

Education reopening and catch-up support across the UK

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Executive Summary

Early Years

As rates of transmission of Covid-19 fell, providers of early education and childcare were allowed to fully open during the summer of 2020. However, demand for their services was much lower than it had been before the pandemic and they faced new costs related to abiding by guidance to reduce transmission of the virus. Support from governments has remained important to the survival of many private, voluntary and independent providers.

- **The proportion of early years providers that were open for business increased substantially between June and October and remained fairly stable for the rest of the autumn term.** Providers appear to have reopened quickest in Wales and Scotland where, by October, more than 90 per cent of settings were open compared to around 80 per cent in England. In Northern Ireland a survey of providers suggests the rates are highest, at more than 95 per cent over this period – but a low response rate may mean this is an overestimate.
- **Some key forms of support for providers across the UK such as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme have remained in place across the UK over this period.**
- **Government support during the autumn term 2020 appears to have been most generous in England and Northern Ireland where some funding was over and above contemporary demand for paid-for or government-funded places.** However, since January 2021 this has changed as England has reverted to allocating funding based on registered places.
- **Support in Scotland and Wales is largely based on actual take-up of places,** although there is greater local discretion for support in Scotland, making it difficult to estimate the support available to providers.
- **National lockdowns in early 2021 mean that new support measures will be important for the sector.** New measures have been introduced in Scotland, where settings are open only for vulnerable children and the children of key workers, while settings in England, Wales and Northern Ireland remain allowed to open for all children but face substantially lower.

School Attendance

Schools began to return full-time in summer and autumn 2020. Pupils in Scotland and Northern Ireland returned in August, reflecting the normal earlier start to their school years. Pupils in England and Wales then returned in September. Throughout the autumn term, attendance was below normal, with significant variation across time and area, particularly in England and Wales.

- **School attendance rates were highest in Scotland,** at around 90 per cent or more over the 2020 autumn term. Attendance rates were slightly lower in Northern Ireland, at about 90 per cent or just below. There was a brief dip to 85 per cent when cases were rising in mid-October and schools closed for two weeks as part of a Northern Ireland wide lockdown.
- **The higher attendance levels in Scotland and Northern Ireland coincide, unsurprisingly, with lower cases of the virus.** Indeed, because of slightly different school years, children in Scotland and Northern Ireland were able to attend school in large numbers in August 2020 when cases were close to their lowest points.
- **School attendance rates were lower and varied more over time in England and Wales,** reflecting higher case rates, particularly in the run up to Christmas. In England, attendance rates

varied from a high of 89 per cent in early November to a low of 80 per cent in the last week of term. Attendance rates were generally lower in Wales, varying from a high of 90 per cent just after a circuit breaker lockdown in early November to a low of 68 per cent in mid-December.

- **Across all four nations, attendance rates were higher for younger age groups**, with primary age attendance rates of 90-95 per cent over much of the autumn. Secondary school attendance rates were about 5-10 percentage points lower for most of the period. When cases were rising fast, secondary school attendance rates dropped extremely fast, with secondary attendance rates falling to 50-60 per cent in Wales in mid-December in Wales and to just over 70 per cent in England in the last week of term.
- **Attendance rates were generally lower in deprived areas**. Average attendance was below 75 per cent in many deprived areas in south Wales, such as Swansea, Neath Port Talbot, Merthyr Tydfil, Blaenau Gwent and Newport. In England, some of the lowest school attendance rates were seen in relatively deprived areas too, such as Oldham, Sandwell, Rochdale, Medway, Havering and Tower Hamlets (attendance about 75-80 per cent on average).
- **Attendance rates were lowest in special schools across the UK**, at about 75-80 per cent in England and 80-85 per cent in Northern Ireland over most of the autumn term.

Catch up support

Governments across the UK have provided extra funding support for catch-up, though these plans differ in their level and focus on disadvantaged pupils. It seems likely that policymakers across the UK will want to add to these plans in light of the ongoing lockdowns.

- **In England, the Department for Education has committed to about £1.2bn or £174 per pupil** for catch-up support for schools and a further £96m in specific post-16 support. This includes a general catch-up premium of £80 per pupil and the National Tutoring Programme targeted at more disadvantaged pupils.
- **The Scottish Government has provided £140m or £200 per pupil**. Plans announced in 2020 cover two years and allow for 1,400 additional teachers and 200 extra support staff.
- **The Northern Ireland Executive has provided about £28m for catch-up support and activities, or about £82 per pupil**. This includes activities in schools in summer 2020 and the 'Engage programme' to help pupils catch-up.
- **The Welsh Government has provided about £40m or £88 per pupil for catch-up support** through its 'Accelerated Learning Programme' and targeted support for exam year groups.
- Whilst the level of catch-up funding is clearly lower in Wales and Northern Ireland, a larger share of programme funding is targeted at disadvantaged pupils in Wales and Northern Ireland (about 50 per cent) than is the case in England and Scotland (20-30 per cent).
- Whilst these plans all represent welcome additional support, **they are all relatively modest compared with the scale of the challenge**, with pupils so far missing out on about half a year of normal face-to-face schooling.
- **Policymakers across the UK should be providing much more catch-up funding, with substantial funding targeted at the most disadvantaged pupils**, who are more likely to have fallen behind.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

Children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) are more likely than other children to have difficulty accessing virtual support and resources when learning from home, while some children require access to additional support such as speech and language therapy.

