

# NATIONAL SENCO WORKFORCE SURVEY 2020

Supporting children and young people with special educational needs and their families during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

A national survey of SENCOs

*“It felt desperate at times”*



# BATH SPA UNIVERSITY








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Bath Spa University is where creative minds meet. One of the UK's leading creative universities, Bath Spa nurtures talent and innovation, offering a wide range of courses across the arts, sciences, education, social science and business to over 7,000 students.

The University employs outstanding creative professionals, who support its aim to be a leading educational institution in creativity, culture and enterprise. Based in stunning countryside just a few minutes from a World Heritage City, Bath Spa University ensures its students graduate as engaged global citizens who are ready for the world of work.

The University's School of Education has been inspiring students, teachers and other education professionals since 1946. As a leader in its field, the School trains, inspires, creates and connects with educators in the region and all over the world, working with over 670 school partners, as well as with colleges, early years settings and anywhere learning takes place. All of its Primary and Secondary teacher training programmes have been rated 'Outstanding' by Ofsted – the highest possible grade that can be achieved.

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nasen



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## About nasen

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nasen is the National Association for Special Educational Needs - a charitable membership organisation that exists to support and champion those working with, and for, children and young people with SEND and learning differences.

Their work ensures that all education practitioners are given the information and support required so that children and young people, particularly those with SEND and learning differences, can thrive.

From SENCOs to senior leaders, teachers to TAs, Local Authorities to leadership boards and beyond, they want to ensure that every part of the education workforce is equipped to understand, identify and support those with SEND and learning differences. Collectively, they can break down the barriers that prevent children and young people from participating in education.

 [nasen.org.uk](https://www.nasen.org.uk)

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| AP       | Alternative Provision                              |
| BERA     | British Educational Research Association           |
| EHC plan | Education, Health and Care plan                    |
| IT       | Information Technology                             |
| LA       | Local Authority                                    |
| MAT      | Multi-Academy Trust                                |
| nasen    | National Association for Special Educational Needs |
| Ofsted   | Office for Standards in Education                  |
| PRU      | Pupil Referral Unit                                |
| SEN      | Special Educational Needs                          |
| SENCO    | Special Educational Needs Coordinator              |
| SEND     | Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities      |
| SLT      | Senior Leadership Team                             |
| YP       | Young people                                       |

### Notes:

- » The terms SEN/ SEND are used interchangeably within the report.
- » As per the SEND Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015) the term 'parent' includes all those with parental responsibility, including parents and those who care for the child.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In 2018 the National Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) Workload Survey was launched and received over 1900 responses.

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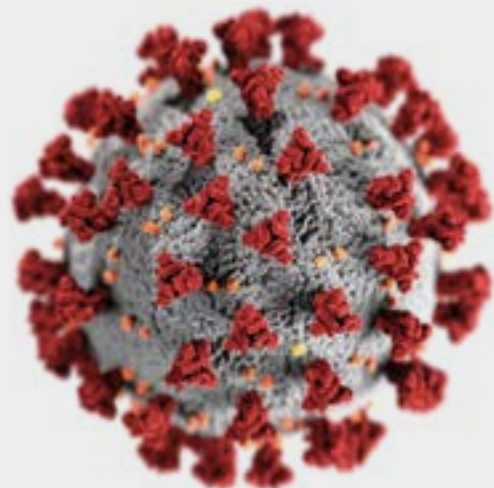
The findings from the research culminated in the report *It's about time: The impact of SENCO workload on the professional and the school* (Curran et al., 2018). The initial survey was followed up in 2019, with the findings published in the January 2020 report *The time is now: Addressing missed opportunities for special educational needs support and coordination in our schools* (Curran et al., 2020). The reports have been shared with the Department for Education (DfE) and have influenced the work of SENCOs, schools and organisations such as nasen and the work of the Whole School SEND Consortium (hosted by nasen).

Now in its third year, Bath Spa University and nasen have continued their research into the role of the SENCO through the National SENCO Workforce Survey 2020. However, a crucial difference with the 2020 survey was the exceptional time period during which it took place. Schools have had to respond immediately to this unprecedented event. To this end in addition to exploring the SENCO role in general, the 2020 survey also focused on capturing the experiences of SENCOs and their schools in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The survey opened on 24th August 2020 and closed on 5th October 2020. The survey asked SENCOs to consider their experiences in school, from when schools closed to the majority of children and young people (YP) in March 2020 to the present day.

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This report specifically details the findings from the 2020 survey related to support provided during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The survey draws on 1022 responses from participants who consented for their data to be analysed and collated as part of this research project, who also identified as a SENCO (or equivalent, for example inclusion coordinator), working in a school or educational setting in England.

