care
inspectorate

Early learning and childcare

Recovery play survey report

August 2023

How is the early learning and childcare (ELC) sector recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic?

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What are the challenges and reflections for children, families and staff working across the sector?

Survey findings from

850

respondents

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Survey results

Foreword

High-quality care and learning are vital in helping children fulfil their potential, and it contributes to closing the poverty-related attainment gap. Evidence from the Scottish Government's report, Growing Up in Scotland, shows that all children - but especially those from more disadvantaged backgrounds - benefit from high-quality early learning and childcare (ELC). The report found that the grading on the Care Inspectorate's theme of 'care and support' was associated with child outcomes, supporting families to thrive, and ensuring that parents and carers can work, train or study. Key to delivery is a well-trained, highly-skilled, supported and valued workforce. We know that a skilled and compassionate professional workforce delivering across a diverse landscape of ELC, including childminders and school-aged childcare, is crucial in determining the quality of a child's experience.

Services and their staff have continued to implement the expansion of 1140 hours of funded ELC across Scotland, and have supported children and families throughout the significant challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic. They rapidly responded and adapted to new ways of working to continue delivering childcare and learning during a time of uncertainty and flux, all the while remaining dedicated and compassionate. I thank them all for their ongoing commitment during these challenging times.

As we have come through the pandemic and implementation of the expansion, it is timely to reflect on where the sector is now and how to support the continued delivery of high-quality services that will support children and their families. We know there will be further developments through Scottish Government policy commitments across the regulated childcare sector and beyond to support families to access care and learning for children aged one to two years, including a commitment to school-aged childcare (SACC). As part of the approach to recovery and looking to the future, the sector needs to deliver high-quality care and learning experiences.

This report presents the findings of the Care Inspectorate's recovery play survey and identifies areas that services told us were strengths, and areas where improvements could enhance everyone's experience of ELC delivery. We will carefully consider how best to support the sector and we hope other key stakeholders will use our findings to celebrate success in the sector and support the workforce.

We worked in partnership with Dr James McTaggart, educational psychologist at Highland council, to plan and deliver the recovery play webinars and survey. We want to thank him for his insight, guidance and commitment throughout the project.

I thank everyone involved in early learning and childcare for their contribution to the recovery play survey and their continued commitment to Scotland's children and families.

Jackie Irvine

Care Inspectorate Chief Executive

Introduction

The recovery play survey resulted in 850 responses from across the range of ELC settings including childminders and school-aged childcare in Scotland. We are delighted that practitioners working across the private, voluntary, childminding and local authority settings took the time to respond the survey.

This report is presenting the findings from an online survey launched on 10 February 2023 and closed on 14 March 2023. The survey was developed following two online webinars we hosted in February 2023.

Recovery play webinars

The Care Inspectorate collaborated with educational psychologist at Highland council, Dr James McTaggart, to offer two webinars to the ELC sector focusing on recovery play for children, families and staff. The webinars attracted 650 staff who signed up from a wide range of settings across Scotland. We recognised the need to offer a reflective space to bring practitioners together to share experiences of working during the pandemic and discuss what the opportunities and challenges have been for children, families and staff.

Additionally, we acknowledged the pressures on the sector, the cost-of-living crisis, staffing challenges and the expansion to 1140 hours. The launch of our new Quality framework for daycare of children, childminding and school-aged childcare in June 2022 was the result of an extensive consultation process with the sector and represents what children's care and learning experiences should be. These webinars were planned to support a conversation with practitioners to explore underlying issues and challenges and to see how we can learn from each other. We wanted to review the range of supports that the Care Inspectorate and other national organisations offer the sector and target that support in a meaningful way.

We want to encourage a wide conversation on the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic for children's learning and development, families' engagement with ELC settings and practitioners' reflections on working during the pandemic. We were committed to ensuring the voices and experiences of practitioners were central to the programme for the webinars. Inspectors from the Care Inspectorate worked in partnership with practitioners from a range of settings to make four videos to share and disseminate the learning from the direct experience of practitioners. We worked alongside the following practitioners to make the videos that were a central element of the webinars. The video links can be accessed below.

Sarah Deacon – Little Daisies and Daisy Day Care, Coatbridge

Senga Neill – High Flyers school-aged childcare, Cambuslang

Tracey Eccleson – childminder, Airdrie

Julie Hadley – Tower View nursery, Glasgow

Dr McTaggart works across education, health and the voluntary sector in Highland council. His work focuses on infant mental health, child, and family trauma with a particular interest in the early years. His input focused on the following points.

- The opportunity to refresh knowledge on the power of play and relationships to help us recover in times of stress.
- The opportunity to reflect on resilience and adversity-balancing learning and wellbeing.
- Identifying gaps in children's experiences, spaces and interactions.
- Exploring what are the current challenges for practitioners.

Rationale for the survey

- Acknowledge the challenging time the ELC sector has faced both working during and post the pandemic.
- Explore what strengths practitioners identified as key support in managing through the pandemic.
- Explore any changes in children in ELC settings now and before the pandemic.
- Offer a reflective space for practitioners to share their experiences.
- Understand the impacts of Covid-19 on children's learning and development, reflect on how they are playing and exploring the environment (indoors and outdoors) and identify any gaps in their experiences.
- Understand how settings are working with families post the pandemic, what are the positives and what are the on-going challenges.
- Review what supports the Care Inspectorate, local authorities and other national organisations can offer ELC settings.

Key messages

Key message 1

What has changed about children's interactions with adults to support play and learning

We received a wide range of responses about how children interact with adults since the pandemic. Most settings identified negative impacts for children, in particular children who are identified as needing additional support from adults.

More children are requiring support with their emotional and social developmental needs to support wellbeing and learning. This requires additional time from adults.

Many settings reported ongoing staffing challenges and the impact this has on adults' ability to meet children's needs and support play and learning.

Key message 2

Children's experiences: how they are using spaces outdoors

Forty-seven per cent of respondents told us that the way children access outdoor spaces has changed. This included a significant increase in the time children spent outdoors and how adults created, adapted and improved access to new outdoor spaces.

Many settings reported an increase in providing quiet, reflective, sensory spaces for children alongside a return to offering free-flow use of spaces since the pandemic restrictions.

Key message 3

Family engagement

Many settings adapted their practice during the pandemic to develop a range of digital communications with families. Some of these new models of communication continue to support family engagement. However, there was a recognition that the daily in-person engagement with parents in settings offers a valuable opportunity to work in partnership to support children's learning and development.

Forty-five per cent of respondents told us that family engagement has remained a challenge. Settings report difficulties in re-engaging parents into settings. Staff report that having enough time to engage with families to support greater involvement is an issue.

Key message 4

Resilience and recovery: settings that are recovering well

Many settings reported that they are recovering well, and some of the reasons for this are around the following key themes.

