typical</th>
<th>September 2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Send information to parents about the school and Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum</td>
<td>29 (89%)</td>
<td>27 (82%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send strategies and personalised resources to parents to use at home to help prepare their child for transition</td>
<td>25 (76%)</td>
<td>23 (70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gather information from parents about their child’s development prior to the beginning of the school year</td>
<td>30 (91%)</td>
<td>21 (64%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Invite parents to the school for an information event/orientation prior to the start of the school year</td>
<td>33 (100%)</td>
<td>4 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have parents and children visit Reception Class(es) prior to the start of the school year</td>
<td>33 (100%)</td>
<td>7 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have pre-schoolers spend some time in the Reception Class(es) prior to the school year</td>
<td>30 (91%)</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct home visits to the homes of children prior to the school year or at the beginning of the school year</td>
<td>27 (82%)</td>
<td>5 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct visits to ALL early years settings to meet child and gather information about child</td>
<td>23 (70%)</td>
<td>-None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct visits to SOME/MOST early years settings to meet child and gather information about child</td>
<td>16 (48%)</td>
<td>-None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shorten school days at the beginning of the school year</td>
<td>30 (91%)</td>
<td>23 (70%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limit number of days child attends school in the early weeks of the school year</td>
<td>23 (70%)</td>
<td>19 (58%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stagger school entry so that children start the school year in smaller groups before meeting with the whole class</td>
<td>29 (89%)</td>
<td>25 (76%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thirteen primary schools responded to an invitation to add to the list of typical activities. Three mentioned **making phone calls or sending emails** to settings/key workers to collect information, or to welcome parents or carers of a child starting in September. Two schools mentioned the **school web site** as a source of information for families new to Reception. Local **EYFS Cluster networks** were mentioned twice as a means of exchanging information and receiving transition documents from pre-school settings. This additional information provided more detail about visits to school, by children, families/carers in order to meet teachers and experience the environment. Three respondents pointed to **1:1 visits of the child and their family**, mostly in September; three mentioned **different version of stay and play**: with families, or on visits with key workers. **Invitations to events** during the school year such as concerts, Christmas performances, summer fair were also mentioned. Information about a new Reception class, in four schools, was sent home and to the pre-school setting, in the form of **stories or booklets with photographs** of teachers and the environment. Visits to schools and settings sometimes focussed on informal social activity: tea, brunch, BBQ; sometimes a visit was concerned with observation of children and interaction with them.

Responses from four primary schools give a flavour of these additions:

‘We have **stay and play sessions in school WITH parents, and other further transition mornings and afternoons without parents, but with key workers. We also invite our children from outside our school nursery to Christmas performances and school reception concerts throughout the year**’. (Primary School 11)

‘School website has a **specific link for new starters information. Starting school booklet given to all PVIs at visit. Learning Diaries left at homes on home visits for families to individualize them about their children and take a shared ownership**’. (Primary School 3)

‘Specific visits to nursery to meet key workers, children and families for a brunch. Specific children visit setting weekly in July to prepare. We have a session in July'
for all new children for an afternoon, while parents meet each other in the garden adjacent to EYFS area’. (Primary School 5)

‘We contact Parents/Carers via phone or email to welcome them to our School. We liaise closely with key workers to meet Parents/Carers and their children at their Pre-Schools, i.e. for informal meet and greet sessions/bbq’s, etc. We send photos of our current setting - indoor and outside environments - to Pre-Schools to be displayed along with photographs of their teachers to be. We visit the children at their current Pre-School to observe their interactions with peers in an environment which is familiar with them, introduce ourselves and find out what fascinates them’. (Primary School 25)

2.2.2.1 The Impact of Covid-19 and Unique Transitions for Primary School Settings

At the time of completing the survey (June/July 2020) there was little or no clarity about what the position would be in September 2020, in relation to how the Covid-19 pandemic would affect transitions. The impact of the need for social distancing and of closure of many settings for pre-school provision was evident in the responses. Gathering, providing and exchanging information remained possible, but for settings where typical practice depended on interpersonal encounters a different approach was required. Physical movement between schools, homes and settings for face-to-face meetings was impossible. Even in schools with Nursery provision on site, the creation of ‘bubbles’ challenged face-to-face communication.

However, primary schools were actively addressing the issues and developing strategies for a different kind of transition. 28 of the 33 schools in the survey provided additional details of their plans for September.

In most cases, transition activity was moving online. Three-quarters of those who responded to our question about alternative and unique ways of supporting transition mentioned making videos to be made available, often via the school website. Tours of the school (in one case with an EYFS child as guide), staff introducing themselves, welcome messages from class teachers were the most frequently mentioned content. Video for
some schools involved teachers reading stories or singing songs. In one case the video was intended to replace the usual visit by parents to the school; it went through the transition booklet sent to parents/carers and also explained the adaptations and changes made necessary by Covid-19 that the children would experience when they started. Similar numbers were using Zoom (sometimes Teams) for virtual meetings. More than half of these described online one-to-one meetings with families. These were intended to replace home visits and introduce the new teacher, and would take place in July or September, or both. To engage children to participate in the online meeting, one school mentioned providing ‘All About Me’ sheets to be filled in before the online meeting. Another school suggested that children at home take photographs of themselves or draw themselves, to send to the teacher or talk about online. Two schools mentioned story sessions, or Rhymetime classes via online platforms (such as Zoom). One school did not use an online platform ‘because all our families are well-known from Nursery’.

Around a quarter of responses referred to continued use of printed material to be delivered or posted to children’s homes. These included: questionnaires to gather information about the child; information about the school packs; school newsletters; a booklet “Helping your child to look forward to school”; transition bags; social stories about starting school; things to do at home to support your child in starting school.

Communication was another strong theme in responses. The School Website was a vehicle not only for videos but for providing information packs, and sometimes special pages for new parents/carers. Six schools mentioned using phone calls to contact parents/families or pre-school settings. One school created an email list for families to facilitate access to and communication with Reception teachers; two others used existing school emails or the school’s existing online learning platform (like Dojo or Seesaw) to achieve this. One school sent postcards to children over the summer holiday; another, to encourage a sense of belonging, sent each child a jigsaw piece to be brought to school on the first day and fitted in to the puzzle.

Around half of responses specifically mentioned plans or hoped for activity to take place in school premises in September: visits to the class to meet teachers and other
practitioners; stay and play sessions in small groups or bubbles. One school planned small
socially distanced groups visiting in the school holidays. Schools where home visits were
an established transition practice, were considering how to continue this. One was
planning to organize home visits but with the option of changing to in-school visits, or in
extremis a phone call. Most others who mentioned home visits, were planning to replace
them with one-to-one meetings with new families but in the school premises. Three
schools mentioned ‘doorstep or garden visits’ to replace home visits.