In summary, the report has highlighted that the challenges which existed in schools prior to the pandemic, specific to the provision of support for children and YP with special educational needs (SEN) and the facilitation of the SENCO role, not only remain but have been amplified as a result of coronavirus (COVID-19). In terms of the initial first period of lockdown and continuing through to the wider opening of schools in September, particular challenges for schools have included ensuring children and YP had access to appropriate information technology (IT) hardware and the provision of virtual support for learners with SEN. SENCOs have reported that the provision of differentiated learning for children and YP with SEN, and the provision of support for children and YP with Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans was challenging during this period. The challenges reported by SENCOs in 2018 and 2019 in relation to the facilitation of the role not only remained but have increased through this pandemic period. The focus of the role shifted, with additional responsibilities related to school leadership and safeguarding needing to take priority over the SENCO role. However, SENCOs reported that a further change to their role was the increased focus on communication with parents and families, something, workload permitting they were keen to continue. The amplification of such challenges in schools echoes the view of Justine Greening (2020), former MP and Secretary of State for Education, who has suggested that the pandemic has widened inequalities in education.

Whilst the report highlights the need for timely, consistent guidance from central and local government, it equally highlights the way in which Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) can work together effectively during challenging periods to support each other both operationally and strategically. The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is making schools think differently about not only their universal offer, but also the potential benefits that learning online can bring, especially for learners with SEN. In addition to this, moving forward a key priority for SENCOs is a focus on mental health and wellbeing in schools as well as increased communication with parents and families, illustrating that the pandemic has not only impacted on school experiences in the short term, but will change the way in which schools work into the future.

## KEY FINDINGS

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### The experience of learning online during coronavirus (COVID-19)

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- » 70% of SENCOs cited that the access children and Young People had to IT hardware at home was a key challenge for schools.
- » Three-quarters of SENCOs felt that their school experienced challenges with providing virtual support for children and Young People with SEN.
- » The overall digital literacy of the school also presented an obstacle, with just over half of SENCOs citing this as a problematic.
- » The provision of appropriately differentiated work online for children and Young People with SEN was a challenge, with nearly three-quarters of SENCOs highlighting this as a concern.
- » 8 out of 10 secondary colleagues cited providing differentiated learning online for children and Young People with SEN as difficult.
- » Just over half of SENCOs stated that supporting staff in developing differentiated learning was also difficult during this period.



## KEY FINDINGS

**70%**  
**of SENCOs**

cited that the access children and young people had to IT hardware at home was a key challenge for schools.

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**just over HALF**  
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stated that supporting staff in developing differentiated learning was also difficult during this period.

## KEY FINDINGS

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### The experience in school during coronavirus (COVID-19) - continued

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- » Nearly three-quarters of SENCOs stated that, from their perspective, their school had experienced challenges in providing support in the setting for children and Young People with EHC plans.
- » The management of risk assessments for children and Young People with EHC plans appeared to be a key area of challenge, with over half of SENCOs highlighting this as an issue (56.7%). This was particularly acute in two regions: 65% of SENCOs in the North East and 64.1% in Yorkshire and the Humber.
- » A strong theme was the impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) on the facilitation of the SENCO role. SENCOs reported that duties and responsibilities related to senior leadership and safeguarding increased. This, in addition to being required to teach class bubbles, meant that often their SENCO role was not their primary focus.
- » SENCOs overwhelmingly reported an increase in workload. In particular those who also had families at home, specifically those with children and Young People who were home-learning, as well as those who were shielding, experienced challenges related to managing their workload.

## KEY FINDINGS

### **nearly 3/4 of SENCOs**

stated that, from their perspective, their school had experienced challenges in providing support in the setting for children and Young People with EHC plans.

### **the management of risk assessments**

for children and Young People with EHC plans appeared to be a key area of challenge, with over half of SENCOs highlighting this as an issue (56.7%).

### **a strong theme was the impact of coronavirus (COVID-19)**

on the facilitation of the SENCO role. SENCOs reported that duties and responsibilities related to senior leadership and safeguarding increased. This, in addition to being required to teach class bubbles, meant that often their SENCO role was not their primary focus.

## KEY FINDINGS

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### The experience in school during coronavirus (COVID-19) - continued

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- » Some SENCOs felt that expectations from Local Authorities were unrealistic and contributed to the increased workload in schools. SENCOs stated that expectations changed frequently, particularly in relation to risk assessments. Previous studies have illustrated that local and national requirements, including statutory paperwork, negatively impact on the role in terms of time (Curran et al., 2018). The findings from this survey suggest that this previously identified challenge has been amplified.
- » The focus of the SENCO role also changed. A prevalent theme was the way SENCOs changed their work and increased their focus on communicating with parents and families. 84.2% of SENCOs felt that their school had demonstrated strengths with the consistent communication with families during this period. SENCOs reported that they felt this had a positive impact, and something they would be focusing on in the longer term.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Support during the pandemic

- » Only 1 out of 10 SENCOs were happy with the support they received during the pandemic.
- » Nearly two-thirds (64.4%) stated that they would like more support from central government and over half would have liked more support from the Local Authority (57.2%).
- » The vast majority of SENCOs in academies (71%) were satisfied with the support received from their MAT, with only 29% saying that they would want more support from the MAT.
- » SENCOs felt that central and local guidance lacked clarity and consistency. Equally SENCOs felt that the manner in which the guidance was released caused issues, both in terms of the timing, but also the lack of time for senior leaders to digest and plan, to ensure that they could address wider school community questions and concerns.