- Recognising and understanding how to view the impact of the pandemic on children's developmental patterns rather than a narrow behaviour lens.
- Recognising the importance of good quality spaces, experiences and interactions to support children's play interests.
- Many settings identify good leadership and positive relationships as a source of resilience for staff, children and families.
- Some settings which are prioritising engagement with families are working creatively to encourage families back into the setting.
- In the settings which are committed to supporting staff wellbeing, staff feel well supported by the leadership and management of the setting.

Key message 5

Challenge and support

Many respondents reported ongoing challenges in recruiting and retaining experienced staff and the negative impact this can have on staff wellbeing and overall levels of stress.

Many respondents highlighted that the continued challenges they are facing in implementing the ELC expansion in relation to increased numbers of children, and the effects of longer days on managing children's developmental needs at key points of the day, for example mealtimes.

Many settings reported that specialist services are harder to reach for ELC staff and families, with longer timescales to enlist support.

Methodology

The methodology used in this survey was a structured online questionnaire. Where percentage breakdowns are available, these may total more or less than 100% due to overall rounding.

For qualitative questions, we used keywords to assess how frequently responses on key themes were received. We then analysed these, presenting some of the most common examples provided. In some instances, people spoke about more than one theme with a single answer, which resulted in totals exceeding 100%.

The online methodology was chosen as it allowed for the collection of quantitative data on key areas of interest, furthermore the survey also included an option for practitioners to submit additional comments. The inclusion of an open-ended follow-up response option was valuable to allow for deeper, qualitative insights and provide contextual understanding of the quantitative responses.

There are important caveats to the findings from this survey. Firstly, due to the voluntary nature, there might have been a non-response or selection bias, with only practitioners who had a particular interest in the survey topic, or who had extremely positive or negative experiences, choosing to respond. Consequently, this might not represent the views of the broader ELC community. Secondly, although the survey covered 22 local authorities, practitioners from the 10 other local authorities did not submit responses, limiting the comprehensiveness of the data.

We targeted respondents across all ELC settings and sectors through the webinars and survey. While the number of respondents was high for a survey of its kind, this report recognises that despite the survey providing useful statistical data, it might not capture the depth and complexity of individual ELC practitioner's experiences.

This survey should be considered as one part of the wider range of information sources about the ELC sector in Scotland.
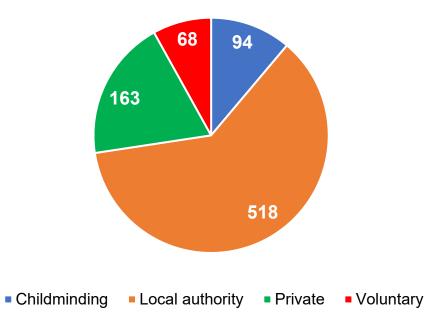
Responses to the survey

Responses to the recovery play survey

The total number of responses received was 850. The following tables provide an overview of the different individuals and service types that submitted a response. Some questions allowed for multiple options to be selected and all questions were set as optional. Therefore, some questions have more than 850 responses and some have fewer.

> **Breakdown of responses**
> This section shows the breakdown of responses from individuals and different service types within the ELC sector.

Question 1
What kind of early learning and childcare services is your setting?

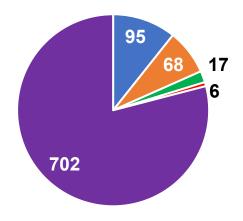■ Childminding ■ Local authority ■ Private ■ Voluntary

Total responses: 843

Percentage breakdown: childminding (11%), local authority (61%), private (19%), voluntary (8%).

Question 2

What type of setting do you work in?

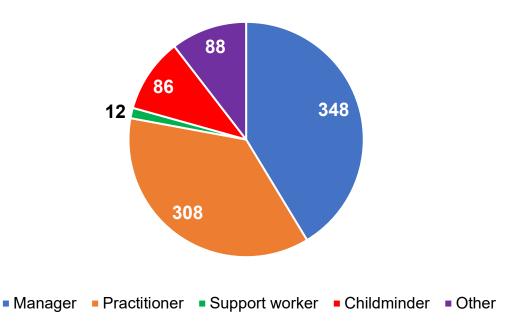■ Childminder ■ School-aged childcare/OSC ■ Playgroup ■ Creche ■ Nursery

Total responses: 888 – this figure will include some respondents who work over more than one type of setting.

Percentage breakdown: childminding (11%), school-aged childcare including out of school care (8%), playgroup (2%), creche (<1%), nursery (79%)

Question 3

What is your role?

■ Manager ■ Practitioner ■ Support worker ■ Childminder ■ Other
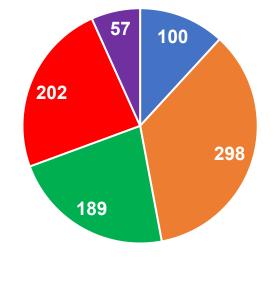
Total responses: 842

Percentage breakdown: manager (41%), practitioner (37%), support worker (1%), childminder (10%), other (10%)

Examples of those who responded 'other' included:

- senior practitioners
- team leaders
- owners/providers
- local authority staff
- administrative staff
- teachers (including head teachers, deputy head teachers and school staff)
- modern apprentices
- attainment based roles (such as equity leads or lead practitioners).

Question 4

What is the maximum number of children who can attend your setting at any one time?

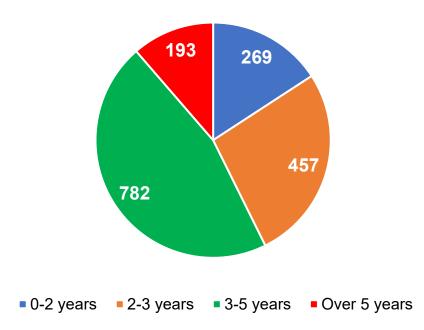

Legend: 0-10, 11-40, 41-60, 61-100, Over 100

Total responses: 846

Percentage breakdown: 0-10 (12%), 11-40 (35%), 41-60 (22%), 61-100 (24%), over 100 (7%)
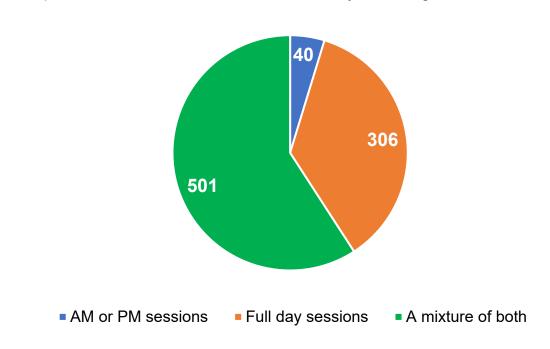
Question 5

What is the age range of the children you work with?