A small group of responses specifically mentioned the need for ‘a longer induction or
slower transition’. The most radical of these involved delaying the start of school for new
children: all children would spend two weeks in their previous classes and then move to
Reception classes. During this time there would be parent meetings and story times for
new children. It was generally felt that extending staggered entry arrangements and
having children join in smaller groups would enable teachers to support children better
in the circumstances created by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The amount of detail related to new or adapted transition practices, which respondents
chose to include was very varied. In some cases, a single item only was mentioned:

‘Doorstep visits’ (Primary School 10)
‘1:1 meetings with parents in school in the first week of September’ (Primary
School 29)
‘No home visits, individual school visit instead if possible’ (Primary School 6)
‘Social stories’ (Primary School 28)

Other contributions included a wider range of practices:

‘Rhymetime zoom session with new classes took place in July. Families new to the
school were invited in for 1:1 meetings in July. All previous settings contacted by
inclusion lead and family link team. Questionnaire sent home for parents
including information about the child and their interests and how both parent and
child feel about starting school. Tasks for children to do at home - photo of child
with their favourite toy and drawing of themselves. Online transition meeting.
Families have had the class email address shared for them to share tasks/info about
their child or ask questions directly to the new class teacher. Video tour of classrooms and spaces. Helping children look forward to school document sent out to all families’. (Primary School 2)

‘Calling and zooming all the Nurseries instead of visiting. Online resources - videos and tours for each class. Online video presentation in place of parents info evening. 20 minute visit in first week of September; 1:1 with teacher in place of home visit Stay and play in September in groups of 5 before school starts’. (Primary School 16)

‘Dedicated page for reception parents on the website which provides them with the information / presentation they would have viewed at the transition meeting. Video of the reception classes and outdoor learning area. Virtual parents meeting using Microsoft Teams. Dedicated class email addresses to allow communication between parents and teachers. Individual phone calls to parents with specific concerns or questions’. (Primary School 30)

‘Updating our School website with the induction packs sent out to all Parents/Carers under a specific EYFS tab - which include general information and photographs of the new teachers and classrooms. Video recording to welcome and introduce/go through the induction booklet/process - discussions surrounding how it usually looks and how it may look as from September. Any questions as a result of the online video will result in phone calls made to Parents/Carers directly. Visits to School - COVID 19 dependent - in September for Parents/Carers and children. Smaller groups of children - COVID 19 dependent - each day. Home visits - either via video link or on their doorstep/back gardens. (Primary School 25)

### 2.2.3 Transition Practices for Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Employed by Primary School Settings

Of 33 possible respondents, 29 (88%) provided information about their typical transition arrangements for children with SEND.
The words most commonly used in responses were: extra, more, additional, individual, personalized. They were used with reference to established practices and included visits to school, visits to pre-school settings by school staff, meetings with parents, key workers, other staff, outside agencies.

**Extra visits to the receiving school** were mentioned in over half of the 29 responses. These were sometimes explained in detail. For example, visits would be arranged at ‘quiet times’ or ‘when the space was empty’; children would visit accompanied by a key worker, SENDCo, or family member. In some schools, visits would be ‘more frequent’ or even ‘weekly’.

> ‘We offer visits for preschools to come into school and look around the EYFS area when they are empty. The visits are conducted by the pre school staff NOT school staff. Generally this happens when the current EYFS children are out on their summer trip or sports day. The preschools usually take photos to be used back in their settings. SEND children may visit more than once. The final visit is usually with the families rather than the preschool practitioner.’ (School 21)

In general, the typical approach used by the majority of the schools responding to our survey is to introduce the child to the new environment, rather than see the child in the setting they are leaving. **Additional visits to pre-school settings** were mentioned by 28% of the responses. Some included specific reference to staff. Inclusion Officer, SENDCo, LSA, Class Teacher, EYFS Lead were mentioned as involved in a visit. **Information exchange** was a key aim for such visits. Observation of, and interaction with, the child was mentioned by only two respondents. Three schools specifically mentioned **home visits**.

The same percentage of responses contained references to **meetings**. In some cases these appeared to be planned, for example: a meeting with parents to gather information about their child; a ‘Starting School’ meeting where parents and child meet with class teacher, SENDCo and support staff. Other ‘meetings’ might be more informal and associated with ‘visits’. **Closer liaison, increased communication, exchanging information and building relationships were evident as aims.** Apart from parents, people mostly mentioned were
teachers, support workers, SENDCos, key workers, outside agencies. Specific involvement of the school and/or the pre-school SENDCo occurred in more than a quarter of responses.

The second most mentioned practice (41%) for SEND children was sending home ‘books’ or ‘social stories’ with photographs of people and places the child would be encountering. These could be looked at and talked about over the summer holidays. Three schools mentioned personalizing these for the individual SEND child. Also mentioned were sending postcards during the holidays and sending video messages to individual children.

Responses from a quarter of schools concerned practices related to the induction phase of transition. These included increased flexibility of arrangements; smaller groups; an individualised timetable.

More than a quarter (27%) of responses cited only one additional or adapted practice. The same percentage referred to three or more practices related specifically to SEND. On the evidence of this survey practices in responding to SEND are similar in type but varied in the extent and depth of application.

Some examples of more detailed responses can be seen below:

’SEND Leader visits or has phone conversation with preschool settings and visits them. Meets parents to discuss identified needs and how we can meet / support the family. If safeguarding issues are identified DSL has conversations with sending setting. Personalised Social Stories / information about school routines are prepared. Small room for 1:1 or small group work on social skills.’ (Primary School 18)

’Meetings with families, family support workers and visits to the nursery and home. Meeting with adults involved with the child. Visits for the child to the setting with key worker in attendance, weekly in July. Video messages sent to the SEND child to help them transition.’ (Primary School 5)

’Social/photo story booklets. Extra visits in the summer. Close work with previous keyworkers and parents to individualise the transition plan. Involvement of school SENDCo.’ (Primary School 3)
2.2.3.1 Impact of Covid-19 and Unique Transitions for Children with SEND for Primary School Settings

Less than half of respondents (13 schools) provided information about any adjustments to transition practices for SEND in September 2020. It may be that schools’ experience of children with identified SEND was very varied. Some schools included plans for children with identified SEND they knew were entering Reception in September 2020.

Eight schools mentioned moving meetings online or using phone calls. Not everyone was planning to move online. In one school, physical proximity in the form of a shared playground was expected to facilitate additional ‘real’ meetings. Another school was aiming to arrange ‘socially distanced home visits (in the garden) for children with ASD.’

One school, referencing the changes and adaptations required by Covid-19, was planning to adapt the booklets that go home ‘so they don’t show pictures that might not represent what they will see in September.’ Another was planning to make videos for children so they can ‘meet’ their class teacher before they start.

Two primary schools were planning to meet uncertainties with flexibility.

‘Settling in will be flexible.’ (Primary School 22)

‘Phased induction. Classes are not set in stone as we haven’t met the children this time - the three classes could change in order to best support children with additional needs.’ (Primary School 31)

One simply stated: ‘Risk assessments’. (Primary School 28)

Three schools mentioned appointing extra staff and one was arranging staff training. In two schools, planning was in place for a child who was expected.

‘1:1 LSA has been put in role to receive one child coming in with identified needs and some funding. Transition will be personalised and flexible to suit children’s needs. School-wide Recovery Curriculum is already planned, including two mornings staff training at start of term around wellbeing, resilience and strategies for managing anxiety in children (eg we have one child coming with EP report noting social difficulties) I am leading a new Nurture Room provision from Sept
2020 and have identified children who will benefit from this specific support’.
(Primary School 16)

‘Online meetings with pre-school and autism team. Meetings with SENDCo . Visual prepared. Calm area/ pod prepared. Telephone calls with parents.’ (Primary School 28)

2.2.4 Feelings about Transition Planning for Primary School Settings

Primary school survey respondents were asked to give three words or phrases to show how they are feeling at the moment of completing the survey about children’s transition to Reception in their school in September 2020. 31 out of a possible 33 respondents replied to this question (94%). Some respondents offered fewer than three words or phrases, some offered more lengthy responses. The responses were condensed into 34 key words.