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## KEY FINDINGS

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### Post-COVID priorities

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- » The top priority for all SENCOs, upon returning to school in the new academic year, was a focus on mental health and wellbeing.
- » 2 out of 5 SENCOs say that coronavirus (COVID-19) has changed the way in which they will undertake the role in the longer term, with a further 35% stating that they are still unsure as to whether the way in which they manage SEN provision will change in the longer term.
- » More than half of the SENCOs said that coronavirus (COVID-19) has made them think differently about the universal offer and access to the curriculum in their school, with 25% still undecided.



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## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important to note that these recommendations have been derived from the responses which asked participants to reflect on an unprecedented event. Therefore, the recommendations have been written with the benefit of hindsight, looking forward to what may help support children, YP, families and schools in the future.

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### Access to and accessibility of virtual learning

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- » Access to IT for all children is a key area of challenge. This needs to be considered as a critical issue and must take into account the wider requirements in terms of access, including access to data.
- » Schools need to prioritise digital learning as a key area for development to support children and YP in term of readiness for their future learning.
- » Online learning needs funding to work well. Schools need to receive adequate funding to ensure that all children and YP are able to access the correct IT hardware and software during periods of online learning.
- » The survey has highlighted existing issues with the support of SEN in mainstream settings, specifically differentiation. With the potential of more frequent moves to online learning, in the short and longer term, it is imperative that teachers are provided with support and training to upskill them in this area.
- » For some children and YP, their experience of education improved through online learning. We would encourage school leaders to reflect on this learning and consider the positives which could be gained through integrating this approach further.
- » The use of technology during this crisis has highlighted both strengths and areas of challenge. The importance, and the potential, of technology to the pedagogical process is imperative. Post pandemic this has the potential to provide an opportunity for the school community to consider and re-evaluate their universal offer.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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### The provision of guidance and support

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- » Consideration needs to be given as to how central guidance from the government can be distributed to school leaders in advance of the general public. This will allow schools to respond to the guidance and plan accordingly, therefore enabling them to communicate and reassure their school community directly and specifically.
- » Clear timescales need to be published regarding how and when schools are expected to respond to guidance, including the timings related to the implementation of guidance, therefore setting expectations for all in the school community.
- » SENCO-specific guidance to be developed in the event of an unprecedented event, which gives key tasks to be focused on in the short and medium term.
- » National exemplars to be provided centrally for specific tasks, e.g., risk assessments.
- » Guidance needs to take into account all groups of children and YP, not just the setting. This includes more specific guidance for supporting children and YP who require SEN support during such times.



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## RECOMMENDATIONS

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### Responding to unprecedented challenges

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- » The role of the SENCO is typically held by one person. Therefore, schools should consider developing a contingency plan, in the event that the SENCO is not accessible, for example through illness.
- » Further guidance should be developed for schools in terms of contingency if schools are unable to proceed in their physical form. Such events may include those recently experienced, fire or flood. Guidance and expectations around online learning would support schools in having to make swift changes to learning environments.
- » SENCOs reported that they felt supported by MATs. There is learning to be extrapolated here in terms of school to school support, the development of networks and the sharing of resources which may further support other schools during unprecedented events.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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### Working with families

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- » Further work to be undertaken to explore the experience of parents, families, children and YP during this initial period of lockdown and wider school reopening to ascertain whether this correlates with the perspectives of schools.
- » SENCOs reported that relationships with parents and families improved, due to increased communication. Senior leaders to consider how these benefits can continue to be realised over the longer term with consideration given to the resources required to enable this to take place.



## BACKGROUND

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In 2018 the National Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) Workload Survey was launched and received over 1900 responses.

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In 2018 the National Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) Workload Survey was launched and received over 1900 responses. The findings from the research culminated in the report *It's about time: The impact of SENCO workload on the professional and the school* (Curran et al., 2018). The initial survey was followed up in 2019, with the findings published in the January 2020 report *The time is now: Addressing missed opportunities for special educational needs support and coordination in our schools* (Curran et al., 2020). The reports have been shared with the Department for Education and have influenced the work of SENCOs, schools and organisations such as nasen and the work of the Whole School SEND Consortium.

Now in its third year, Bath Spa University and nasen have continued their research into the role of the SENCO through the National SENCO Workforce Survey 2020. The survey was released in September 2020 with the intention to build on the previous two surveys. The survey aimed to explore the longer term trends of the SENCO workforce and in particular revisit the findings from the initial survey. The survey received over 1000 responses.

However, a crucial difference with the 2020 survey was the exceptional time period during which it was taking place. The impact of coronavirus (COVID-19) on children, YP, parents and the wider school community has been reported in the news. Evidence demonstrating the impact on children and YP with SEN, parents and families is emerging, including the recent survey undertaken by Special Needs Jungle (Tirraoro, Blower and Keer, 2020) and the research undertaken by the National Autistic Society (2020).