- 0-2 years
- 2-3 years
- 3-5 years
- Over 5 years

Total responses: 1,701

Percentage breakdown: 0-2 (16%), 2-3 (27%), 3-5 (46%), over 5 (11%)

Question 6

What patterns of attendance do children have at your setting?

■ AM or PM sessions   ■ Full day sessions   ■ A mixture of both

Total responses: 847

Percentage breakdown: AM or PM sessions (5%), full day sessions (36%), a mixture of both (59%)
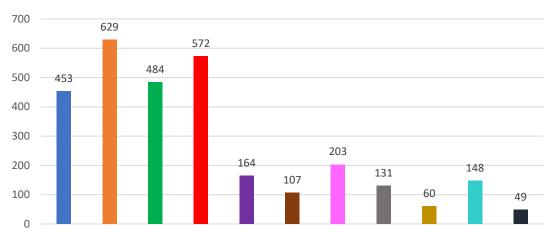
> **Strengths**
> This section focuses on what is working well in ELC as well as what worked well during the pandemic.

Question 7

What strengths do you believe helped your service get through the pandemic?

- Strong leadership team
- Strong staff team or peer support
- Professional relationships - staff
- Professional relationships - with families
- Working in partnership with other agencies
- Support from provider/owner
- Support from local authority
- Support or relationship with community/local networks
- Support or relationship with national bodies
- Support from the Care Inspectorate
- Other

Examples of responses marked 'other' included:
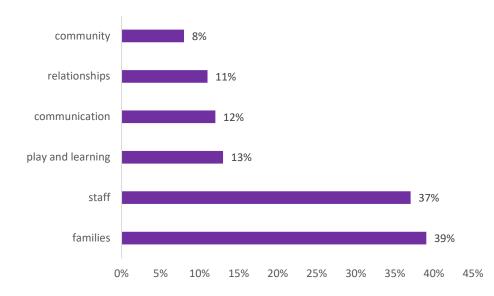
- support from families
- personal qualities of individuals or staff teams
- using guidance, including Scottish Government Covid-19 and other sources.

Some respondents did not feel able to respond because they:

- did not work in a service during the pandemic
- did not feel there was enough support from management
- did not feel there was enough support from other agencies.

Question 8

Can you share an example of the positive work you have been doing to support the recovery process for staff, peers, children and families, including where you have worked well with others?

There were 590 responses to this question.

Thirty-nine per cent of respondents to this question spoke about families. This included:

- recognising and acting on the challenges faced by families
- bringing families back in to the setting and open-door policies
- finding different ways to engage – open days, stay and play, online and in-person meetings or events
- increased focus on nurture and knowing that families are finding it hard
- working with families and schools to plan transitions
- digital technology, including use of Learning Journals to support engagement
- increasing flexibility around pickups and drop-off times
- offering additional support
- basing improvement plans on family need.

Thirty-seven per cent of respondents to this question spoke about staff. This included:

- having strong teams and processes to support new staff
- staff supporting each other
- ensuring staff wellbeing was supported by management
- being flexible, supporting staff with caring responsibilities or appointments.

Thirteen per cent of respondents to this question spoke about play and learning. This included:

- helping families engage with children's play and learning through stay-and-play sessions, digital learning journals and providing resources to help support play and supporting the home learning environment
- accessing the wider community for play such as trips to the library, soft play and local playgroups
- training for staff to support quality play experiences
- adapting play spaces.

Twelve per cent of respondents to this question spoke about communication. This included:

- adopting new or innovative approaches to communication, particularly by digital methods
- regularity of communication with staff, families and other stakeholders, maintaining exchanges of information and updates
- open and honest communication, including open-door policies
- maintaining communication during restrictions or periods when services were closed.

Eleven per cent of respondents to this question spoke about relationships. This included:

- creating a trusting environment for staff, children, families and other professionals
- prioritising relationships with families, including rebuilding relationships when reopening and supporting transitions
- professional relationships between the service and external agencies
- home visits, helping to establish relationships with families from the outset.

Eight per cent of respondents to this question spoke about community. This included:
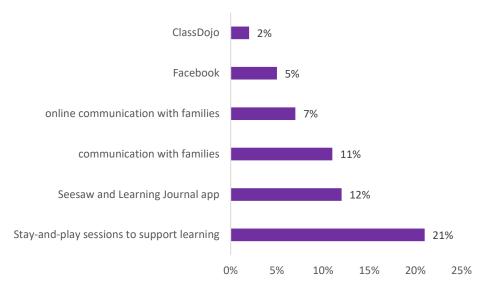
- accessing community resources such as libraries
- re-engaging with different services and activities within the community such as playgroups and care homes for older people
- valuing families and external professionals as part of the service's community
- creating links with other community services such as foodbanks and other organisations who can offer support to families.

Tell us about family engagement in ELC

Question 9

What is working well in terms of family engagement?

There were 664 responses to this question.

Twenty-one per cent of respondents to this question spoke about stay-and-play sessions to support learning. This included:

- stay-and-play sessions to support learning have been a starting point before extending more frequent opportunities for families to spend time in the setting
- staff enjoy the opportunity to engage with parents and carers during stay-and-play sessions
- most stay-and-play sessions are planned group activities such as Bookbug, PEEP (parents' workshops) or opportunities to participate in events, such as Christmas nativity
- some practitioners told us that stay-and-play was the only family engagement.

Eleven per cent of respondents to this question spoke about communication with families. This included:

- daily communication being necessary to meet children's needs
- online communication was a strong feature of communication methods used
- recognition that communication is a two-way process.

Seven per cent of respondents to this question spoke about how online communication with families was working well.   A further 12% specifically mentioned the use of Seesaw app or Learning Journal app, 5% mentioned Facebook and 2% mentioned ClassDojo. This included:

- online communication methods established during Covid-19 pandemic are continuing to work well
- families were reported as responsive to online communication.

Four per cent of people who responded to this question told us that drop-off time was a strength within family engagement. This included:

- recognition that verbal conversations with families are important
- some drop-off experiences are still at the gate or garden outdoors.

What are the challenges?

> **Challenges**
> This section looks at what was challenging for ELC services during the pandemic and continues to be challenging

Question 10

What have you found to be the most challenging element of supporting children and families as we recover from the pandemic?

There were 833 responses to this question.

- ■ Barriers to accessing additional support
- ■ Staff turnover
- ■ Supporting staff wellbeing
- ■ Maintaining your own wellbeing
- ■ Changes in relationships with families
- ■ Changes outwith your control
- ■ Training and development - reduced opportunities
- ■ Other

Common responses marked 'other' included:

- most or all the options available were difficult ('all of the above')
- staffing (including experience levels, turnover, increased sickness absence, recruitment by local authorities and availability of both permanent and temporary staff to fill vacancies)
- burnout, not enough breaks for staff or staff working long hours
- lack of financial assistance
- paperwork expectations, which impact on staff morale and wellbeing
- declining usage of services
- children and families need for extra support (including financial and ASN (additional support needs))
- challenges on referral routes for children to access ASN additional support
- impact on mental health of staff, children and families.