- **Funding specifically to support children with SEND was announced in Northern Ireland and England in the autumn term, with funding announced later in Wales and not yet announced in Scotland.** In Northern Ireland and Wales, funding applies to all children with SEND while in England only the minority of children with SEND who attend a special school are eligible.
- **At a national level, detailed guidance to schools and local authorities describing how they are expected to deliver special education is lacking in all four UK nations.** This is concerning given the risk that many children with SEND will have fallen behind their peers during the first lockdown and are likely to require more support to learn while at home than other pupils.

Free School Meals

For many children, the meal that they receive at school is a key part of their diet, and its absence could put a significant strain on families' already stretched budgets. Governments of UK nations faced the challenges of providing free school meals to eligible children who were unable to attend school during the school term and considering whether, and how, to provide them during the holidays when schools were closed.

- **Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland continued with the methods they used in summer 2020 to provide support. Policymakers in England chose to move to food parcels instead, which were the subject of much controversy and they have moved back to vouchers while allowing more local discretion than previously.** Approaches in Wales and Scotland allow quite a bit of local discretion and in Northern Ireland consist of direct financial transfers to families.
- **Governments in Wales and Northern Ireland provided clear and early expectations for families,** committing to fund holiday provision for the longest period of the four nations (until April 2022), followed by England (until Christmas 2021) and Scotland (Easter 2021).
- **In the period from October half term to Easter, support for free school meals during the school holidays appears most generous per meal in Scotland, followed by Wales and Northern Ireland,** while funding in England is not ring-fenced for children eligible for FSM so we cannot compare its generosity. Among Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland funding has been most generous per meal in Wales (£3.90), followed by Northern Ireland (£2.70) and Scotland (£2.50), but families of children eligible for free school meals in Scotland were also entitled to a one-off payment of £100 per child in December.

Other Support

Governments across the UK have also provided a range of additional support for schools and local authorities that we have not been able to consider or compare in detail in this report. This includes continued provision of digital devices (e.g. over 1 million devices delivered in England so far), support for school transport (e.g. £40m in England, £10m in Wales), mental health support (e.g. £8m specific support in Wales), support for remote learning (e.g. an extra £45m announced recently in Scotland) and safety/hygiene measures (e.g. the Northern Ireland Executive provided about £43m for reopening schools and £26m for PPE).

Section 1: Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the closure of school and education institutions to most pupils during the lockdown of spring and summer 2020. This led to large losses in schooling time. The delivery of in-kind benefits, such as free school meals, were also complicated by school closures. It was also extremely challenging to deliver support for children with special educational needs and disabilities, both in mainstream and specialist settings. Private, voluntary, and independent providers of early years education and childcare also faced large financial challenges due to a loss of private income.

In the face of such enormous challenges, the four governments across the UK made different choices about how to support pupils during lockdown. In a previous report published in October 2020, we detailed the nature of these policy approaches and potential policy lessons.¹ This includes how the different governments sought to support the early years sector and attendance at schools during lockdown (with children of critical workers and vulnerable children still encouraged to attend school). We also examined surveys of home-learning across the UK, which illustrates the socio-economic inequalities in the quantity and quality of home-learning taking place during lockdown. We also examined the success of the four governments in providing replacements for free school meals and delivery of digital devices to enable home-learning. This showed the benefits of using existing infrastructure and local knowledge. We also documented the reductions in support for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities.

In this second report, we examine policies on re-opening and catch-up support since children began to return to school and early years settings from summer 2020. We start by examining the early years sector, both in terms of attendance and the level of financial support across the four nations. We then compare school attendance levels during the autumn term. The following section then details the level of catch-up support for schools announced by each country. We then detail the support made available for pupils with special educational needs and disabilities during their 2020 autumn term, and the nature of replacements for free school meals for pupils who had to remain home at various points.

As with the first report, the focus is on schooling and early years education to make this exercise manageable. The work focuses on responses of the UK government (England), Welsh Government, Scottish Government and Northern Ireland Executive over 2020.

Whilst both this and the first report are backward looking, the lessons learnt are likely to be highly relevant, both for the current period of school closures and for when school begin to reopen again. At the time of writing, primary schools are due to begin re-opening to some younger pupils (ages 7 or under) in Wales and Scotland from 22 February. Schools in England and Northern Ireland are not expected to reopen more widely until 8 March. In what follows, we seek to draw out the main policy lessons from the first lockdown and from the period of re-opening in the 2020 autumn term.

In addition to the topics we cover in the report, it should be noted that governments across the UK have provided a variety of further support for schools and local authorities. In England, the Department for Education provided a further £40m in support for local authorities to cover additional costs associated with school transport.² In addition, the Department for Education has delivered a further 1 million laptops and devices to help with remote learning over the 2020-21

¹ Sibieta, L. and Cottell, J. (2020) Education policy responses across the UK to the pandemic [Online] Available at: <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/education-responses-uk-pandemic/>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/multi-million-pound-funding-package-for-school-transport>

school year.³ The Scottish Government has provided a total of £300m to help with education recovery over the course of the pandemic. This includes £140m in catch-up funding we discuss in detail in section 4, support for free meals discussed in section 6 and £45m to support remote learning during the current lockdown.⁴ In addition to the catch-up and free meals support described later in this report, the Welsh Government has provided £10m to local authorities to support school transport costs, £30m to local authorities to support COVID pressures (such as costs of hygiene products), £2m for face coverings and over £8m for mental health support.⁵ In Northern Ireland, the Department of Education has provided nearly £200m in financial support for schools, children and young people over the course of the pandemic.⁶ This includes about £12m for summer activities before the start of the school year and £15m for catch-up through the Engage programme, both of which are discussed in section 4. It includes over £40m in support or replacements for free school meals over the pandemic. It also includes £43m for schools as part of the restart and £26m for PPE.