Schools have had to respond immediately to this unprecedented event. To this end the 2020 survey, in addition to exploring the SENCO role in general, also focused on capturing the experiences of SENCOs and their schools in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The survey asked SENCOs how, from their perspective, the pandemic had impacted on provision for children and YP with SEN, including the challenges that they faced as a SENCO and as a school community. The survey asked SENCOs where they demonstrated strengths as a school, and to consider how their future practice may be impacted, including their priorities for the coming academic year. This report details the findings from the survey related to coronavirus (COVID-19) and focuses on the first period of national lockdown in March 2020 to the initial wider reopening of schools in September 2020. The second part of the SENCO Workforce Survey, which explores the SENCO role more broadly, will be released in March 2021.

## REPORTING OF RESULTS

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### Reporting of results

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The survey draws on 1022 responses from participants who consented for their data to be analysed and collated as part of this research project, who also identified as a SENCO (or equivalent, for example inclusion coordinator), working in a school or educational setting in England.



## OVERVIEW OF PARTICIPANTS

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### Overview of participants

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84.4% of respondents stated that they were currently working in a mainstream school. 16 respondents (1.6%) worked in a special school and 20 respondents (2%) worked in alternative provision or a pupil referral unit (PRU). 2.6% stated that they worked across multiple settings. 5.2% of respondents described their setting as an early years or nursery setting. Nearly two-thirds (63.7%) reported that they worked in the primary phase. Just over a quarter worked in a secondary setting (25.3%).

42.3% of respondents reported that they worked in a local authority maintained school, with 38.7% working as part of a Multi-Academy Trust (MAT). Just under 5% of respondents worked in an independent school (3.7%). 9% worked in a standalone academy. See Appendix for further detail (pp. 40-41).



## CONTEXT

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### Context

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The survey asked SENCOs to reflect on their schools' experiences during the initial period of coronavirus (COVID-19). The time period under review includes from when schools closed to the majority of pupils on Friday 20th March 2020 until schools re-opened to the wider school population in September 2020. The survey closed on 5th October, at which point the majority of schools had been fully open for four weeks and therefore it is important to consider this within the reading of results.

Whilst schools initially closed to the majority of children and YP, they did remain open for key worker children and 'vulnerable children'; children and YP with an EHC plan were included in this group. This presented specific implications for special schools and alternative provision where the majority of children and YP will have an EHC plan. It is noteworthy that during the period of lockdown two aspects related to the SEND regulations temporarily changed. Statutory timescales for the processes associated with EHC needs assessments and plans were temporarily relaxed from 1st May 2020 until 25th September 2020. This meant that whilst the processes continued during this time, a coronavirus (COVID-19) exception applied when it was not reasonably practical to meet a requirement. In addition to this, whilst EHC plans remained in place, from 1st May until 31 July 2020 Local Authorities were required to use 'reasonable endeavours' to secure provision for children and YP in accordance with the EHC plan. Schools were issued with guidance regarding the necessary risk assessments to enable attendance for children and YP with an EHC plan, to be completed with parents.

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## CONTEXT

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### Context - continued

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The Ofsted Annual Report, published 1st December 2020, included findings from the interim visits undertaken by Ofsted during the autumn term, following the wider re-opening of schools. The report highlighted that the early identification and assessment of SEN has been adversely affected by coronavirus (COVID-19), with the report stating, 'for some children, this will cause lasting harm' (2020 p. 34). They also cited concerns that some children were particularly vulnerable including 'disabled children who were no longer able to access educational support and already face increased risk of abuse' (2020 p. 33). Furthermore, the impact on parents was highlighted, with concerns that families may be experiencing additional pressures to manage their child's needs due to the lack of access to support. The report noted that most children and YP with EHC plans did not attend school during the first national lockdown and while most special schools were fully open at the end of the summer, attendance remained low. Echoing these findings, a survey of parents conducted by Special Needs Jungle in June 2020 suggested that only 28% of surveyed parents agreed that their child's education placement had provided 'very good support during lockdown' (Tirraoro, Blower and Keer, 2020 p. 6). Whilst research relating to the impact on children is in its infancy, a survey conducted by the National Autistic Society between June and July 2020 reported that 7 out of 10 parents 'said their child had difficulty understanding or completing schoolwork and around half said their child's academic progress suffered' (2020 p. 2).

With regards to the longer term, it is notable that in September 2019 the government announced that it was time to review the progress of the SEND reforms, which were introduced in 2014. In addition to this, the review would inform the revision of the SEND Code of Practice (DfE and DoH, 2015) which was initially planned for 2020. However due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic the review, and the revision of the SEND Code of Practice, has been delayed and this is now planned for release in early 2021.