Question 11
What is still challenging in terms of family engagement?

There were 605 responses to this question.

Thirty-five per cent of respondents to this question spoke about families. This included:

- a high number of responses around families being reluctant to engage with settings
- some families need support to build their confidence
- not all families want to come into settings
- some families are very keen to engage but settings do not have the time or resources to fully support this
- more could be done to highlight the role ELC settings can play in supporting families
- some families are living with more challenges than before the pandemic.

Twenty-five per cent of respondents to this question spoke about time. This included:

- a high number of responses detailing that family engagement is restricted due to pressures on staff time
- children are not used to spending time away from parents, which means settling in is harder
- all of staff time is used caring for children or covering for other staff, which leaves very little time for family engagement
- staff deployment does not factor in the time needed for family engagement.

Seventeen per cent of respondents to this question spoke about staff. This included:

- recruitment and retention issues having a negative impact on engagement with families
- increased anxiety in staff
- staff are having to find innovative ways to involve families
- general issues with staffing make family engagement harder
- staff finding it harder to engage with families as families are reluctant to engage
- staff do not have enough time to properly focus on family engagement
- high levels of absence make it harder for staff to reach all families.

Seven per cent of respondents to this question spoke about pick-up and drop-off procedures. This included:

- depending on shift patterns and other logistics staff and families do not always see each other enough
- contrasting views on the positives and negatives of having parents coming into settings
- challenges around confidentiality and sharing of information
- these are not the best times to have quality engagement with families.

Four per cent of respondents to this question spoke about 1140 hours and the ELC expansion.

Some respondents reported the expansion means there is less time for family engagement.

Four per cent of respondents to this question spoke about additional support needs. This included:

- increase in children requiring additional support means there is less time to engage with families
- long waiting lists mean staff are often the main support for families
- increased worries for families who are concerned about their child's support needs being met.
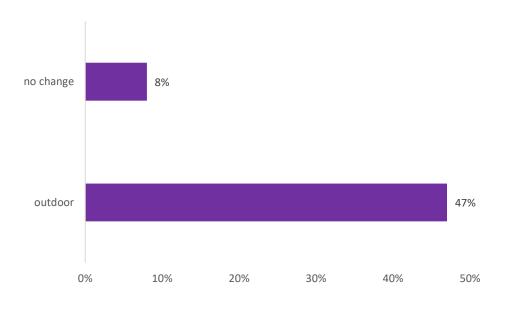
How are children using spaces in ELC?

> **Examples from practice**
> This section provides an overview of current practice within the ELC sector, including what has changed since the pandemic.

Question 12

Can you provide an example of what, if anything, has changed in the way children use spaces indoors and outdoors in your setting now compared to before the pandemic?

There were 629 responses to this question.

Forty-seven per cent of respondents to this question spoke about outdoor spaces. This included:

- significant increases in the time children spend outdoors
- services creating new outdoor spaces such as woodland areas, mud kitchens and additional shelters
- there can be some reluctance from some staff and children to be outdoors, although other children now prefer to be outdoors
- parents can have some reservations about the time spent outdoors
- some children are now more confident in the outdoors and better at assessing risk.

Fifteen per cent of respondents to this question spoke about indoor spaces. This included:

- opening indoor spaces and reducing barriers to children leading their play
- offering children access to an indoor space should they choose not to play outdoors
- offering more balance between indoor and outdoor spaces
- indoor spaces being used less frequently in outdoor settings
- more use of sensory spaces to support children with additional support needs
- more children needing support with indoor activities.

Eleven per cent of people who responded to this question spoke about general spaces. This included:

- keeping spaces as they were or reverting to how spaces were used prior to the pandemic
- increasing the use of sensory or quiet spaces to support children
- changes to how children enter and exit the premises, parents not entering playrooms for drop-off or collection (this was viewed as mainly positive by respondents)
- some children finding it difficult to be in large spaces or groups after lockdown.

Eight per cent of respondents to this question spoke about free-flow spaces. This included:

- free-flow spaces supporting children to lead their learning
- increasing free flow around the setting, including between different spaces as well as indoor and outdoor play
- maintaining free flow throughout the day
- introducing free flow and highlighting the positive impact this has had on children.

Seven per cent of people who responded to this question spoke about resources within spaces. This included:

- using resources differently, focusing on imagination and curiosity
- finding it difficult to maintain or replace resources due to budgets
- children needing additional support to access and use resources
- some caution around use of resources that are not easy to clean
- several negative responses talking about a lack of respect for resources and children having difficulty sharing.
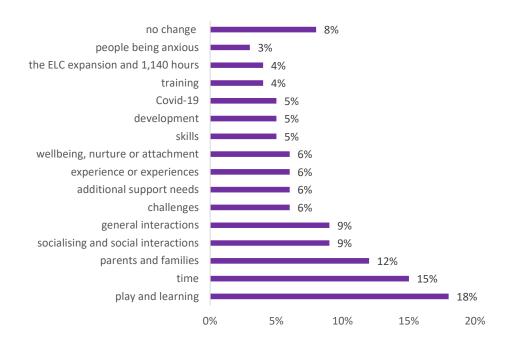
Eight per cent of respondents to this question told us there had been no change to how children used spaces. This included:

- services that are based outdoors all the time
- services that spent lots of time outdoors prior to the pandemic
- services that retained the same balance of indoor and outdoor play.

Question 13

Can you provide an example or your opinion on what, if anything, has changed about how adults, including you or staff members, interact with children to support their play and learning now compared to before the pandemic?

There were 594 responses to this question.

Eighteen per cent of respondents to this question spoke about play and learning. This included:

- children needing more adult support with their play and learning
- widening play opportunities with a greater focus on wellbeing and nurture through play
- challenges around staff having enough time to meaningfully engage in play
- an increase in child-led and responsive play
- an increase in children needing adults to lead their play
- staffing issues impacting on the quality of interactions and children's play experiences
- more interactions focused on children's wellbeing
- more emphasis on play pedagogy and taking time to observe children.

Fifteen per cent of respondents to this question spoke about time. This included:

- staff not having enough time to interact with children due to other commitments such as paperwork or documenting learning and practice
- staff not having enough time to complete all their expected tasks
- taking longer for children to settle and get to know staff
- more time needed to offer additional support to children, which makes it difficult to find a balance to meet all children's needs.

Twelve per cent of respondents to this question spoke about parents and families. This included:

- children finding it hard to separate from parents
- some parents needing extra support
- taking children and families home circumstances into account to help support families appropriately
- some families find it more difficult to engage in their child's learning.