Trends in case numbers

By way of overall context, Figure 1.1 shows the rolling 7-day positive case rates per 100,000 over the four nations up to the end of January 2021. It shows that case rates were relatively low throughout most of September. There was then an increase across all four countries during October. The largest rise was in Northern Ireland, where cases rose from 100 per 100,000 at the start of October to reach over 350 per 100,000 by mid-October. Cases then fell in Northern Ireland following a four-week partial lockdown at the end of October, reaching a low of 100 per 100,000 at the end of November. In Wales, cases rose from 100 per 100,000 at the start of October to reach 300 per 100,000 by the end of October. Cases then fell to 200 per 100,000 following a two-week circuit-breaker lockdown at the end of October and start of November. The rise in cases was slower in England but reached nearly 300 per 100,000 by mid-November. Cases then fall back to about 150 per 100,000 following a four-week lockdown over most of November and early December. The rise in cases was slowest in Scotland where cases rose to less than 200 per 100,000 at the end of October and fell back to 100 per 100,000 at the end of November following a range of restrictions introduced over the course of October and November.

There was then a large and sharp upsurge in cases across all four nations during December and January. This happened first in Wales, where case rates rose from 200 to 650 per 100,000 over the first three weeks of December. Since the implementation of a full lockdown on 19 December, case rates fell to just over 100 per 100,000 by the end of January. Case rates rose rapidly in both England and Northern Ireland in December, rising from 150 to 700 per 100,000 over the course of December. These rates have both since come down following the move to full lockdowns in both countries, down to 250 per 100,000 in England and 200 per 100,000 in Northern Ireland at the end of January. The rise in cases in Scotland seems to have been less sharp, rising to a peak of 300 per 100,000 at the start of January and falling back to just over 100 per 100,000 following the implementation of a full lockdown from January 4.

³ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/laptops-and-tablets-data/2021-week-5>

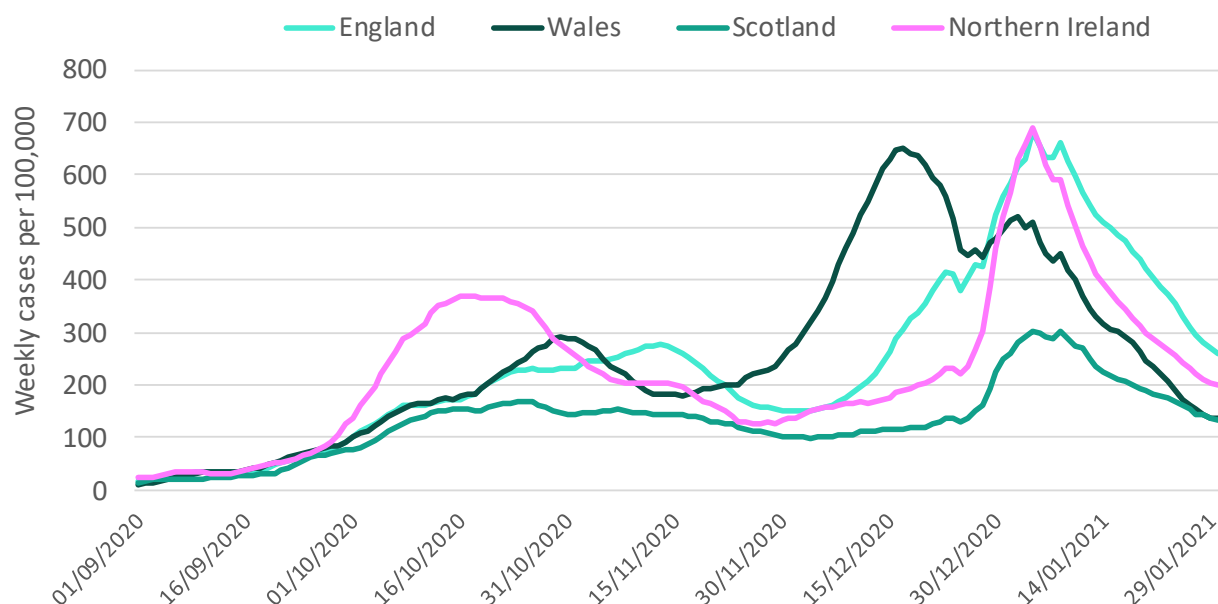
⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/news/schools-funding/>; <https://www.gov.scot/news/remote-learning-to-continue-for-majority/>

⁵ <https://gov.wales/extra-10m-buses-school-transport-guidance-published>; <https://gov.wales/schools-coronavirus-guidance>; <https://gov.wales/welsh-government-makes-7-million-available-support-pupils-while-schools-are-closed>; <https://gov.wales/increased-support-childrens-mental-health-following-covid-19-outbreak>

⁶ [https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/covid-19-funding-allocations# blank](https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/covid-19-funding-allocations#blank)

As we shall see in section 3, these patterns in case rates by country over time coincide quite closely with differences in school attendance, as one might expect.

Figure 1.1 Rolling 7-day case rates by country



Notes and sources: <https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk/>

Section 2: Early Education and Childcare

In response to the Coronavirus outbreak, early education and childcare providers across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland closed in late March for all children, except those of key workers and those classified as vulnerable. This put considerable pressure on providers of early education and care in the private, voluntary and independent settings, which rely on a mix of parent fees and public funding to cover their costs. The primary policy aim in this area during the initial lockdown in early 2020 was to provide financial support so that settings could continue to operate or be in a position to reopen once allowed.