Of these, 19 were categorised as indicating ‘positive’ feelings, and 14 as indicating ‘negative’ feelings. Some words were offered by more than one respondent.

‘Positive’ feelings

Excited 11; Prepared 5; Hopeful 4; Confident 3; Determined 2; Dedicated 2; Mindful 2. Plus: Organised, patient, optimistic, accepting, curious, open-minded, flexible, welcoming, forward-thinking, positive, relaxed, aware.

‘Negative’ feelings

Worried 6; Apprehensive 5; Uncertain 4; Confused 4; Nervous 3; Concerned 3; Anxious 2; Unsure 2; Overwhelmed 2; Disappointed 2. Plus: Frustrated, stressed, unclear, challenging, unprepared.

Responses were then grouped by school. This revealed considerable divergence between schools in feelings and attitude.
Seven schools recorded **only positive feelings:**

Prepared 4; Confident 2; Excited 2; Determined; Dedicated; Curious; Open-minded; Flexible; Forward-thinking; Positive; Mindful; Relaxed; Aware; Welcoming.

Seven schools recorded **only negative feelings:**

Worried 4; Concerned 3; Apprehensive 2; Uncertain 2; Unclear 2; Anxious 2; Unprepared; Challenging; Disappointed.

Six schools were **more positive than negative:**

Excited 3; Hopeful 2; Prepared 2; Dedicated; Determined; Mindful; Organised; Patient

BUT ALSO Apprehensive 2; Anxious 2; Unsure; Nervous.

Eight schools were **more negative than positive:**

Confused 3; Uncertain 2; Worried 2; Overwhelmed 2; Stressed; Disappointed; Frustrated; Unsure; Apprehensive; Anxious; Nervous.

BUT ALSO Excited 4; Hopeful 2; Optimistic; Accepting.

Two schools were **both positive and negative in the same degree:**

Nervous; Unsure; Worried

Excited; Hopeful; Confident.

### 2.2.5 Key Challenges When Planning for Transition in September 2020 for Primary School Settings

The survey asked for three factors which had presented the biggest difficulty when planning for transition in September 2020. Thirty-one respondents completed this section.

The almost unanimous impression created by these responses was of teachers who were most concerned about the **lack of face-to-face contact with children and families** and how this would affect **building relationships**. There was equal concern about the **reduced opportunities for children (and families) to visit the school or the class** to familiarize themselves with the environment, meet the teacher and their new peers. Only four responses did not include this dimension, finding the organizational and information gathering issues created more difficulties.
Three quarters of respondents mentioned **not being able to invite children and families into school**. Visits in the summer term, opportunities to stay and play, and organizing induction/welcome visits in September were all mentioned. The same proportion was concerned about **lack of contact with parents/carers**. Although some responses cited lack of welcome/information/induction meetings, and home visits, more had concerns about the **general lack of opportunities to explain, inform, reassure, dispel anxiety, gain cooperation and parental engagement**.

Nearly as many teachers said that **not being able to visit or have contact with pre-school settings was a difficulty**. Most did not give a reason for this. A few said this was because they were unable to observe/meet the children who would be joining their class. More were concerned that closure of PVIs, and staff being furloughed, meant that liaison with key workers and getting hold of transition documents was difficult or impossible. One or two resented that it was seen to be their responsibility to ensure this happened, rather than an expectation of staff in pre-school settings.

The third equally large group of responses was about the **shortcomings of government guidance and the impact of Covid-19 and guidance on early years transition in September 2020**. Two respondents cited this as two of the three factors creating difficulty. Lack of clarity, lateness of arrival, constant change were all mentioned by respondents as significant challenges. This made it difficult to ‘see what it will be like in September’. Schools which included this as a factor were concerned about creating ‘bubbles’ and the impact of this; uncertainty about numbers; using physical space and social distancing; setting up classrooms; changed routines; provision of resources, equipment and staff. Most importantly for some respondents the impact of changes in government guidance made it very difficult to communicate with parents/carers about transition arrangements.

Related to this, respondents talked about the fact that **parents in some schools were anxious**. In one school, communication involved many families with English as an Additional Language. Another school was concerned that parents who were anxious would not send their child to school in September. Responses from two schools anticipated difficulties because children had had fewer learning opportunities. Two
others cited a need to prepare for children’s emotional wellbeing. One teacher’s difficult factor involved finding time to think about all the other returning pupils.

2.2.6  **Key Facilitators When Planning for Transition for Primary School Settings**

Compared to writing about difficulty teachers found less to say about helpful factors. Two left this section empty; one wrote ‘None’. Four teachers contributed only two factors.

The responses of the 28 teachers who contributed to this section are mostly covered by one, who wrote:

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Technology          Communication           Working Together (Primary School 5)
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These three interwoven themes are evident in the majority of responses.

Three quarters (N=21) of all responses to this question included at least one reference to digital or electronic forms of communication. **Technologies** mentioned as helpful included online platforms like Zoom (most frequently cited), Microsoft Teams and Google Meet; video; websites; email; Dojo; texting; telephone.

‘Virtual Transition Meetings meant that external professionals not usually able to make it have attended.’ (Primary School 4)

‘An up-to-date website that can easily be amended to include additional pages. A texting service to communicate with existing parents and admissions information that includes email addresses for new families to the school ensuring contact can be made easily.’ (Primary School 32)

‘Staff confidence in using online platforms more.’ (Primary School 15)

‘Opportunities for staff development virtually so staff feel more involved in the whole process.’ (Primary School 22)

‘Sharing class email with new parents - developing links with families, opportunities to share information about their child and ask questions to relieve concerns. Online platforms enable us to share information with parents and
In connection with communication, several schools mentioned the importance of having accurate and readily available contact lists. Pre-existing links with pre-school settings; new entrants with siblings; having families with established associations with the School Nursery and school: all were mentioned as helpful factors when planning for transition.

In contrast to the previous question where lack of contact with pre-school settings was seen as creating difficulty, 39% (N=11) of respondents cited links with feeder pre-school settings as helpful. About half of these were from schools which had a nursery on site, acknowledged as an advantage. However, the Nursery does not necessarily provide all of their intake. The other schools took children from PVIs and playgroups:

‘Nurseries and preschools taking the time to talk to us on the telephone, despite the difficulties they face with a smaller staff team/furloughed staff etc. We found that all settings spoken to were only too pleased to spend the time to chat about transitions”. (Primary School 11)

‘Strong existing relationships with feeder settings has meant that we’ve been able to conduct verbal handover on the phone’. (Primary School 7)

Working together was another strong theme across the responses. Only three contributions contain no reference to some kind of mutual support and co-operation as a helpful factor when planning for transition in September 2020. Other responses often include two factors that could be classified in this way.

Previously cited responses indicated the perceived value of productive communication with feeder settings. The value of teamwork within a school was a feature of 64% (N=18) of responses. Two aspects emerged as related to defining a helpful factor. They had equal weight. Having committed, experienced, flexible and creative teachers to work with was important. Also important was having a supportive Head Teacher/SLT, admin staff, and governors/Academy Trust. These factors appeared to generate confidence and optimism in facing challenges.
“Can do’ attitude of staff and governors to help with transition prep eg film videos, make presentations, virtual tours.’ (Primary School 11)

‘Hardworking staff who want the best for the children.’ (Primary School 15)

‘The solution focused attitude of the staff.’ (Primary School 17)

‘Working closely with the admin manager, nursery and SLT.’ (Primary School 24)

‘Having a well-established team who are fully prepared and able to adapt and adjust as short notice.’ (Primary School 26)

‘Established and experienced EYFS staff who have a wealth of knowledge about transition to draw upon to think creatively.’ (Primary School 32)

‘Incredibly supportive Head and Deputy - listening to teachers - ‘we're putting in place plans to best support OUR children’ - bespoke to our School.’ (Primary School 34)

A quarter of respondents also mentioned working with parents. ‘Helpful’ parents were described as: understanding that things will change, open, positive, supportive in the community, patient, flexible.