Nine per cent of respondents to this question spoke about socialising and social interactions. This included:

- children having fewer social interactions due to restrictions, which has had a negative impact on wellbeing and learning
- children taking longer to settle and become familiar with staff and peers
- the impact of the pandemic on children's language and communication skills
- children needing help to regulate their emotions in a social setting.

Nine per cent of respondents to this question spoke about general interactions. This included:

- staff are more wary of close contact with children
- staff do not have enough time to interact with children, including where they require additional support
- adapting interactions based on knowledge of children's wellbeing and support needs, including personal circumstances
- staff are less confident in their interactions
- fewer interactions with parents than before.

Six per cent of respondents to this question spoke about challenges. This included:

- increased paperwork impacting on time staff have with children
- managers having to support staff more due to added challenges or pressures
- more challenges faced by families, which staff support them with
- lack of staff causing additional pressures for staff and impacting on interactions
- added pressure of the ELC expansion.

Six per cent of respondents to this question spoke about additional support needs. This included:

- greater waiting times to access specialist support for children, impacting on the level of support needed from staff
- higher levels of children needing additional support
- finding it difficult to have enough time to fully support or interact with children.

Six per cent of respondents to this question spoke about experience or experiences. This included:

- large levels of new or inexperienced staff who have had less time to train
- focus on providing as many social experiences as possible
- children having less experience of group settings or activities.

Six per cent of respondents to this question spoke about wellbeing, nurture or attachment. This included:

- increased focus on children's wellbeing
- increased focus on nurture
- staff being more aware of children and families' wellbeing
- adopting nurturing approaches as the focus of interactions.

Five per cent of respondents to this question spoke about skills. This included:

- staff having less time to focus on developing their skills, which is especially difficult for newer staff
- children needing extra support to develop life skills
- the impact of restrictions and less interaction on children's social skills.

Five per cent of respondents to this question spoke about development. This included:

- being more aware of where children need additional support, nurture, or comfort
- supporting children's social and emotional development
- changing the focus on development, need to support wellbeing and learning holistically
- staff more involved in support due to difficulties accessing other services
- supporting children with their emotions.

Five per cent of respondents to this question spoke about Covid-19. This included:

- removing restrictions such as masks made interacting with children easier
- staff and children being more aware of how viruses spread, which has both positive and negative impacts on interactions and practice.

Four per cent of respondents to this question spoke about training. This included things like:

- more focus on nurture and wellbeing in training programmes
- a lack of training opportunities, which was impacting on staff skills and knowledge.

Four per cent of respondents to this question spoke about the ELC expansion and 1140 hours. This included:

- impact on recruitment and retention of staff
- 1140 hours being the biggest driver of changes in interactions
- a decrease in the time staff have to spend with children.

Three per cent of respondents to this question spoke about people being anxious. This included:

- staff experiencing more anxiety or worries, which sometimes impacts on quality of interactions
- children and their families experiencing more anxiety or worries
- families more anxious about leaving children in settings
- settings having concerns about illness and how to manage this.

Eight per cent of respondents to this question told us there had been no change in interactions and where they expanded on this answer, they told us it was because:

- they had more settled staff teams
- they had an experienced staff team.

Question 14

We know an impact from the pandemic has been reduced engagement of parents with ELC settings. To help us understand how to provide the most appropriate support, can you indicate where you feel you are now with family engagement as compared to before the pandemic?

There were 801 responses to this question.

- Has improved
- Was difficult and remains difficult
- Has become more difficult

Percentage breakdown: has improved (55%), was difficult and remains difficult (26%), has become more difficult (19%).

Question 15

Can you share an example of what you are doing to support children who may be more upset, distressed, or reluctant to explore and engage?
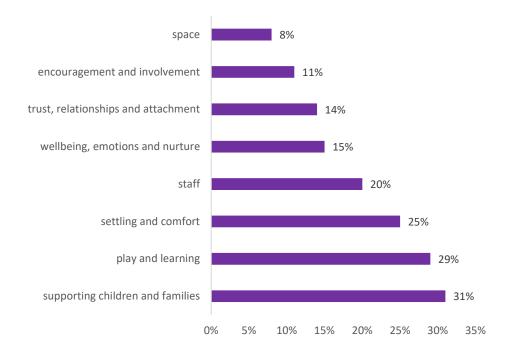
There were 668 responses to this question.

Thirty-one per cent of respondents to this question spoke about supporting children and families. This included:

- increased communication between home and nursery
- focusing on getting to know each family and providing reassurance
- working loosely with families to plan children's care and support as well as sharing updates on children's progress
- having parents back in the setting, which helps form relationships
- helping families access additional support
- inviting parents to stay and play sessions
- flexibility around pick-up and drop-off.

Twenty-nine per cent of respondents to this question spoke about play and learning. This included:

- offering stay and play sessions to support learning
- staff regularly engaging in play with children
- using observations of play to help plan for children's care, play and learning
- play and free play supporting children's resilience
- increased access to outdoor play.

Twenty-five per cent of respondents to this question spoke about settling and comfort. This included:

- offering longer or more individual settling sessions depending on the needs of each child and family
- supporting children to bring transitional objects from home to help with settling in
- enhancing the transition process from home to setting and supporting parents to stay in longer during settling
- allowing as much time as needed for settling in
- experiences focused on emotions and supporting children to make connections.

Twenty per cent of respondents to this question spoke about staff.   This included:

- the importance of staff skills in comforting and supporting children
- the importance of consistent staffing and providing named staff or keyworkers for children
- providing opportunities for staff to support individual children
- providing training on Solihull or nurture-based approaches
- having a larger staff team helps, it is more difficult to adopt positive approaches if there is pressure on staffing through recruitment or absence
- providing opportunities for staff to raise concerns helped ease pressures.

Fifteen per cent of respondents to this question spoke about wellbeing, emotions and nurture. This included:

- providing experiences aimed at supporting children's wellbeing
- helping children to understand their emotions using nurtured based approaches
- practitioners increased awareness of nurture and trauma-informed practice.

Fourteen per cent of respondents to this question spoke about trust, relationships and attachment. This included:

- keyworker systems supporting staff and children to build relationships
- prioritising building relationships with children and families
- regular communication with families
- developing practice to support attachment for children, including staff training and targeted improvement plans.

Eleven per cent of respondents to this question spoke about encouragement and involvement. This included:

- involving families as much as possible
- encouraging families to be more involved in the setting
- using positive approaches to help children engage with peers and staff
- the importance of providing responsive child led experiences based on children's needs and interests.

Eight per cent of respondents to this question spoke about space. This included:

- creating quiet spaces and nurture or sensory rooms
- providing access to spaces that support small group activities
- ensuring children have space to self-regulate
- allowing children, the time and space they need to settle each day.