Starting in June in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and in July in Scotland, early years providers were allowed to offer places to all children. Unlike schools (some of which provide early education and childcare), at the time of writing providers in the PVI sector have been allowed to remain open into the spring term 2021 in all countries except for Scotland, where settings have been told to limit their service to only vulnerable children and those of key workers. Although settings had been allowed to open fully since summer, demand for places appears to have remained below pre-pandemic levels throughout the remainder of 2020, while providers have faced higher costs due to the need to abide by government guidance on how to prevent the spread of the virus.

There has been some debate about how governments should fund the sector until demand returns to pre-pandemic levels; we will not explore the nuances of this debate here.⁷ For the purposes of this paper, we observe that government policy should ensure that otherwise viable businesses in the sector are able to continue to operate and be able to scale up their operations to keep up with any rises in demand for places, while being supported to provide high quality early education. This relies on demand returning to pre-pandemic levels eventually, with government support being in proportion to the projected rate of demand rising. For instance, if demand were projected to return to pre-pandemic levels in the short term, there might be a stronger case for government to support businesses to retain the skilled staff they already employ than if demand were not projected to return until into the longer term.

As rates of infection of the virus vary significantly between different parts of the country, the kind of support that early years providers need might differ too. Policies which provide responsive support to early years providers may therefore need to allow local flexibility in response to varying local circumstances.

In this section we review the available evidence to assess the impact that the pandemic has had on the early years sector and summarise the support provided by the government of each country of the UK since provider re-opened to all children in summer 2020.

Early years providers open for business

Many early years providers closed their doors during the initial lockdown in early 2020. At the time, there were concerns that, due to the scale of pressures on providers, some might have to close permanently. Data from the four countries of the UK suggests that the rate at which providers reopened their doors between June and the present varied considerably. However, it should be borne in mind that the data for each country is collected in different ways which might affect its comparability, as discussed below.

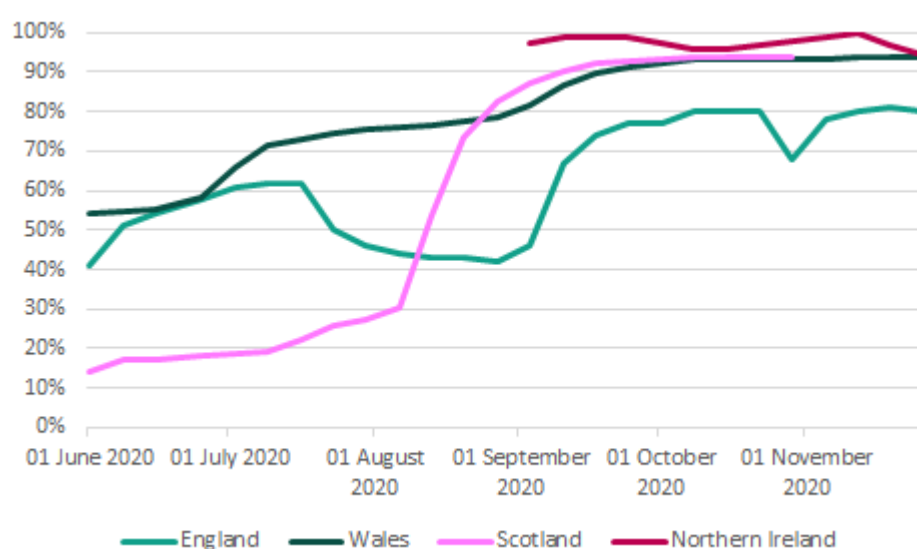
Data for Wales and Scotland comes from the bodies with whom early years providers are registered, data for England comes from a survey of local authorities, and data from Northern Ireland is from a voluntary survey of providers. Local authorities in England who respond to the survey report, on average, being unaware of the status of approximately 10 per cent of settings, meaning that the actual proportion of settings open could be higher than reported in Figure 2.1. Because data in Northern Ireland is collected from a voluntary survey of providers, there could be a selection bias if providers that are temporarily closed are less (or more) likely than others to respond to the survey. Additionally, data in Wales may include some childcare providers which offer care for school age children as well as those under five.

As illustrated in Figure 2.1, following the announcements that settings could reopen to all children in June and July, the proportion of settings open for business appears to have risen fastest in Wales and to have been less affected by the summer holiday than in England. In Scotland, the proportion rose gradually until schools reopened in August, at which point the proportion of settings open rose quickly. In September, the proportion of settings open in England rose quickly, from fewer than half of settings at the beginning of the month to more than three quarters by the end. Since October, the

⁷ For discussion of these issues, see for example <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14990>

proportion of settings in each country appears to have remained relatively stable, coming to rest at 90 per cent or more in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, and at 80 per cent in England, except for a dip in the half term. Following the temporary closures of the majority of early years settings in the first lockdown, these figures are relatively encouraging. However, figures in England suggest that the sector has not bounced back as convincingly as in other countries. The gap between England and other UK countries may be partly explained by the differences in how data is collected in each country, described above. If the proportion of settings that have remained open in the autumn term is lower in England than in Scotland and Wales, as appears to be the case, it is unclear what explains this difference.

Figure 2.1 Proportion of early years providers open between June-November 2020, by country



Notes and sources: Figures for England: (<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>) Local authorities report being uncertain of the status of around 10 per cent of providers in each time period, these are excluded from the figures reported in this graph; Figures for Wales: Care Inspectorate for Wales (not published); Figures for Scotland: (<https://public.tableau.com/profile/sq.eas.learninganalysis#!/vizhome/COVID19-SchoolsandChildcareInformation/Introduction>); Figures for Northern Ireland: (<https://www.opendatani.gov.uk/dataset/attendance-at-educational-settings-during-the-covid-19-outbreak-23-march-2020-to-29-june-2020>) Figures for NI include survey responses from nursery schools and non-statutory settings.