Beyond school factors, such as school and EY clusters, Reception Teacher networks, and online coaches, were also mentioned as helpful.

Two responses referred to the Bristol Early Years Unique Transition Guide as helpful in enabling staff to focus their thinking and prioritise. Two respondents identified having to work from home as providing more time to think and plan than was usually available. One looked forward to working with smaller groups (Primary School 5) in September; another thought a delayed start would be helpful.

2.2.7 Additional factors presenting difficulty when planning for transition for children with SEND for Primary School Settings

Of the 31 possible respondents, two did not answer this question and one wrote ‘None”. Four other respondents contributed only two factors presenting difficulty. One respondent contributed only one.
In general, perceived difficulties in planning provision for children with SEND were very similar to those for other children. However, in considering SEND, **the difficulties created by lack of face-to-face contact had greater emphasis.** Words and phrases like ‘direct’, ‘physical’, ‘natural’, ‘observation’, ‘can’t see’, ‘in person’, ‘remote’, were more prevalent in these responses.

Not being able to visit and observe in pre-school settings was mentioned by 61% (N=17) of respondents. In particular, access to key workers and the information they possessed was a problem. Difficulties created by lack of opportunities for teachers to meet children and families, in school, or on home visits were included in 93% (N=26) of contributions. Visits to school were seen as important in building relationships, enabling the teacher to observe and spend time with the child, enabling the child to experience and familiarize themselves with a new environment. For one respondent, this lack of direct contact meant ‘*reading documents with no context*’.

Four primary school respondents mentioned difficulties created by **government guidance**: constant changes created uncertainty and made it difficult to share accurate information about school provision in relation to supporting a child’s SEND with parents. Changes to the classroom and outdoor environment meant that making photo books so children would know what to expect in September was difficult.

The **wider impacts of the management of the Covid-19 pandemic** were also mentioned in survey responses: school and pre-school closure, social distancing meant that children had missed learning and social opportunities and were out of routine.

The inevitable **move to online transition activities** as a response to the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic was cited as **problematic** by some teachers. ‘*Moving online*’ was difficult; ‘*virtual meetings with parents were not possible because of lack of technical equipment or internet access.*’ Getting ‘*all information via phone or email*’ created difficulties. ‘*No stay and play - photos are not the same*’.

**Difficulties accessing specialist advice and support** to meet the needs of children with SEND was also mentioned by three respondents. Four teachers highlighted problems
with administration, within the school and externally, as a cause of difficulty. For example:

‘Departments stretched and submission of paperwork/funding etc has been delayed’. (Primary School 3)

‘Significant delay in the EHCP process has led to our school being named on an EHCP when we have had no contact with the pupil or their family prior to being named.’ (Primary School 26)

The response to this question is encapsulated in the responses from one school:

‘Not able to meet the children in person to see how they engage in learning / play and see how their additional needs are supported in their current setting. EYFS transfer documents being sent after a delayed amount of time so information from an external establishment cannot be taken into account when classes are set. Not being able to invite parents / professionals into the school to view the classroom to advise if any amendments are required to meet the needs of the child.’ (Primary School 32)

2.2.8 Additional helpful factors when planning transition for SEND Children for Primary School Settings

Of the 31 possible respondents three gave no answers and one wrote ‘None’. Four respondents noted only one factor. Four respondents noted only two. The data are drawn from 27 respondents.

Responses related to knowledge of pre-school settings represented 56% (n=15) of survey responses. A perceptible theme was that of previous knowledge of the setting and the children from visits before Covid-19 restrictions got in place. This associated with established good relationships which made exchange of information by phone and passing documents, easier and smoother.

‘Strong existing relationships with feeder settings has meant that we’ve been able to conduct verbal handover on the phone.’ (Primary School 7)
'SENCO who has liaised closely with Pre-Schools at the beginning of the year before COVID 19 had properly been established. We knew the children we would be potentially receiving as from September - put certain plans in place/update PD if required, etc... Strong relationships with Pre-School and key workers - up to date knowledge/IEPs shared with class teachers to be.’ (Primary School 34)

**Sources of support** were mentioned as a positive factor by 63% (n=17) of respondents. The main source of support cited was the school’s SENDCo. Also mentioned were other teachers, specialist teams, parents and SLT.

‘The Local Authority have put on excellent support sessions which 1:1 staff have accessed and gained support from’ (Primary School 16)

As before virtual meetings, video messaging, access to online resources were cited as helpful. Phone communication was also important (44% n=12).

‘Zoom meetings with preschool and parent have been really useful - these personal meetings have enabled a really strong exchange of information and parents say they feel reassured.’ (Primary School 10)

‘Zoom meetings around the child with nursery staff, parents and EYFS team here.’ (Primary School 24)

‘Having video call transition meetings with key agencies.’ (Primary School 28)

‘Speaking to families specifically on the phone to discuss how we can support their child.’ (Primary School 28)

‘Virtual Transition Meetings meant that external professionals not usually able to make it have attended.’ (Primary School 4)

Some primary school respondents also mentioned the **quality of colleagues**, describing them as persistent in making things work, confident, focused, experienced in best practice for children with SEND. **Being able to adapt start dates for transition, and being flexible in planning** were also reported as welcome factors. As was **the understanding of the impact Covid-19-created factors** would have on children, which needed to be acknowledged and taken into account in planning. Two teachers thought the **extra time**
out of class that the Covid-19 pandemic had created was helpful because it enabled them to research and plan more thoroughly than usual.

‘A well-established team with experience of working with a number and range of SEND pupils.’ (Primary School 26)

‘Staff experienced in best practices for children with SEND.’ (Primary School 9)

‘Knowing all children will need time to transition so the learning will feel more nursery-based this year.’ (Primary School 14)

The response to this question is encapsulated in the responses from Primary School 4 below:

‘Being able to have virtual transition meetings where possible. In some circumstances this has meant that external professionals who may not previously have been able to make a meeting have been able to.

Adapting the start of the year to allow transition to happen – this will help school and the pupils but may be difficult for parents to manage.

Nursery and pre-school settings having a clear understanding of need and being able to hand over pupil passports.’ (Primary School 4)
3. Results from Phase 2

3.1 Interview Results
Qualitative data was gathered in Phase 2 involving semi-structured online interviews with Early Years Leads in 10 primary schools. Four main themes arose as part of the analysis; these related to challenges related to the transition of children into primary school; impact of the Covid-19 pandemic; successful transition practices implemented this year; and support for the future.

The themes are discussed in greater detail in the sections below. When a practitioner’s words are quoted, he or she is identified only by a randomly assigned unique code, e.g. EY Lead 4.

3.1.1 Interviewee Demographics
Nine interviewees were Early Years Leads Teachers and one described herself as Phase One Lead. Two of the EY Lead teachers had additional roles: one as Key Stage 1 Lead, another as Year 1 Lead. Nine interviewees were Reception Class teachers; one was not in class.

The interviewees came from schools across the city.

In three schools, the school Nursery was the main source of children entering Reception. Five schools took children mainly from provision in the private or independent sector. For one school, most children came into Reception from a Children’s Centre.