Question 16

We appreciate that has been a particularly challenging time for everyone in the ELC sector. To help us understand how to provide the most appropriate support can you indicate whether children in your setting are offered the following experiences more or less often than compared to before the pandemic?

Percentage breakdown (of 831 total responses to this question)

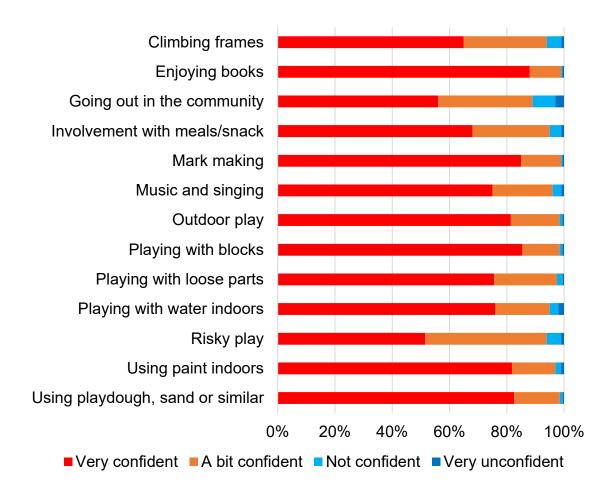|	Much more	A bit more	About the same	A bit less	Much less
Climbing frames	7%	10%	69%	8%	7%
Enjoying books	11%	16%	66%	5%	2%
Going out in the community	12%	12%	34%	22%	20%
Involvement with meals/snack	21%	21%	38%	16%	4%
Mark making	10%	11%	76%	4%	<1%
Music and singing	13%	13%	58%	12%	4%
Outdoor play	35%	24%	38%	2%	1%
Playing with blocks	15%	14%	70%	1%	<1%
Playing with loose parts	19%	19%	56%	4%	1%
Playing with water indoors	9%	7%	69%	10%	4%
Time for children to have chats with adults	16%	18%	45%	12%	9%
Using paint indoors	7%	8%	79%	5%	2%
Using playdough, sand or similar	11%	10%	68%	9%	2%

The specific comments made by participants for questions 16 and 17 are included within question 18.

Question 17
How confident are you in providing these experiences now?

Percentage breakdown (of 832 total responses to this question)

	Very confident	A bit confident	Not confident	Very unconfident
Climbing frames	65%	29%	5%	1%
Enjoying books	88%	11%	<1%	<1%
Going out in the community	56%	33%	8%	3%
Involvement with meals/snack	68%	27%	4%	1%
Mark making	85%	14%	<1%	<1%
Music and singing	75%	21%	3%	1%
Outdoor play	81%	17%	1%	<1%
Playing with blocks	85%	13%	1%	<1%
Playing with loose parts	76%	22%	2%	<1%
Playing with water indoors	76%	19%	3%	2%
Risky play	51%	42%	5%	1%
Using paint indoors	81%	15%	2%	1%
Using playdough, sand or similar	83%	16%	1%	<1%

Any further comments ?

Question 18

Do you have any further comments to tell us about the experiences you are providing for children now?

There were 374 responses to this question.

Thirty-four per cent of respondents to questions 16, 17 and 18 spoke about staff. This included:

- an increase in other tasks and responsibilities, including paperwork and providing one-to-one support can take staff away from quality play and interaction opportunities
- strong staffing models make it easier to provide quality experiences
- staffing pressures and challenges impacting negatively on the quality of experiences offered to children (challenges include recruitment, additional tasks, and the stress of inspection)
- taking time for staff to build their confidence back up
- staff are working hard to provide the best experiences for children
- there is a high turnover and a lot of new staff impacting on quality of experiences.

Twenty-six per cent of respondents to this question spoke about experiences in general. This included:

- regaining confidence providing some experiences such as those with food or shared resources
- providing a safe, stimulating environment is the key to good experiences
- it is challenging to provide quality experiences due to other pressures
- more use of natural, organic and sensory resources
- the importance of a calm environment and quality interactions with adults
- staffing challenges directly impact the experiences services can offer.

Twenty per cent of respondents to questions 16, 17 and 18 spoke about play and resources. This included:

- lack of resources or staffing issues impacting negatively on the quality of play experiences
- a general lack of resources or lack of finances to improve resources
- adopting new and innovative approaches to play and learning
- increased free play and outdoor play.

Twelve per cent of respondents to questions 16, 17 and 18 spoke about additional support needs. This included:

- an increase in the number of children requiring additional support but staffing is insufficient meet all children's needs
- lower staff to child ratios are needed, which makes it harder to get out in the community and impacts on other experiences
- it is more difficult to access support from other agencies following the pandemic
- services are not equipped to meet the needs of children who require additional support
- pressures around staffing and children needing additional support are intricately linked.

Ten per cent of respondents to questions 16, 17 and 18 spoke about the ELC expansion and 1140 hours. This included:
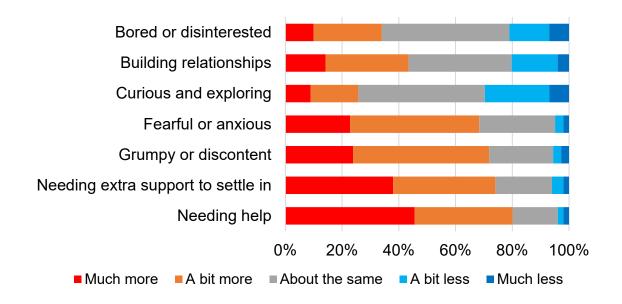
- the expansion is having an impact on the quality of experiences offered to children
- the expansion is having an impact on staff wellbeing and morale, which impacts on quality
- the expansion has some positive aspects, but some services are understaffed and under resourced at present.
  .

Eight per cent of respondents to questions 16, 17 and 18 spoke about lunch, snacks, and mealtimes. This included:

- reluctance around meal preparation or sharing of food
- new or innovative approaches to mealtimes have been introduced
- some services find the focus on mealtimes has a negative impact on the rest of the day
- mealtimes are the focus of some improvement plans.

Question 19

In general, how would you compare how children are now in your setting to the children before the pandemic?

Percentage breakdown (of 816 total responses to this question)

	Much more	A bit more	About the same	A bit less	A lot less
Bored or disinterested	10%	24%	45%	14%	7%
Building relationships	14%	29%	36%	16%	4%
Curious and exploring	9%	17%	45%	23%	7%
Fearful or anxious	23%	46%	27%	3%	2%
Grumpy or discontent	17%	34%	36%	8%	5%
Needing extra support to settle in	38%	36%	20%	4%	2%
Needing help	46%	35%	16%	2%	2%

Question 20

Do you have any other comments on how children are in your setting now, compared to before the pandemic?

There were 409 responses to this question.