Attendance rates in England

The proportion of early years settings open for business can only tell us what proportion of settings are facing such significant pressure that they are forced to remain closed, as opposed to those settings that have experienced a loss of income but have been able to remain open. A clearer picture of the capacity and health of the sector is provided by the proportion of children who are attending early years settings compared to the proportion we might have expected in the absence of a pandemic.

Attendance rates are a function of demand for, and supply of, childcare – which in turn are affected both by the proportion of settings that are closed for business and the reduced capacity that some

settings might experience due to the extra health and safety measures imposed by the virus. In the absence of sufficient financial support to maintain their pre-pandemic operations, settings may scale down their operations in the short term in response to lower local demand, for instance by making some staff members redundant. This could lead to a relative scarcity of supply of places later if recruiting staff with suitable skills and education takes longer than it takes for demand to increase.

Figure 2.2: Number of children attending early education and childcare in England during the autumn term as a proportion of the number who usually attend



Source: Data for England: (<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>). The Department for Education calculates that they expect approximately 929,000 children would have attended an early education and childcare place on a typical day in the autumn term – the number attending is given as a proportion of this. A higher number of children attend during the term time overall than on a typical day.

Figure 2.2 suggests that attendance at early education and childcare places in England remained well below the expected average in September but grew quickly as the autumn term continued, plateauing at just over 85 per cent at the end of the Autumn term. The dip in October represents the autumn half-term, when fewer children would usually attend early years settings.

The levelling off of attendance rates in England from November suggests that there is a risk that demand for early education and care might not return to pre-pandemic levels for some time. In addition, these rates do not tell us how many hours per week, on average, children are attending for. Robust estimates of whether families are using more, less or the same amount of early education as would be expected in the absence of a pandemic is so far unavailable.⁸ There is

⁸ Evidence from a survey of parents conducted by Ipsos Mori finds that half (50%) of parents who had been using childcare before the pandemic and were doing so in September 2020 were using the same number of hours of formal childcare as before. Just over a third (35%) were using more hours of formal childcare, and one in eight (13%) were using fewer hours. This survey does not allow us to isolate the impact of the pandemic from the impact of children getting older since it began, since children tend to attend for more hours of

evidence that some early years providers are reducing their opening hours, and if this translates into children attending for fewer hours on average this could have a significant impact on the incomes of early years providers, which is based on the hours of childcare they provide.⁹

While comparable data from other UK countries is not available, it is possible that the trends in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are similar to those seen in England.

Government support provided

Below we describe the support provided by governments of UK nations in the 2020 autumn term, building on our earlier review of support provided in the first period of school closures in response to the pandemic.¹⁰

UK-wide support

Since October, most of the support offered by the UK Government that applied to businesses, including private, voluntary and independent early years providers, has remained in place. The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme was due to end at the beginning of November, but this has been extended until the end of April 2021.¹¹ The Self-Employment Income Support Scheme has similarly been extended, having originally been set to close in late October. Some other sources of support, such as business loans and the mortgage payment holiday, while still technically open to applicants throughout the autumn term were not made any more generous, so those who had already made use of these funds by September were not eligible for renewed support.

England

In the autumn term the government's approach to paying for government-funded childcare places in England had been to pay as if attendance rates were at the level that they had been at in January 2020, before the pandemic. From January 2021, it was due to revert to its usual approach of funding in proportion to the number of children actually attending. Following the start of another national lockdown in January 2021, with attendance at early years settings being less than 60 per cent as high as would be expected in the absence of the pandemic, some last-minute guidance issued directly to local authorities amended this slightly.¹² The guidance asked providers to complete this year's census based on the number of children registered for places, rather than those actually attending.¹³ In addition, the Department for Education said that it would fund any additional places for children who join after January up to 85 per cent of the levels of attendance seen the previous year in January 2020. This approach to funding is less generous than it was in the autumn term, but more generous than it would have been if it had moved to funding based on actual attendance in January 2021.

childcare each year until they reach school age. <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/childcare-and-home-learning-families-0-4-year-olds-during-covid-19-0>

⁹ E.g. <https://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/childcare-survey-2021>

¹⁰ Sibieta, L. and Cottell, J. (2020) Education policy responses across the UK to the pandemic [Online] Available at: <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/education-responses-uk-pandemic/>

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/chancellor-extends-furlough-and-loan-schemes>

¹² <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>

¹³ Crawford, C. and Farquharson, C (2021) Today's early years census likely to reduce government spending on childcare significantly [Online] Available at: <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/15268>

In the autumn term, support from the government meant, in theory, that the vast majority of providers would not see a change to their income from government-funded places compared to the previous academic year. Because attendance in the 2020 autumn term was lower than it had been in January, this meant that, on average, providers would receive funding for more places than they provided. Although data on the actual cost of this policy is not yet available, we estimate that an average-sized provider in the private, voluntary or independent sector might have received additional funding of approximately £3,200 per month in the autumn term compared to what they would have received in government-funded places if funding was based on actual take-up.¹⁴ It should be noted that early years providers are highly heterogeneous, so the experience of most providers will differ from this average.