3.2 Key Theme 1: Challenges in The Transition of Children to School
Interviewees described disrupted transition to school and having to employ unique ways for preparing children for starting school. For some, having to adapt and dismiss completely their typical transition activities was felt as a key challenge:

‘Home visits are a really big part of our philosophy and replacing that was difficult’

(EY Lead 1)

Others talked about the fact that most transition activities were delayed this year:

‘We actually set classes really early, but we had to put that back a bit so parents found out what class their child was in a little bit later. I think it was still in line
with a lot of other schools but again it wasn’t what our parents are used to.’ (EY Lead 1)

The majority of the interviewees described as a significant challenge not being able to establish a relationship between children, their families and teachers before September.

‘Children started in September without ever having met or seen their teacher. They were sent photos but they hadn’t actually seen them.’ (EY Lead 2)

Despite developing new ways of supporting transition through online means of communication, some interviewees felt that this was not enough and that it had an impact on levels of engagement from parents:

‘Early years transition is all about those relationships and them seeing you and them getting used to how you work, seeing what the classroom looks like and then feeling secure in that environment. And although we did a virtual tour and a little welcome video and we did a lot of stories but people weren’t engaging, people weren’t looking at those things.’ (EY Lead 3)

Not establishing relationships before children started school was seen by interviewees as having an impact on the quality of the information they had about the children:

‘Seeing things on paper is very different to seeing a child in their setting.’ (EY Lead 2)

The practicalities of ensuring school is a safe environment was also mentioned by a few participants especially in relation to planning for transition. How to manage school resources was also reported as a challenge from interviewees:

‘It was about getting that balance between keeping their mental health and emotional side of feeling safe in school and balancing it with the risk of catching Covid.’ (EY Lead 2)

The biggest challenge reported by all interviewees related to communication with nurseries and early years settings in the Summer Term:

‘Early years teams have always been very close and very good at working together and particularly at that time of the year where we would normally be having lots
of those conversations about children in our setting. But social distancing bubbles really affected communication between nursery and reception staff’. (EY Lead 4) ‘Information was very hit and miss this time. It wasn’t even phone calls this time. A lot of the time it was just emails. If anything, a lot of the time they didn’t get back to us.’ (EY Lead 3)

Some interviewees talked about the fact that nursery staff were furloughed during the first national lockdown which resulted in school staff getting very patchy and inconsistent information on the children from members of the nursery staff who did not know the children as well:

‘Because nurseries do operate on such close key worker relationship, it did mean that there was quite a few children I didn’t get much information for or got very patchy information about.’ (EY Lead 5).

For others, the pandemic exacerbated a difficulty in communication between schools and preschool settings that existed in previous years. Three of the ten interviewees described the difficulty they have every year in contacting the nurseries and how this year this was even harder:

‘There was very little contact and very little proactivity from nurseries.’ (EY Lead 5)

‘It should be the responsibility of preschool settings to contact the schools and not the other way around.’ (EY Lead 5)

This was made even worse due to the fact that Government guidance on schools’ response was not timely and it lacked clarity:

‘A little bit more notice might have been helpful before so that we could have things in place ’cause we were bombarded with questions from parents and carers.’ (EY Lead 2)

‘A lot of government guidance came out at the very last minute. It got to the point where you thought it’s only guidance, a person can only process so much.’ (EY Lead 6)
'There was no clarity, so we weren’t sure what the expectations were. We didn’t have the clarity from the government or that people knew what to do so we were firefighting all the time.’ (EY Lead 3)

‘The government guidelines have been interpreted very differently in different schools even down to very practical things like using sand. Some schools aren’t allowed to sing at all with some schools singing outside, some schools are still singing in the classroom.’ (EY Lead 1)

‘Some times it feels that people writing the guidance don’t know any children or teachers. So where I went for my guidance was my colleagues, my friends who were in the same position and the Bristol teaching school alliance who were releasing documents that were actually research based and came from professionals in early years.’ (EY Lead 6)

**Views were divided in terms of support provided more locally.** Although some interviewees talked very positively about support from the Early Years Team in Bristol, others felt unsupported.

‘No guidance from the City. No cluster meetings or hub meetings or network meetings. But St Paul’s CC Project R was really useful (EY Lead 3)’

Finally, four out of the ten interviewees discussed challenges in relation to the planning for the **transition of children with SEND.** Despite a number of additional practices and activities being implemented, interviewees described the difficulties around building a relationship with the child and their family but also ensuring they have all assessment information they need to plan for a successful transition to school.

‘It has been very difficult to get transition right for our SEN children. They’ve had a much slower start than everybody else in Reception. And it’s been really really hard to get a good picture of the children. It’s taken a long time getting to know them.’ (EY Lead 3)

‘SEN transition was one area I was less satisfied with. We did do extra things because of Covid but it wasn’t the same.’ (EY Lead 1)
For one interviewee, transition for children with SEN was very positive due to the fact that strong relationships with the families were already in place:

‘Transition for children with SEN was so seamless because we already had a relationship with the families.’ (EY Lead 7)

Despite these challenges, all early years leads interviewed talked about how pleased they were with how transition to primary school worked out this year. All interviewees expressed a feeling of relief and surprise about how well children transitioned to school and reported on the positive learning that has arisen from having to work in different ways:

‘It’s been a much more positive experience than any of us were really thinking it would be. It wasn’t as difficult as we thought it would be.’ (EY Lead 4)

‘As educators we are always very research oriented, we always wonder the what if’s. Wondering what it would be like if children haven’t had that preschool experience, and wondering what it would be like if this and that and you know what? We have been gifted that. It’s been a really interesting time to really re-evaluate our practice. Reconsider everything that we do in transition and it is about that kind of rebooting and refreshing and it’s making us look with fresh eyes at things. So yes, it’s been tough. And yes, we’ve had to rethinking everything that we do. But actually, we’ve taken a lot of really, really powerful and positive learning from it too.’ (EY Lead 8)

‘It’s all about balance isn’t it? I felt I was balancing what the children needed and they all need different things because they had different experiences. What the parents needed. Again, that was different. And what the staff needed in order to prepare for it. So, I think the compromise worked well in the end.’ (EY Lead 1)

3.3 Key Theme 2 – The Impact of Covid-19 on Early Years Transition to School

Interviewees talked about the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the children, their families and on school staff.
### 3.3.1 Impact on Children

All but one interviewee reported varied and sometimes significant negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children’s development:

‘I don’t think there is any significant difference. I think we were expecting there to be and I think we were expecting to have to work a little bit more and do more work on just not having that one-to-one attention all the time and following instructions but I say no difference to any other start of the school year.’ (EY Lead 2)

**IMPACT ON LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT**

Interviewees reported on a varied impact on children’s language development due to the closures of early years settings and children spending large periods at home. Some interviewees felt that children’s language ability has improved by increased interaction with their parents:

‘I think their language is actually really good. I think you can tell they’ve been at home having one to one talking to a parent.’ (EY Lead 1)

The majority of our interviewees however reported a significant negative impact on children’s language ability, in particular for children with already identified needs:

‘Some of our children who would have access speech and language therapy in their nursery have missed a large chunk. It’s a strange system because they don’t follow them through to Reception and you have to reapply’ (EY Lead 4)

‘They came in at such a low level on their language. I mean they are always low with their language but this year it was particularly concerning. That’s why our curriculum here is language based.’ (EY Lead 7)

Beyond the impact seen in children’s oral language, interviewees reported significant difficulties with important language and communication skills such as listening and attention:

‘Sitting on the floor and listening to a story.’ (EY Lead 9)

‘It’s noticeable that it’s taken longer to get those routines. For example the first couple of weeks listening to a story – that was very difficult. The children were just not ready to sit and listen to a 10-15 minute story.’ (EY Lead 4)
• IMPACT ON SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT:

Interviewees reported an impact on children’s social skills and ability to be and learn in a group:

‘Socialisation has been an issue especially for children with no siblings. It appears as a fear. When we are doing story time or snack time, we’ve got a few children who appear highly anxious about being in a group’. (EY Lead 10)

‘It’s like we are not Reception practitioners, we are nursery practitioners, that’s where we are at. The social sharing, having to take turns and wait and actually share toys, not just with one other child but in a big group that’s been a real struggle.’ (EY Lead 8)

‘Being in a group of children and not having your need instantly met is really noticeable.’ (EY Lead 9)

‘They are not used to that number of people being around them maybe. If someone bumps into them, there are tears, it’s like a big deal.’ (EY Lead 4)

• IMPACT ON EMOTIONAL WELLBEING, RISK TAKING AND RESILIENCE

All interviewees expressed a sense of relief about the fact that children’s emotional wellbeing did not seem affected or as affected as they feared it might have been:

‘…they literally skipped in’ (EY Lead 7)

‘Their wellbeing is actually quite high, probably higher than when they were at home and didn’t have the structure of nursery and that normality.’ (EY Lead 1)

Interviewees felt that this might be due to children’s young age:

‘The Reception children are the ones that have come in not knowing any better.’ (EY Lead 10)

‘It’s almost easier for very young children. I think what we are really noticing is that the children in the year group above having quite a lot of anxiety around it, whereas young children have sort of taking it in their stride.’ (EY Lead 5)

Interviewees’ positivity was also reflected in their comments about children’s resilience:
'Children have shown an amazing resilience. They’ve surprised everybody.’ (EY Lead 6)
‘I just find this cohort in both classes, they are just the most appreciative, hungry, lovely bunch of kids.’ (EY Lead 7)
‘They missed preschool and they appreciated it and it’s just nice to get back to normal.’ (EY Lead 1)

However, some reported differences in children’s willingness to ‘have a go’ and take risks with their learning:

‘They are not willing to have a go, they are not so willing to try anything new’ (EY Lead 6)

• IMPACT ON INDEPENDENCE SKILLS

All interviewees reported that children have less well-developed independence and self-help skills in comparison to previous cohorts:

‘Toileting seems to be quite poor this year. We’ve had quite a lot of children who have a lot of accidents.’ (EY Lead 4)

‘We noticed that children were less independent when they came into Reception, because they were at home with grandparents or people around them have been doing things for them which wouldn’t have happened if they’d been in nursery.’ (EY Lead 7)

‘We had to work quite hard at things like tidying up.’ (EY Lead 7)

‘They haven’t learned to do certain things like put their coat on, put their shoes on, putting their foot in their shoe, you know dressing themselves is a big thing.’ (EY Lead 6)

• IMPACT ON PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

The greatest impact reported by all interviewees was in regards to children’s physical development. That related to children’s general ‘physical stamina’ (109), as well as specific skills in their fine motor skills:
'We’ve never encountered a cohort like this. There is just no strength in their fingers in their hands so all we are doing at the moment is getting stamina and strength and dexterity going.’ (EY Lead 8)

‘Children’s fine motor control and gross control is a good three to six months adrift of where we would normally expect it to be.’ (EY Lead 1)

‘Fine motor was affected. We found that lots of children didn’t have any notion of using scissors or holding a pencil or a mark making tool. They really struggled with putting their coat on.’ (EY Lead 6)

‘This year a lot of them are holding pencils with two hands which I’ve never seen before. It’s just a foreign object to them really. Not many children are able to write their name, or even the first letter of their name.’ (EY Lead 4)

‘Motor application was incredibly low. They just didn’t know how to hold any kind of writing implement or they just didn’t have any kind of strength.’ (EY Lead 7)

In addition, interviewees talked about children’s gross motor skills and general muscle strength having been affected due to lack of access to open spaces during lockdown:

‘PE and rolling a ball in a certain direction. A lot of our families don’t have gardens. Children may not have used that sort of equipment for a long time.’ (EY Lead 4)

‘Even the ones that have spent a lot of time with their parents. Their core strength isn’t quite the same, so when they’re sitting on the carpet or they are sitting downstairs and painting their postures are very different and I wonder if even if you’re at home writing with your children, it’s not quite the same as sitting at preschool, is it or they might be lying on the floor drawing on their tummy or something? I don’t know.’ (EY Lead 1)

‘That core muscle strength was definitely not where we wanted. Just literally hasn’t got the strength to hold themselves, hold their heads up.’ (EY Lead 8)
• IMPACT ON EARLY LEARNING SKILLS

Finally, interviewees expressed concerns about children’s delayed early learning skills:

‘It feels like they’ve lost about six months of their learning really.’ (EY Lead 3)

‘Those phase one letters and sounds skills and listening. We don’t want children to come to school knowing about all that, but we are used to them distinguishing between sounds and knowing a bit about rhyme and alliteration. We noticed that they don’t have that. We saw how many could already blend and segment and it’s a lot less than usual.’ (EY Lead 1)

‘We’ve noticed some children are not even able to say number names in order’ (EY Lead 4)

• DIFFERENTIAL DISADVANTAGE

Interviewees acknowledged the fact that the impact of the pandemic on children’s development has not been the same for all children and that children from disadvantaged backgrounds and children with SEND have been affected more:

‘The impact has been far greater for our SEN children. Very much so. Everything that the nurseries would have put in place, all the PHSE skills we’ve been lost.’ (EY Lead 10)

‘Some children have had hardly anything done with them, and some have had a lot of attention.’ (EY Lead 1)

‘Some families spent a lot of time in the outdoors and going on nature walks. The families who did engage and did all sorts of things and the families who couldn’t or didn’t.’ (EY Lead 6)

‘I think the main effect has been on the phonics and the pre-reading cause a lot of our parents aren’t readers themselves, so they are not reading to the children.’ (EY Lead 3)

3.3.2 Impact on Parents and Carers

Interviewees talked very positively about parents being resourceful with supporting home learning but also children’s wellbeing and wider life skills:
‘Our parents are very resourceful. We were really impressed with what home had done and the emotional stability parents provided.’ (EY Lead 6)

‘Parents seemed to be doing a lot of life skills we’ve lost in our education system’ (EY Lead 10)

For some interviewees, the biggest impact reported on the families related to food poverty and food insecurity:

‘We had a lot of food poverty during the actual lockdown itself. And we had our own food bank next to the school.’ (EY Lead 7)

‘So the biggest drive for me in relation to transition was to get them in so they could have a meal as soon as possible.’ (EY Lead 7)

Interviewees reported an impact on parents’ and carers’ emotional wellbeing:

‘We’ve had a lot of parents messaging us with quite small things but I think that’s because they can’t come in and talk to us as much and they haven’t got to know us as well. That’s probably had an impact on the parents’ anxiety levels.’ (EY Lead 4)

This was mirrored by some interviewees’ response to the fact they have not managed to build strong relationships with the parents/carers yet:

‘We are finding it difficult not to be able to connect with parents, not having built these relationships yet.’ (EY Lead 9)

In relation to how parents have coped with home learning and the use of technology, opinions varied. Some interviewees felt positive about the fact that parents/carers were able to use technology well to support home learning and access the transition activities offered by the nursery and school:

‘Our families were able to access the technology.’ (EY Lead 2)

Positive effects of online transition activities were particularly mentioned for families who have English as an Additional Language (EAL):

‘We have a lot of EAL families, so we found that having that visualisation that Zoom provides to physically show an object to them was useful.’ (EY Lead 10)
For others, it seemed that the period of home learning has sparked a decision to remove their children from formal education altogether:

‘A lot of our parents have decided to home educate.’ (EY Lead 10)

3.3.3 Impact on School Staff

Although interviewees were not explicitly asked about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on teachers and their work, they all mentioned varied forms of impact. Some interviewees felt very positive and argued that the pandemic, despite the challenges it posed to supporting the transition of children to school, provided a lot of opportunities for learning:

‘No problems, just opportunities.’ (EY Lead 8)

Some interviewees reported feeling unprepared and unskilled to respond to the new technical and digital demands made on them.