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## FINDINGS

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### Supporting learners with SEN during coronavirus (COVID-19): access and accessibility of IT

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SENCOs reported that the access children and YP had to Information Technology (IT) hardware at home was a key challenge for schools, with 70% of SENCOs flagging this as a concern. For those strongly agreeing that this was a challenge, this was almost twice the proportion in special schools (58.3%) than in mainstream schools (31.2%). Thematic analysis of qualitative responses illustrated that for some access to the government scheme, get help with technology during coronavirus (COVID-19), was problematic with concerns predominantly relating to the timing of deliveries to schools. However, in addition to this, SENCOs reported that the access families had to sufficient internet data was also difficult. Some schools provided children and YP with dongles to enable access to the internet to mitigate this issue.

***The lack of IT in our community was the biggest barrier to anything we wanted to do.***

***The provision of dongles would also have greatly helped students. As a school we gave out all our available IT equipment as well as buying dongles and Kindles to assist all students.***

Whilst almost three-quarters of SENCOs experienced challenges with providing virtual support for children and YP with SEND (73.3%), the workforce was divided on whether or not this was an area of strength. Indeed, 25% remain undecided. In special schools, 14 out of the 16 respondents cited difficulties with providing virtual support for children and YP with EHC plans. Yet, in addition to challenges with virtual support and access to IT hardware, just over half of SENCOs cited challenges with the level of digital literacy in their schools; with the challenge appearing marginally higher in secondary schools than primary schools.



## FINDINGS

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### Supporting learners with SEN during coronavirus (COVID-19): differentiating learning

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Ensuring that children and YP with SEN were able to access appropriately differentiated work online was cited by nearly three-quarters of respondents (72.5%) as a challenge for their school; 8 out of 10 secondary SENCOs considered this to be a challenge. Providing staff with support to differentiate learning was considered difficult, with over half of all SENCOs citing this as a challenge (54.1%). While some SENCOs had already identified this as an area they would need to focus on if such a situation was to happen again, it is important to note that with nearly three-quarters of SENCOs (Curran et al., 2020) stating that they do not have enough time to focus on their role consideration would need to be given as to how this could be prioritised.

***The pandemic highlighted staff training needs and the fact that some teachers did not consider the needs of their pupils with SEND and did not provide them with differentiated, scaffolded work for them to access.***



## FINDINGS

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### Supporting learners with SEN during coronavirus (COVID-19): children and young people with education, health and care plans

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Nearly three quarters of SENCOs (72%) stated that, from their perspective, their school had experienced challenges in providing support in the setting for children and YP with EHC plans. This figure was broadly similar when different phases were considered (primary 74.4%, secondary 68.7%).

The management of risk assessments for children and YP with EHC plans appeared to be a key area of challenge, with over half of SENCOs highlighting this as an issue (56.7%). This was particularly acute in two regions: 65% of SENCOs in the North East and 64.1% in Yorkshire and the Humber. Thematic analysis of responses suggested that a lack of timely, consistent guidance and support from Local Authorities was a key difficulty for SENCOs, in addition to the time the risk assessments took to complete. However, it is noteworthy that SENCOs also felt this was an area of strength for their schools, with 76.5% of SENCOs agreeing or strongly agreeing that their schools demonstrated strengths in this area. We could hypothesise that this activity demonstrated strengths through the priority it was given, yet challenge through the difficulty of the process. This echoes previous SENCO surveys which have highlighted concerns that statutory paperwork is not only time consuming but also inconsistent nationally (Curran et al., 2018; Curran et al., 2020).

***Much of my time was taken up in trying to complete ECHP 'risk assessments' which felt like a paper exercise and of no direct support to the child.***

***It took over a month for LA to provide a risk assessment template. I made my own the first week.***

***The expectations on completing risk assessments and reviewing them fortnightly alongside parents and children was overwhelming. I have 30+ EHCPs so this took up an incredible amount of time. While I was still carrying out annual reviews, supporting families, speaking with families and children weekly. It got too much at one point.***

## FINDINGS

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### Impact on children and young people with SEN

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Through the open text responses, SENCOs shared concerns about how the first lockdown period may have impacted on children and YP with SEN. In particular, a prevalent theme through the qualitative responses was difficulty in accessing external agencies and Local Authorities services during this period. Frustrations ranged from not being able to access support at all, to support being delayed. SENCOs voiced concerns that this had already impacted on children and YP, with one SENCO noting that due to delays with the Local Authorities, YP in their setting had missed out on their college places. SENCOs also felt that the lack of access would lead to problems in the future, as waiting lists grow in response to the delay and consequently children and YP are waiting longer to access specialist support. Although significantly in the minority, it is important to note that there were also reports of services which had adapted and worked well.

In addition to accessing wider support, nearly two-thirds of SENCOs (63.6%) stated that providing children and YP with access to equipment that is regularly used at school was also difficult. 13 out of 16 special school SENCOs stated that this was a challenge, and it could be argued that the impact was greater due to the specialist nature of equipment in special schools not being regularly available elsewhere.