The pre-announced change from January 2021 to funding based on actual take-up would make a significant difference to the sustainability of some early year providers – especially those which previously received a greater proportion of their income from government-funded places. One survey of local authorities in England found that 58 per cent believed in the autumn term that some local childcare providers would permanently close as a result of this support being withdrawn, with the rest split between believing that providers would not close locally and not holding enough data to decide.¹⁵ Another study estimated that if providers lost 10 per cent of income from frees and public entitlement funding, the proportion of settings with a ‘significant deficit’ would increase from 28 per cent before the pandemic to 37 per cent after the pandemic.¹⁶

Additionally, the ongoing lockdown is likely to lead to a large reduction in demand for childcare places in January 2021 – including government-funded places. Guidance released in January by the DfE says that children not attending an early years setting due to coronavirus, but that are registered with one, should be included in early years census that will be used to decide funding in the spring term.¹⁷ Despite this, settings will experience a significant reduction in government funding as a result of this change. The approach to funding childcare places from January 2021 is likely to need to change as a result.

Wales

Since settings were allowed to reopen fully in late June, there have been a number of changes to the financial support that they have been eligible for due to changes to government-funded childcare. Most recently, in response to the national lockdown in early 2021, government advice says that

¹⁴ This calculation is based on the following: average attendance rates of children eligible for FEEE places in England were 19% lower in autumn term 2020 than in the previous year, excluding from this calculation the first two weeks of September when data may have reflected lower attendance in the summer holiday (<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/2020-week-50>); approximately 56% of providers’ income was sourced from government-funded places in 2018 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-providers-cost-study-2018>); the average monthly income of a PVI provider in 2019 was £30,130 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/childcare-and-early-years-providers-survey-2019>).

¹⁵ Jarvie, M. and Dali-Chaouch, M. (2020) Childcare Survey 2021 early release [Online] Available at: <https://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/childcare-survey-2021>

¹⁶ Blanden, J., Crawford, C., Drayton, E., Farquharson, C., Jarvie, M., & Paull, G. (2020) Challenges for the childcare market: the implications of COVID-19 for childcare providers in England [Online] Available at: <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14990>

¹⁷ <https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/article/coronavirus-dfe-tells-local-authorities-to-fund-children-temporarily-absent-from-nurseries>

Childcare Offer funding may continue to be paid based on the hours that children have booked to attend rather than those they actually attend, and that further funding may be available, but this appears to be up to local authorities to provide.¹⁸

The temporary Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme (CCAS) for vulnerable children and the children of key workers closed at the end of August, with the pre-existing Childcare Offer of 30 hours a week of free childcare for working parents of three- and four-years olds reinstated from August. More children are eligible for the latter offer, meaning that providers are likely to benefit from its reinstatement.¹⁹

A grant of up to £5,000 per setting was made available to early years providers which had been unable to access funding through other means. However, it was taken up by fewer settings than expected in the initial weeks of it being open.²⁰

Scotland

Early Learning and Childcare Settings in Scotland could reopen fully from mid-July until the new year when they were asked to provide places only to vulnerable children and those of key workers. The support available to early years providers via government-funded places remained unchanged since our previous report until the new year, when funding was announced to support providers to remain open to smaller groups. In January 2021, the Scottish Government announced a support package of £3.8m for each four-week period of restrictions; it is unclear how much this will amount to per setting.

Outside of this emergency funding, local authorities are advised to have ‘sustainable local funding models’, to be devised in conversation with providers and which recognise the costs those providers may have faced in preparing for the planned expansion of government-funded childcare in Scotland. Although official deadlines for the rollout of the expanded offer were postponed due to the pandemic, most eligible children were taking up an expanded place in the autumn term, suggesting many providers have gone ahead in providing it.²¹ The exact nature of funding is likely to have varied between local authorities.

The Childminding Workforce Support Fund, which provided financial support to childminders who were facing hardship and had not been able to access funding via other routes, closed for new applications on 19 October.²² The fund had been part-funded by the Scottish Government.

¹⁸ <https://gov.wales/guidance-childcare-providers-childcare-offer-wales-coronavirus#section-55722> Accessed 09/02/21

¹⁹ Around 9,000 children accessed childcare via the CCAS at the height of the scheme, though it is not clear how many hours per week they attended for, on average (source: <https://gov.wales/childcare-offer-wales-reopen>). In contrast, 14,600 children were supported via the Childcare Offer in January 2020,

²⁰ <https://record.assembly.wales/Plenary/6565#A60365>

²¹ <https://www.gov.scot/news/majority-of-children-receiving-expanded-elc/>

²² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-support-to-childcare-sector/pages/childminders-financial-support/>

The Transitional Support Fund, which provided funding to support early years settings to meet the extra costs they incurred in complying with public health guidance related to the pandemic, closed to applications on 9 October.²³

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, the main source of financial support for early years providers during July and August 2020 was the Childcare Recovery Fund. The Fund provided financial support to providers based on their size and type to assist with the additional costs incurred adhering to Department of Health Covid-related guidance to support the reopening of childcare provision. The Childcare Support Fund has been replaced by the Childcare Sustainability Fund, which aimed to provide financial support to providers to assist with complying with guidance as well as to provide financial support while providers were operating with reduced demand for their services. With similar eligibility criteria as the Recovery Fund, it provided a one-off payment to providers in or after December to cover the period from September to December. Settings were eligible for different rates of funding depending on their size and the type of setting. As an example, an early years setting registered for 25-60 places was eligible to receive £2,559 per month for each of the four months in the period. While the purpose of the scheme is different to previous schemes, it is worth noting that it is less generous for a comparable setting than its predecessor.²⁴

Support was also made available to providers who had to partially or fully close temporarily due to Covid-19 in the autumn term (e.g. because a staff member had a confirmed case) and to settings that were forced to close in the two-week school closure in October.²⁵ This was announced on 5 January 2021.

This system of grants to early years providers was unique among the four nations during the autumn term (Scotland has since introduced a system of grants to support providers who are open in the spring term and coping with lower demand and higher costs). The support appears relatively well targeted at some of the key issues faced by providers due to the pandemic; namely, reduced demand, increased costs, and temporary closures.