Category	Percentage
the ELC expansion and 1,140 hours	4%
resilience	5%
communication and interactions	8%
staffing	13%
play and learning	13%
children's skills, learning and development	20%
parents and families	22%
additional support needs	29%

Twenty-nine per cent of respondents to this question spoke about additional support needs. This included:

- significant increase in children needing additional support
- lockdown has impacted the level of support children require
- services are now more likely to be the agency that requests additional support
- settling in processes have been adapted to support children who need some additional support
- children require extra support for a range of reasons, not only because of additional support needs.

Twenty-two per cent of respondents to this question spoke about parents and families. This included:

- children and families are much more anxious compared to before the pandemic
- families often need support from other agencies or organisations
- issues with attachment are impacting on settling in and children find it harder to separate from parents
- parents need more reassurance on how their child's day has been
- mixed views on the best way for parents to drop off or collect children (some kept parents at the door, others allowed them inside)
- lack of other groups such as playgroups or parent and toddler groups has impacted on parents' confidence and skills
- parents find it hard to support children with their emotions
- other pressures such as employment mean parents need to put children into services at a younger age.

Twenty per cent of respondents to this question spoke about children's skills, learning and development. This included:

- children are developing at a slower pace than compared to before the pandemic
- restrictions and lockdowns have impacted on children's development, including motor skills and social skills
- children's language development has been impacted by the pandemic
- services are not able to access the correct support children need at the right time
- children are much less independent than before the pandemic.

Thirteen per cent of respondents to this question spoke about play and learning. This included:

- mixed views on whether children are less engaged or more engaged in play compared to before the pandemic
- children find it more difficult to play in larger group settings
- some improvements in children's engagement are noticeable as we get further away from covid restrictions
- some negative views on children breaking or damaging resources
- the business of settings and longer days makes it harder for children to play.

Thirteen per cent of respondents to this question spoke about staffing.   This included:

- staff find it hard to support all children and meet all children's needs
- staff absences have increased, and recruitment is harder
- staff shortages are having a negative impact on quality and children's experiences
- staff are experiencing more aggression and, in some instances, violence from children
- longer session times are harder for staff and children.

Eight per cent of respondents to this question spoke about communication and interactions. This included:

- development of children's communication and language skills is more gradual than before the pandemic
- children find it more difficult to interact with staff and peers
- effective communication with families can help the settling in process
- staff are having to support children to develop their communication and language skills more often than before the pandemic.

Five per cent of respondents to this question spoke about resilience. This included:

- contrasting views on whether children's resilience has improved or worsened following the pandemic
- some services are focusing on building children's resilience.

Four per cent of respondents to this question spoke about the ELC expansion and 1140 hours. This included:

- the expansion is impacting on quality within some services
- some services are not able to support all children due to pressures.

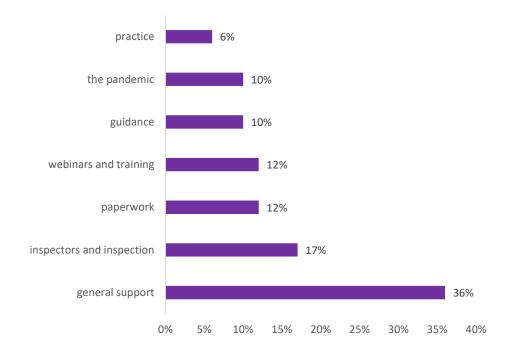# How can the Care Inspectorate provide further support?

Further support
This section looks at what respondents told us is still needed form the Care Inspectorate, local authorities and other organisations.

Question 21
What is still needed from the Care Inspectorate?

There were 536 responses to this question.

Category	Percentage
practice	6%
the pandemic	10%
guidance	10%
webinars and training	12%
paperwork	12%
inspectors and inspection	17%
general support	36%

Some 36 per cent of people who responded to this question spoke about general support. This included:

- the Care Inspectorate should adopt a more supportive approach to inspections
- support for services to improve even where they are good or very good already
- visits outside of inspection to support services
- establishing groups of providers that can offer peer support
- more interaction outside of inspection
- more understanding of the support children need and how too much paperwork impacts on this
- more information, training and guidance on how to support children with additional support needs
- taking emotional wellbeing of staff into consideration during inspection
- providing more support to the sector in general
- several positive comments describing a supportive relationship with inspectors and the Care Inspectorate.

Seventeen per cent of respondents to this question spoke about inspectors and inspection. This included:

- inspectors could be more aware of the challenges faced by services
- more closely aligning with local authorities in terms of what is expected of services
- offering more support to services outside of inspection and for the inspection process to be more supportive
- providing more written resources on what is expected of services, including checklists and being clear on the paperwork required
- focus on having positive relationships with services
- more consistency in who the inspector is, fewer changes of inspector
- more consistency in what inspectors look for in services
- finding ways to make inspection less stressful
- several positive comments describing positive, supportive relationships between services and inspectors.

Twelve per cent of respondents to this question spoke about paperwork. This included:

- aligning expectations on paperwork more closely with local authority
- there should be less reliance on paperwork at inspection
- reducing paperwork expectations would give staff more time to spend engaging with children
- paperwork requirements create additional pressures and stress for staff
- paperwork is more important to the Care Inspectorate than to families.

Twelve per cent of respondents to this question spoke about webinars and training. This included:

- recent webinars were helpful and supportive
- practice notes are helpful
- more training opportunities and engagement with the sector outside of inspection would be helpful
- training on specific pieces of guidance would be helpful
- training from the Care Inspectorate would be supportive and offer reassurance.

Ten per cent of respondents to this question spoke about guidance. This included:

- less reliance on published guidance with more direct support such as training and webinars
- more notice or raising of awareness when guidance changes
- inspections can help offer support and guidance, but not all services have been inspected since the pandemic
- more guidance on key areas such as illness, family support and general best practice expectations.

Ten per cent of respondents to this question spoke about the pandemic. This included:

- doing more to appreciate and understand the impact the pandemic has had on services
- support calls during the pandemic were appreciated and supported services at a challenging time
- post-pandemic inspections could have been more supportive
- more time is needed to recover from the pandemic before inspections are carried out.
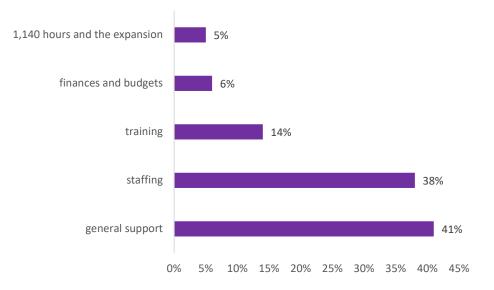
Six per cent of respondents to this question spoke about practice. This included:

- more sharing of good practice and ideas would help support services
- case studies and video examples of good practice would be helpful
- more guidance is needed for services, including on what inspection looks like.

What further support is needed from local authorities?