However, concerns regarding support were not confined to accessing wider agencies, SENCOs also highlighted concerns about support for children and YP in school in the longer term. With the absence of interventions running during the initial period of lockdown, SENCOs speculated that children and YP would be 'further behind' than they were before the start of the pandemic. SENCOs shared worries that interventions may not be able to run as they would have previously, due to restrictions in school. Thus, limiting the way in which schools could respond when children and YP returned to school.

***Longer term, there are more children who are going to require additional support from school and wider services.***

## FINDINGS

### Impact on children and young people with SEN - continued

Yet, SENCOs also pointed out that the move to online learning benefitted some students, and they felt that this was something which needed to be considered moving forward. It is interesting to note that a recent survey which explored the experiences of young people and foster carers during the first lockdown (Research in Practice, 2020) suggested that whilst home-schooling experiences were mixed, there were benefits related to the flexibility offered through online learning as well as the 1:1 support provided. Notwithstanding issues with access, further benefits of online learning for learners with SEN may include a reduction in sensory demands, flexibility, change of pace, ability to pause, rewind and review as well as reducing transitions (Heavey, 2020).

***Many of our pupils with EHCP's thrived during home-schooling when there were less communication and social expectations on a day to day basis, they were happier. This shows that these young people are still finding school a stressful place to be and our practice requires further development.***



## FINDINGS

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### Impact on the SENCO role: workload

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SENCOs were asked whether they felt coronavirus (COVID-19) had impacted on their role. A thematic analysis of the free text responses overwhelmingly demonstrated that SENCOs felt that their workload increased significantly. In particular those who also had families at home, specifically those with children who were home-learning, as well as those who were shielding, experienced challenges related to managing their workload.

***Trying to home-school two primary-aged children whilst being a full time SENCO at home was virtually impossible at times.***

SENCOs felt that expectations from Local Authorities were unrealistic and contributed to the increased workload. Some SENCOs stated that expectations changed frequently, particularly in relation to risk assessments. Responses to SENCO queries were slow. It could be argued that this applied further pressure to a role which was already managing an excessive workload. Whilst the SEND Code of Practice states, 'the school should ensure that the SENCO has sufficient time and resources' (DfE and DoH, 2015 p. 109) 70% of SENCOs in 2018 stated that they felt that they did not have enough time to undertake the role (Curran et al., 2018).

***My SENCO role increased and I found I was working longer hours to support families and their children because of the lack of outside agencies and support for them.***

However, it is important to note that there were some notable benefits which arose from this situation, thus further highlighting the variation of how the role is facilitated and the experience of the post-holder. For some SENCOs who were working at home, they reported that they were able to focus more on their SENCO role. This allowed them to complete paperwork and, in some cases, attend online training.

***The pandemic gave me the opportunity to work from home and focus full time on [the] SEN role. I achieved a lot. I now have increased hours from 2 to 4 days as SENCO.***

***My productivity rate was good as I was not being disturbed for behaviour.***

## FINDINGS

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### Impact on the SENCO role: a shift in responsibilities

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Typically, SENCOs also undertake additional roles in school, for example class teacher. Respondents to this survey stated that 58.7% were part of senior leadership team (SLT), with 31.6% stating they were safeguarding lead and 33.2% stating they were the Designated Teacher for Looked After Children. A strong theme throughout the survey was the way in which the responsibilities of the SENCO changed as a result of coronavirus (COVID-19), including an increased focus on undertaking safeguarding responsibilities, being drafted in by senior leaders to teach class bubbles, as well as an increased need to undertake senior leadership responsibilities, whether the SENCO was an 'official' senior leader or not. In addition to this, some SENCOs were undertaking doorstep visits, with a number citing that they were drafted in to deliver food parcels to families.

***To support the school, I was completely flexible, from driving to deliver work and sandwiches to taking groups and worked across the holidays.***

A further impact of increased workload and changing responsibilities meant that some SENCOs felt that they could not focus on their SENCO responsibilities.

***I found that my role was taken up with safeguarding and that my SENCO role came second to this.***

The responses demonstrated that there has been a personal impact on SENCOs. Throughout the open text responses SENCOs reported feelings of isolation, stress and anxiety. In part this related to feeling overwhelmed, but also due to working from home and feeling 'out of the loop'.

***I worked longer and harder than ever, it felt desperate at times. No support from social services. I felt unable to switch off.***

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## FINDINGS

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### Impact on families

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A prevalent theme through the qualitative responses was how SENCOs changed the focus of their work; increasing their communication with parents and families. Typically, this was through regular phone or video calls. The nature of this contact was mixed, ranging from checking in with parents and families, to supporting children and YP, to supporting parents with their own mental health. Some SENCOs reported an increase in the number of parents flagging concerns about their children, speculating that this may be because the parents had been working closely with their children at home and were more cognisant of their learning needs.

***I was more available to parents and senior leaders were more available to me, which enabled better support and communication for SEN children and their parents. I felt able to do my job properly as I had time and flexibility which I do not normally have due to my class teacher responsibilities.***

84.2% of SENCOs felt that their school had demonstrated strengths with the consistent communication with parents during this period. As a result, SENCOs felt that their relationships with parents and families had improved and consequently this was something that SENCOs wanted to continue. The move to online meetings was cited as an enabler to developing these relationships.