Summary and conclusions

Following the reopening of early years settings, the proportion of settings that were open approached normal levels by the end of the autumn term in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (about 90 per cent open in all three cases), with levels in England slightly lower (80 per cent or so). Evidence from England shows that attendance also gradually increased to about 85 per cent of pre-pandemic levels by the end of the autumn term. As demand grew and settings reopened, support for the sector generally became less generous than it had been at the height of the first lockdown.

During the 2020 autumn term, the support available appears to have been most generous in England and Northern Ireland, where some funding was independent of contemporary demand for paid-for or government-funded places. Given this, it is unclear why the proportion of early years providers

²³ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-support-to-childcare-sector/pages/transitional-support-fund-for-childcare-providers/>

²⁴ <https://www.early-years.org/csf-sustainability>

²⁵ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/minister-announces-new-measures-support-childcare-providers-0>

that are open appears to have remained lower in England than in other countries over the autumn term; this may in part reflect the differences in how data is collected in each country.

Support for providers in Wales and Scotland appears to have returned over the autumn term to being dependent on demand, although in Scotland local authorities who are responsible for delivering funding are advised to have 'sustainable local funding models' which may make support more generous. In summary, the support made available by UK governments in the first lockdown appears to have enabled most providers to reopen their doors in the autumn term. However, support has gradually become less generous across the board. With a new UK-wide lockdown from January, new support measures have been announced in Scotland, and may be required in other countries to ensure that providers can continue operating.

Section 3: School attendance

Following the first lockdown and summer holidays, pupils across the UK returned to school on a full-time basis from August and September. Getting as many pupils back to school full-time was clearly crucial to allow them to catch up from any losses in learning over the lockdown period. However, there were numerous challenges and barriers to getting attendance rates back to pre-pandemic levels. This included rising infection rates starting in September (see Figure 1.1), lack of parental confidence in safety measures and the very difficult decisions facing pupils and families with health conditions that make them more vulnerable to the virus.

Figure 3.1 shows the recorded attendance rates across all four UK nations over the 2020 autumn term. The precise way these are measured differs slightly across each country, with the implications noted below.

Scotland

Starting in mid-August 2020, pupils in Scotland were the first to return in full. Attendance rates started relatively high at 94 per cent in the week starting 17 August. These then dipped slightly, before returning to just over 90 per cent for most of September and October (most local authorities had holidays during the week starting 12 October). Attendance rates remained close to 90 per cent for November and early December, before falling to 87 per cent for the last week of term. These relatively high rates of school attendance as compared with the other UK nations make sense given the lower case rate in Scotland over most of the period (see Figure 1.1)

According to the data, two per cent of pupils, on average, were absent for COVID-related reasons on any given day during August and September. This then climbed to just under three per cent during October and about four per cent during November. COVID-related absences fell again in early December, before climbing back up to over five per at the end of term.

Scotland implemented a closure of pubs and restaurants in the central belt for three weeks from mid-October and a five-tier system of local restrictions from early November. In all areas, there were no new restrictions on schools during the Autumn Term.

Northern Ireland

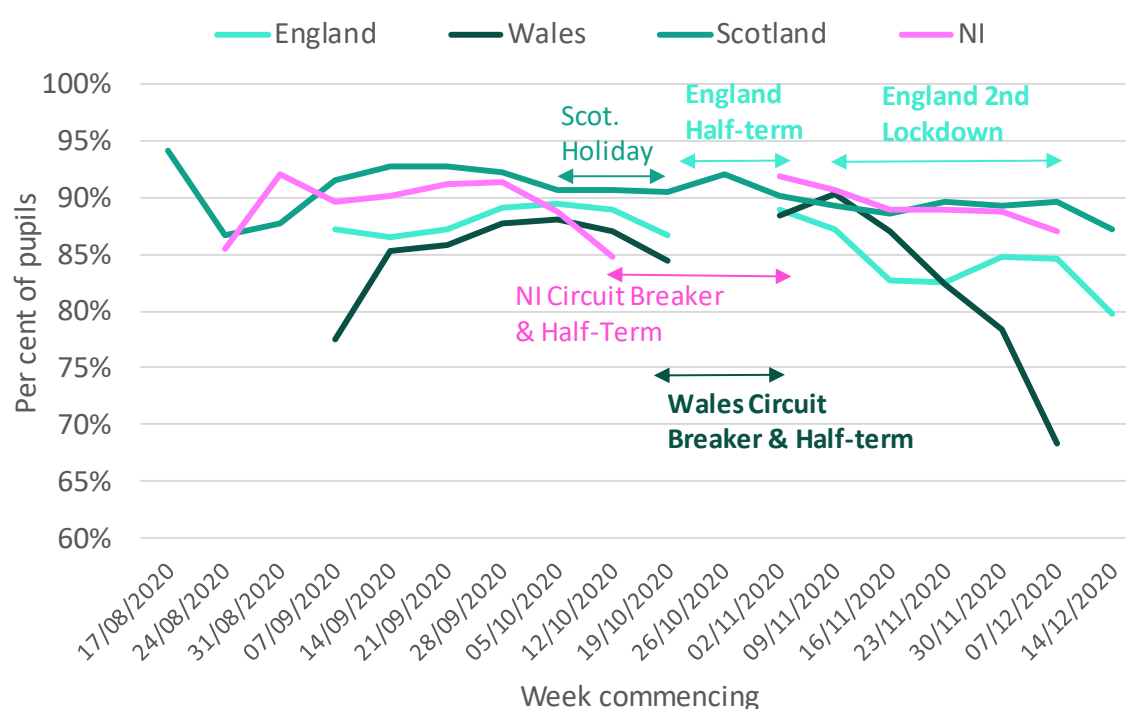
Pupils in Northern Ireland returned in the last week of August 2020. The share of pupils in school started at about 85 per cent in the last week of August, before climbing to around 90 per cent in early October. COVID-related absences accounted for only about two per cent of pupils over

most of this period. Attendance rates then dropped sharply to 85 per cent in mid-October and COVID-related absences climbed to eight per cent of pupils. This coincides with the sharp rise in cases across Northern Ireland in October. At this point, schools across Northern Ireland closed for two weeks (as part of a wider set of restrictions across Northern Ireland for four weeks).²⁶