‘It was quite a steep learning curve when we first closed down because we didn’t have a clue about online learning and how to use it.’ (EY Lead 3)

Others were more familiar with online learning and reported feeling confident with continuing on that journey of providing support to their pupils’ online:

‘We’ve always used an online platform so we just extended it for online learning whereas before it was only for assessment.’ (EY Lead 8)

All of the interviewees agreed that there has been an increasing focus on staff’s professional development in the area of online learning:

‘We are now investing in Google Classroom. We’ve got new whiteboards, so there’s been a lot of investment in that kind of technological training for staff.’ (EY Lead 3)

However, the most significant impact reported by the majority of the interviewees related to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the emotional wellbeing of teachers. Interviewees talked about feeling stressed and overworked:

‘It’s really tough on teachers cause, although children don’t know it, it’s not as they want it to be. And that’s really tough on teachers. It’s depressing for teachers.”
I don’t think any of us got the emotional and mental wellbeing. It’s a lonely job and not having that connectivity with your colleagues. Collaboratively working is all gone. It’s a very depressing time to be a teacher.’ (EY Lead 9)
‘I’ve never felt so tired.’ (EY Lead 1)

Some reported that a lot of the emotional ‘stress’ derived from the fact that teachers are **trying to minimise the impact of the pandemic on children** and support them as well as they can:

‘The reality is less time, less people, but same, if not more expectation. And yet people like us and our colleagues will not let the children be affected by Covid. And that needs to be acknowledged on the impact of Covid on staff.’ (EY Lead 7)
‘Because our kids are definitely disadvantaged already, we don’t want Covid to disadvantage them anymore so you are doing everything you possibly can, but in a shorter time span all the time and you are doing extra stuff and provide those interventions and we’ve still got to make sure that attainment is there but with less time to do it in.’ (EY Lead 10)

### 3.4 Key Theme 3 – Successful Transition Practices Employed in Early Years Transition 2020

Below is a list of practices employed by schools this year that were deemed successful by our interviewees:

- Using online platforms to communicate with parents in the Summer term before children starting school that allow face-to-face communication:

  ‘I was personally surprised with the Zoom meetings with parents in the summer. The parents seem to really appreciate the fact that they had a chance to speak to us face to face rather than on the phone.’ (EY Lead 9)

- Sending children online videos of their teacher reading stories in the Summer term.

- Child and parent individual visits at school to meet their teachers:

  ‘Individual visits at school worked well and the teachers said that they were able to get a lot of the things they would usually get from the home visits instead.’ (EY Lead 1)
• Staggered entry of small groups of children.

• Extended staggered entry:

'We put an extra 2 weeks on and that was really beneficial both for building relationships with the children but also with the families because it meant that staff had longer to get to know the children in the small group before everybody was in together which was really important.' (EY Lead 2)

• Class allocation that allows for children who know each other from nursery to be together.

• Parents visiting the school in small groups two weeks after the beginning of term to get introduced to the curriculum and school routines.

• Parents dropping off children outside the school gate:

'What’s happened before is that the working parents will give their child a kiss at the door and run. Other parents will stay and then the children whose parents haven’t stayed will be a bit oh hang on a minute, what’s going on here and actually having everyone to do the same thing has probably made that transition from home to school a little bit easier' (EY Lead 2)

• Delayed start of term.

• Sending materials like social stories, school routines and photographs of staff to children with SEND during the Summer term.

Below there is a list of transition approaches and practices that our interviewees reported will continue using after the Covid-19 pandemic has finished:

• A focus on building strong relationships with parents:

‘This is what we always do. You get to know the family and get to know what they need. So we’ll do the same again.’ (EY Lead 9)

• Class allocation that allows for children who know each other from nursery to be together.

• Recording the parents evening presentation so parents who can’t attend the event can access it later.
• School visits for parents and children both in July and September rather than just July.
• Slower settling-in period (290) especially for children with SEND.
• Giving parents several opportunities during the Summer Term to meet with teachers in different ways:

  ‘The zoom meetings. There will always be parent that aren’t able to come in for work or other reasons. Actually, giving parents a couple of opportunities, two or three times that they can see you in different ways is quite nice.’ (EY Lead 4)

• Online meetings with nurseries and early years settings in the Summer Term:

  ‘Zoom meetings with nursery schools could be more widespread. For the nurseries that don’t really engage with transition. So that would be an easier way of ensuring that we meet everybody face to face’ (EY Lead 8)

• Dedicating a space on the school’s website on early years transition.

  ‘Having things that are on your website permanently is a really good thing to do’ (EY Lead 9)

• Welcome videos introducing the school and teaching teams:

  ‘I wouldn’t replace visits of course but having it there for long periods of time for children to be able to watch and to get involved is a great thing.’ (EY Lead 1)

• Longer home visits.

• Parents dropping off children outside the school gate:

  ‘We have to do a bit of reflection on that. We’ve had a lot of parents say it’s quite hard to get a feel for how their children are settling. It’s much more difficult for the parents and for the relationship between teacher and parent. But children have settled a lot better. They were immediately all great. We had one child cry. That was it. They were just straight in and happy.’ (EY Lead 1)

  ‘You miss those conversations with the parents but the disruption to the mornings has been so much better for the children’ (EY Lead 9)
Online learning for children who have to have long periods of time out of school for health reasons.

3.5 **Key Theme 4 – Support for Planning Successful Transitions**

Finally, interviewees were asked about the type of support they need to plan successful transitions in the following years. The majority of them talked about the invaluable support they received this year and will want to continue receiving in the coming years from the *school’s senior leadership team*:

‘A really good SENCo.’ *(EY Lead 1)*

‘Support from school’s SLT and a strong school community.’ *(EY Lead 3)*

‘My SLT because they get early years, they are so understanding, they read research.’ *(EY Lead 6)*

‘An understanding head teacher who understood that the government guidance was guidance written by people who have to come out with blanket recommendations. But what we needed to do was take that guidance and actually tailor it to what our children need. So he was very willing for us to be adaptable and creative in our planning.’ *(EY Lead 8)*

**Meetings and networking with other local schools** was also considered important in terms of support around planning for transition:

‘Cluster meetings on zoom. They are always useful.’ *(EY Lead 4)*

‘Networking with other schools would be really helpful. I am sure there is a lot of fantastic practice out there that we could learn from.’ *(EY Lead 8)*