***The relationships built with parents through regular phone calls and communication is something that I do not want to lose. I hope to continue to build upon this as it has been invaluable in building trust, understanding needs and building on a child and family centred approach.***

***I have a closer relationship with parents than before, this has helped me with a greater understanding of the needs of some of my SEN children. I will look to continue with regular phone calls where it is effective.***

## FINDINGS

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### The importance of wider support

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Only 1 out of 10 SENCOs were happy with the support they received during this period of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Reflecting on the support they needed during the pandemic, the areas that SENCOs flagged were more support from the Local Authority and more support from central government. Nearly two-thirds (64.4%) stated that they would have liked more support from central government and over half would have liked more support from the Local Authority (57.2%).

It is noteworthy that SENCOs felt well supported by senior leaders during this period. This is positive given that in 2018, less than half of SENCOs (48%) felt that their role was understood by senior leaders; perhaps indicating a shift in perception. Similarly, the vast majority of SENCOs in academies (71%) were satisfied with the support received from their MATs, with only 29% stating that they would want more support from the MAT.

***We had a good set up across our MAT, risk assessment platform on provision map (EDUKEY) to complete and had regular meetings as a team to discuss issues that had occurred.***

A strong theme through the qualitative responses was the feeling that the guidance from central government and Local Authorities lacked clarity and consistency. SENCOs reported concerns that this impacted on relationships:

***The LA and government gave us next to no guidance or support and I feel our school was left to manage. Schools were finding out things at the same time as parents and so didn't have time to find solutions before we were getting questions making schools look incompetent.***

***The LA could have provided more support for our specific local context e.g., what was happening with access to EPs remotely, the SEND admin team, as instead it was a case of trying to work it out as we went along.***



## FINDINGS

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### The importance of wider support - continued

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Equally, the timing of the guidance was problematic, in terms of how and when it was released. SENCOs flagged that releasing guidance to everyone at the same time does not allow schools to formulate a plan and respond accordingly. Equally, SENCOs felt that some guidance was slow to form, leaving a vacuum of information. SENCOs highlighted that there needed to be more specific guidance for supporting all children and YP with SEN in mainstream schools.

***Government announcements given in middle of night and then changing regularly made it very difficult to plan and keep up with changes.***

***Information was communicated at the same time to both school leaders and the general public giving the school no notice to plan and tailor communication to suit the hugely different communities within each catchment area of the city.***

***Everyone was left to their own devices with little direction. When asking for advice from the LA it took me five weeks to get a reply.***



## FINDINGS

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### What would you do differently next time?

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SENCOs were asked to consider what they might do differently, if such a situation ever occurred again. A key theme throughout the open ended responses was moving to online support quicker, including teaching and meetings, as well as social support for children and YP with SEN, perhaps seeking to address the concern that just over half of SENCOs stated communicating with children and YP had presented a challenge to the school.

***[I would arrange] group meetings for children- to help support their need to socialise and keep in contact with friends, in a safe environment.***

Certainly, the benefits of taking meetings online were evident, in terms of saving time for travelling, but also for accessibility for parents.

***Meetings were held online/virtually which had a big impact on the time required to attend these and was a much better and more effective way of meeting.***

Whilst SENCOs highlighted that they would act quicker to encourage parents to send their children into school, particularly children with SEN, they also stated that they would be slower to respond to central and local guidance to account for potential changes later on. Equally, in terms of home support SENCOs suggested they would develop home learning packs and as well as increasing the focus on differentiation, with SENCOs noting that this also presented a training need for staff.

## FINDINGS

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### Post coronavirus (COVID-19) priorities

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2 out of 5 SENCOs say that coronavirus (COVID-19) has changed the way in which they will undertake the role in the longer term, with a further 35% still unsure. More than half of SENCOs said that it has made them think differently about the universal offer and access to the curriculum, with 25% still undecided.

***The curriculum needs to be streamlined - far too much needs to be covered which means those that are able can keep up but those who need more time to fully embed knowledge and skills will always be on the back foot. The curriculum is not inclusive to every child's needs.***

Finally, the survey asked SENCOs to rank their priorities for the coming academic year. It is important to note that the following depicts the activities SENCOs felt are the most urgent, not necessarily the most important. Therefore, the following table should be interpreted as activities which SENCOs feel they need to prioritise in the short term, rather than areas which they want to strategically focus on.

The following table illustrates the top 5 priorities, from a potential 12, ranked by setting.