Question 22

What is still needed from local authorities?

There were 566 responses to this question.

Some 41 per cent of people who responded to this question spoke about broad support. This included

- financial support and more recognition of financial pressures
- more parity between local authority settings and partner providers in terms of training and support provided
- more support for families out with ELC settings
- having more time to support settings, as capacity seems stretched
- more support for children with additional support needs
- support available is not consistent between different local authorities or with different partner providers
- more support and resources to help families and for early intervention
- more support with the expectations around paperwork, providing examples of what is expected
- some settings reported wanting greater support from local authorities
- more capacity within specialist teams such as educational psychologists or speech and language
- several positive comments about support being provided, particularly by QIOs/link officers.

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Some 38 per cent of people who responded to this question spoke about staffing. This included:

- more support to access quality training opportunities
- a reduction in the number of staff leaving the PVI sector for local authorities is necessary
- fairer pay for all staff to help keep staff and have continuity of care for children
- better staffing models, including more cover for absence and illness
- more opportunities for staff from different services to meet and discuss practice or offer peer support
- reintroduction of room leads or senior practitioner roles
- considering the needs of a service or children when designing staffing models
- more acknowledgement of the impact of 1140/the expansion on staffing levels as well as staff wellbeing and morale
- reduce the time staff spend on other tasks to allow more time with children
- increase the number of bank or relief staff that are available
- more support for settings who are not in partnership for ELC.

Another 14 per cent of people who responded to this question spoke about training. This included:

- more access to training for staff
- more support with accessing formal qualifications
- additional funding for training
- more training in specific areas including first aid and additional support needs
- ensuring there are enough staff to allow services to release staff attending training
- increased training opportunities for school-aged childcare services and childminders
- wider access to shared training opportunities for all sectors.

Some 6 per cent of people who responded to this question spoke about finances and budgets. This included:

- an increase in support with budgets and finances is needed
- less complexity around finances and contracts
- an increase in the money available to services
- larger budgets to help meet the expectations of both local authorities and the Care Inspectorate.
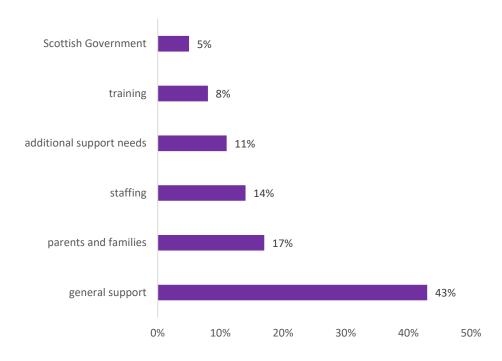
Some 5 per cent of people who responded to this question spoke about 1140 hours and the expansion. This included:

- equitable funding models are needed
- an evaluation of the impact of the expansion would be helpful
- more listening to providers about the expansion and impact is needed
- the expansion should be paused
- more help with meeting the expectations of the expansion.

What further support is needed from other organisations?

Question 23
What is still needed from other organisations?

There were 331 responses to this question.

Forty-three per cent of respondents to this question spoke about general support. This included:

- a wide variety of support is needed including financial support, support with recruitment and more support from other organisations including the Care Inspectorate, Education Scotland, local authorities and Scottish Government
- support should be more accessible and better suited for settings to use in practice
- national bodies such as NDNA, CALA, SOSC and SCMA offer helpful support to services
- more support from health colleagues and agencies that can provide services for children with additional support needs
- more support should be provided face to face
- several people and services feel well supported by other organisations or have sufficient internal support within their organisation.

Seventeen per cent of respondents to this question spoke about parents and families. This included:

- more advice and support being available for families
- easier access to services that can provider support, particularly for children with additional support needs
- reducing waiting lists for other services including ASN, CAMHS and other medical services
- more family engagement and better ways to help families link with others.

Fourteen per cent of respondents to this question spoke about staffing. This included:

- finding ways to encourage more people into the sector
- changing how ELC staff are viewed, to see them as qualified professionals
- valuing the ELC workforce more
- improving the quality of training and development support for inexperienced staff
- finding ways to improve job satisfaction and wellbeing.

Eleven per cent of respondents to this question spoke about additional support needs. This included:

- improved waiting times, a reduction in the amount of time between referral and being seen
- more face-to-face support for children and families
- increasing the amount of support available to children and families
- more training and guidance for staff to support children with additional support needs.

Eight per cent of respondents to this question spoke about training. This included:

- more affordable training
- training on specific themes such as outdoor play and learning
- increasing the accessibility of training for all settings.

Five per cent of people who responded to this question spoke about the Scottish Government. This included:

- support with recruitment and retention of staff
- support with finances and budgeting
- fairer financial arrangements
- a review of the expansion to ensure it is successful.

What is harder to bring back after the pandemic?

Next steps – key actions

Below are two word clouds that demonstrate the most common answers to the poll conducted at each of the webinars.

The poll results from the webinars reinforce some key themes identified in the survey results. Firstly, that staffing, and staff confidence and wellbeing, remain significant challenges. Secondly, the ELC sector is fully aware of the importance of improving engagement and involvement with parents in settings and it has identified this as a critical area requiring support from national organisations and local authorities.

Next steps – We are listening

Respondents looked for the Care Inspectorate to be more consistent, offer more support outside of the inspection process and reduce the burden of paperwork, particularly where local authorities or others require similar documents.

Actions the Care Inspectorate will take forward

You said	We will do
Over burden of paperwork requirements from Care Inspectorate and Education Scotland.	We are developing a shared inspection framework with Education Scotland. When the framework is developed, we will also review our shared inspection methodology.
Childminders said there can be too much paperwork and expectations differ depending on the regulator or local authority.	We will clarify our expectations on paperwork for childminders and produce guidance. Following the survey, we will be engaging with representatives from across ELC and SACC settings to undertake a similar exercise.
Not knowing what an inspection is like can lead to anxiety.	We already offer a resource explaining what an inspection might look like to support the sector and promote collaborative relationships. We will promote this again and consider with the sector what could be improved.
Support is needed from a wide range of local and national bodies, including those that can provide additional support for children who need it.	We will share the findings of this survey with key national stakeholder groups Education Scotland and Scottish Government.

You said	We will do
There can be inconsistency in the judgement and expectations of inspectors.	While every inspection is unique and individual professional judgements are crucial, we are continuing to develop our internal processes and quality assurance systems to support a consistent approach to inspection.
Respondents highlighted that the webinars and recent practice notes have been helpful and requested more opportunities to meet with the sector community to share practice ideas.	We will produce more practice notes, prioritising the challenges of engaging with parents in settings across the ELC sector. We will work in partnership with Education Scotland, Scottish Government and other stakeholder groups to discuss the survey results and how best we can work together to target support appropriately.

Thanks to all the children, families and settings featured in this report.

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