‘Finding out about the experiences of other schools would be supportive as well, because we’ve all made these decisions. I speak, I speak to other early years leads and every school’s got different rules and regulations, and they’re doing things differently. I think it would be quite supportive to be able to know what’s worked, what hasn’t worked, how people have done things differently. That would be that would be very useful.’ *(EY Lead 1)*
‘Project Reception. We met up in July and we are meeting again this evening. It has been fantastic’ (EY Lead 10)

Clear guidance from the Local Authority was mentioned as being supportive when planning for transition:

‘The Unique Transitions document was very useful.’ (EY Lead 6)

Clearer and better-timed government guidance was also mentioned by all interviewees as essential:

‘Support in terms of resourcing and guidance will be good. What are we allowed to have? Better quality information about the virus and how it transmits would help. But alongside an early years person.’ (EY Lead 10)

Interviewees repeated how essential communication with a child’s early years setting is. Ensuring communication between settings happens in a timely fashion was mentioned by a number of interviewees:

‘Support with contacting the nurseries. I found that quite difficult because it was hard to get through to people and contact the nurseries. If there had been some system in place. If there was some transition thing across Bristol where everybody did it the same way.’ (EY Lead 1)

Interviewees discussed how much they would value financial support when it comes to planning for transition:

‘If we had to go through this again, the biggest demand support we would need would be financial. We used to be able to share resources across three classrooms and now we’re having to provide additional resources because we can’t share them.’ (EY Lead 8)

Finally, interviewees stressed the need for early years practitioners to have support to implement a ‘recovery curriculum’ and focus on supporting the wellbeing needs of children before anything else:

‘How much promise there was to a slow start. I haven’t seen that. There was a bit of discord between the need for an emotional recovery and once people saw that
actually our kids are really resilient and were just happy to be back at school, I think that recovery went out of the window’ (EY Lead 7)
4. Implications for Policy and Practice

The study aimed to investigate the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on early years transitions to school, with a focus on young children with SEND. By documenting changes to typical transition practices and exploring educational professionals’ perspectives and experiences in the way they navigated the Covid-19 crisis to prepare children in their first year of formal schooling, we hoped to identify what school transition practices have been effective and should be built upon and what support is needed for children’s first year of schooling (with a special reference to children with SEND). In the analysis of the data collected, a number of issues were raised which are relevant to professional practice and policy.

Firstly, our results have shown that, overall, a large proportion of early years settings and primary schools typically employed a range of practices to support the transition of children to school. These transition activities and practices aim to foster positive relationships and include connections between children and families and early years settings. Activities reported ranged from information sharing and liaising with families and key professionals to activities that aim to support the child and families to familiarise with the school environment and routines.

Our data also suggest that there has been a significant disruption or delays in planning for early years transition this year as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite this, our findings support that early years practitioners responded to the challenge by adapting their typical transition practices or by employing a range of new activities/practices. However, our data suggest that in many cases early years transition is reliant on individual professionals’ belief and endorsement that successful transitions provide children with the foundation for later school success. Individual professionals’ initiatives, their energy and determination to support transition were driving factors in how settings (early years settings and primary schools) responded. There was less evidence of a consistent and systematic approach to early years transition planning across all settings.
As such, clearer expectations in relation to transition to school are needed across settings to ensure all settings can support smooth and positive transitions to school.

A further important implication from our study is related to the importance of building strong relationships between schools and early years settings. Our data suggests that systems for effective communication across settings are not always in place, and communication that does exist, is again reliant on individuals’ energy and willingness to make those links and build relationships with professionals working in other settings. All settings need to be supported in a more systematic way driven by Local Authority systems to develop effective ways of communication for transition to be jointly considered and planned.

Similarly, our data suggests that the most common transition activity reported by our survey respondents related to increased communication with families, a transition practice that was often highly valued by educational professionals, especially in receiving primary schools. Our results suggested that sharing expectations with parents concerning school routines, practices and demands generally help children’s adjustment into school and promote positive learning experiences in their first year at school. These results support a growing base of research supporting the importance of parental engagement in promoting school success among children.

The present study also indicates that an early focus on planning for transition of children with SEND is needed. Our findings suggested that the few early years settings that have begun to think about transition for a child with SEND in Terms 1 and 2 did have some information to share and were better prepared to support transition, even though the child had not attended the setting since March 2020.

In relation to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children’s first year of schooling, our study pointed to the fact that children settled more easily into Reception than many early years professionals had feared. However, what was noticeable from early assessments and observations was the impact of long periods without essential early learning experiences provided by Early Years settings. Respondents reported on many
areas of ‘regression’, such as speech, language and communication skills; physical development (stamina; fine motor control); risk taking; resilience; and independence.

Importantly, it is evident from our study that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been much greater for children with SEND and children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Missing out on important early learning typically provided by early years settings, disruption of access to specialist support services, lack of access to the outdoors and different types of parental involvement were key factors impacting on the transition and adjustment of these pupils to school. All challenges reported by survey respondents were exacerbated or had greater emphasis in the case of children with SEND and children from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is therefore essential that steps must be taken to provide extra support to the transition these pupils need.

The present study also highlighted a significant impact on the emotional wellbeing of early years professionals. Teachers talked about feeling stressed, overworked and incredibly concerned about children and families as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This emotional stress was created by unclear government guidance and uncertainties posed by the Covid-19 pandemic as well as professionals’ determination to minimise the impact of the pandemic on children and their families. This finding highlights the importance of online support networks for early years professionals that can promote good practice in relation to transition as well as emotional support in times of need. Our findings suggested that emotional stress was mitigated by understanding and support from the school’s senior leadership.

Further on, an important implication of the present study is the need for educational professionals to engage in further and more systematic professional development in online teaching and support. Educational professionals were largely unprepared and unskilled to respond to the technological and digital demands of online learning, and although there have been significant improvements in the second and third national lockdowns on how schools responded, our data suggests that this will continue to be an area of professional development for many educational professionals. The importance of getting online teaching and learning right for children with SEND is paramount.
The importance of a **supportive school system** was also frequently highlighted in our study. A supportive head teacher and senior leadership team was named as essential by almost all study participants in their ability to effectively plan for transition, as is a supportive SENDCo for children with SEND. Our study findings point to the importance of head teachers and senior leadership teams who understand the nature of early years education.

Finally, our study points to the importance of early years professionals’ confidence when it comes to preparing for transition. **Knowing what is best for ‘our school, our families and community’ and using that knowledge and information to redesign transition practices is crucial when it comes to developing professional practice.** The experience of coping with Covid-19 has been seminal in forcing changes to practitioners’ established practices. Many teachers who participated in this study were already thinking about incorporating changed or adapted practices as standard after the pandemic. Making time, at whole-school or phase level, to reflect, evaluate and consider what has been learned from having to adapt and make changes could be a rewarding and empowering experience for early years professionals.
5. Conclusions

The case for carefully planning and supporting the transition of young children to school continues to build, particularly in the case of children with SEND and children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many early years professionals have developed innovative and effective systems to support smooth and positive transitions to school. The experience of coping with Covid-19 led to significant disruptions in planning for transition, but despite these, early years professionals responded to the challenge and adjusted their practices for this year’s cohort of children. Nevertheless, the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic was seen in the areas of children’s language and communication, physical development, social development and independence. Most worryingly, the impact of Covid-19 has been much greater for children with SEND and children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

While most early years professionals intuitively recognise the value and importance of supporting transition to school, barriers persist inhibiting a consistent and systematic approach to planning for transition and adequately preparing children when entering formal education. This means transition support is patchy and young children and their families continue to have unequal access to support when starting school. This research report sets out some suggestions emerging from our study about possible ways forward.
6. References