## FINDINGS

|                  | Setting Type   |  |  |  |
|------------------|--|--|--|--|
| Overall Priority | Primary  | Secondary  | Special / AP   | All  |
| <b>1</b>         | A focus on mental health and well-being                | A focus on mental health and well-being                | A focus on mental health and well-being                | A focus on mental health and well-being                |
| <b>2</b>         | Identifying additional support needs                   | Transition   | Completing annual reviews                              | Identifying additional support needs                   |
| <b>3</b>         | High quality teaching / developing the universal offer | High quality teaching / developing the universal offer | Identifying additional support needs                   | Transition   |
| <b>4</b>         | Working with / supporting with families                | Identifying additional support needs                   | Transition   | High quality teaching / developing the universal offer |
| <b>5</b>         | Transition   | Working with / supporting with families                | High quality teaching / developing the universal offer | Working with / supporting with families                |

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## APPENDIX

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### Research procedures

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The survey was developed in two parts. The first part of the survey repeated previously asked questions from the first survey in 2018 which pertained to the SENCO role in general. The purpose of this was to be able to compare data over three years and this will be published in the forthcoming SENCO Workforce Survey Report in March 2021. The second part of the survey focused on capturing the experiences of SENCOs and their schools in response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The survey asked SENCOs how, from their perspective, coronavirus (COVID-19) had impacted on provision for children and YP with SEN, including the challenges that they faced as a SENCO and as a school community. The survey asked SENCOs where they felt that they demonstrated strengths as a school, and to consider how their future practice may be impacted, including their priorities for the coming academic year.

The survey, as a whole, was piloted prior to release, with eight SENCOs taking part. Following feedback from the pilot participants, a minor number of amendments were made to the survey prior to its release. Amendments including developing some questions further, to provide greater clarity, and amending some technical aspects related to the options provided within questions.

The survey opened on 24th August 2020 and closed on 5th October 2020. The Jisc online survey platform was used. The survey was distributed through various channels including:

- » The National SENCO Workload Survey mailing list
- » Information was sent to Providers of the National Award for SEN Coordination
- » Social media, predominantly twitter and Facebook
- » Directly to Local Authority Special Education Teams (GDPR permitting)
- » nasen mailing list.

## APPENDIX

### Research procedures - continued

Ethical approval was granted by the School of Education, Bath Spa University, with the research following BERA's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2018). Prior to completing the survey, participants were asked to provide their consent for their response data to be used and reported only as part of this research project. SENCOs were made aware that participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time, without reason up until they submitted their responses. No identifying information was collected, either in relation to the participant or their setting. All responses to the survey have been contributed anonymously.



## APPENDIX

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### Analysis of findings

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The findings discussed in this report are derived from the online survey data. All data from the pilot study has been discarded. For the purposes of the discussion, data reported reflects the views of respondents, unless otherwise stated where relevant, for example, primary/ secondary settings. It is important to note that responses from some settings, including but not limited to early years and special schools, had comparatively low response rates and therefore this may be considered a limitation in terms of the wider representation of those from within these settings. Questions which elicited further responses from participants, through open text responses, have been thematically analysed and used for illustrative purposes.



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## APPENDIX

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### Participants

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1044 people took part in the survey with 1039 consenting for their data to be collated for analysis and reported as part of this research project. Of those who consented for their data to be reported, 1022 stated that they were working as a SENCO, or equivalent, in a school or educational setting in England. Therefore, data within this report is derived from the responses from those who a) have consented and b) who are working as a SENCO in England.

84.4% of respondents (n=863) stated that they were currently working in a mainstream school. 5.2% of respondents (n=53) described their setting as an early years or nursery setting. 2.6% (n=27) stated that they worked across multiple settings. 16 respondents (1.6%) worked in a special school and 20 respondents (2%) worked in alternative provision or a pupil referral unit (PRU).

In terms of the phase the respondents worked in, the majority reported that they worked in the primary phase, with nearly two-thirds (63.7% n=651) stating that they worked in this phase (for the purposes of this survey primary includes infant, junior, first or middle school). Just over a quarter worked in a secondary setting (25.3% n=259). 42 respondents stated that they worked in an 11-through school (4.1%).

42.3% of respondents (n= 432) stated that they worked in a Local Authority maintained school, with 38.7% (n= 396) working as part of a Multi-Academy Trust. Under 5 % of respondents worked in an independent school (3.7% n=38). Less than 10% worked in a standalone academy (9% n=92).

In terms of geography, for SENCOs who responded that they worked in England, the largest area represented was the South West, with just a quarter of responses from this area (24.1% n=246). 167 responses came from the South East (16.3%) and just 14.7% from the West Midlands (n=150). The least number of responses in England came from the North East (3.9% n=40).



## APPENDIX

### Participants - continued

41.2% of respondents described their settings as larger than average (n=421), with 35% of respondents (n= 358) describing their setting as smaller than average. (Note, whilst guidance was provided via the survey re average sizes of primary and secondary school, the size of school reported is from the respondents' perspective).

The majority of respondents identified as female (94.5% n=966) with 5% (n= 51) identifying as male. 60% of the SENCOs had four or more years of experience in the role (n=609), with over 80% having completed, or working towards completing, the National Award for Special Educational Needs Coordination (n=848). Just over half of SENCOs held additional teaching responsibilities (52.1% n=532).



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