In-school attendance climbed back up to 91-92 per cent when schools returned in early November and COVID-related absences fell back down to about three to four per cent of pupils. A further two-week circuit breaker lockdown was implemented in Northern Ireland from 27 November, though schools remained open this time.

Over the course of November and December, school attendance fell slightly to a low of 87 per cent in the second week of December. For the last week of term, all schools in Northern Ireland moved to remote or online learning, partly in response to the sharp rise in cases.

Figure 3.1: School attendance since reopening in August/September 2020



Notes and sources for England: Covers all pupils in state-funded schools (except maintained nurseries) and averaged over each week (<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>). **Notes and sources for Wales:** Figures covers all pupils in maintained settings (including maintained nurseries) (<https://gov.wales/pupils-present-maintained-schools-7-september-18-december-2020>); Conwy, Powys and Pembrokeshire had a two-week half-term from 19 October to 2 November; schools were closed to pupils in year 9 and above in the week commencing 2 November (except for pupils taking exams). All secondary

²⁶ These figures for Northern Ireland are below those we have previously published. This is because previous attendance figures for Northern Ireland treated pupils who were self-isolating and learning from home as “present.”

*schools were closed for face-to-face teaching during the w/c 14 December and many primary schools closed early too. **Notes and sources for Scotland:** Figures are averaged across each week in all local authority settings, excluding childcare settings*

*(<https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-daily-data-for-scotland/>). **Notes and sources for Northern Ireland:** In school attendance across all primary and post-primary schools (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/management-information-attendance-pupils-and-workforce-schools>), schools in Northern Ireland were closed to pupils in Northern Ireland for two weeks from the week commencing 19 October.*

England

Pupils in England and Wales began to return from 1 September, though this was staged in many cases. In England, attendance rates started off at about 87 per cent in the week commencing 7 September, before growing to about 89 per cent in mid-October. Attendance rates then fell to 87 per cent in the last week before half-term (excluding schools that were already on half-term). A three-tier system of local restrictions was introduced in England in mid-October, though schools remained open in all three tiers.

These attendance rates are slightly below those seen in Scotland and Northern Ireland for most of September and October, reflecting the higher case rates in England. Indeed, further data suggests that about four to five per cent of pupils in England were absent from school for COVID-related reasons during October, rising to six to seven per cent in the week before half-term (for most of England).²⁷

After half-term, school attendance rates climbed back up to 89 per cent, but then dropped sharply to a low of 83 per cent by late November. COVID-related absences also climbed back up to 8-10 per cent of pupils in the third week of November.²⁸ This reflects the gradual rise in cases during October and November.

A four-week lockdown was implemented in England from 5 November, though schools remained open. By the end of this four-week lockdown, attendance rates had climbed back up to 85 per cent in the first week of December. There was then an extremely sharp fall to a low of 80 per cent in the last week of term. For this last week of term, COVID-related absences were about 9-11 per cent of pupils. This coincided with the upsurge in cases at this time across much of London and south-east England.

Wales

Whilst most schools in Wales started back in the first week of September, the first day all pupils in Wales were expected to be back in school was 14 September. As a result, attendance rates clearly took longer to pick up. From mid-September, attendance rates were still slightly below those seen in England, but increased to about 88 per cent in early October. As seen in the other UK nations, attendance rates dropped off during October, falling to 84 per cent in the last week before half-term. This coincides with the upsurge in cases in Wales in October.

For the last week of October and first week of November, Wales imposed a two-week lockdown. During the first week of November, only pupils up to year 8 and those taking exams were able to

²⁷ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/2020-week-42>

²⁸ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/2020-week-48>

attend school. The lack of older age groups (with higher infection rates) in school could partly explain the high attendance figure of 88 per cent for the first week of November. However, even when older age groups returned the following week, attendance rates climbed to a high of 91 per cent. At this point, school attendance rates in Wales equaled those seen in Northern Ireland, and were above those seen in England and Scotland, having been lower during September and October.

School attendance rates then dropped extremely rapidly in Wales over the rest of November and early December. From a high point of 91 per cent in the week starting 9 November, attendance rates fell to 82 per cent in the last week of November and even further to 68 per cent by the second week of December. Recorded in-person attendance was then 16 per cent in the last week before the Christmas holidays (not shown on the graph), though all secondary schools had moved to remote learning and many primary schools closed early for Christmas. This sharp fall in school attendance in Wales in December reflects the large upsurge in cases seen in Figure 1.1

Data on reasons for absence in Wales is not published in the same way as it for England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. However, the data that is available shows that 50-60 per cent of absences were explicitly related to COVID in late November and the first two weeks of December. This would equate to about 10-15 per cent of pupils in Wales absent for COVID-related reasons in late November and early November (given attendance rates were falling from about 80 to 70 per cent). This strongly suggests that COVID-related absences are likely to have been highest in Wales.

Data for Wales does include pupils in maintained nurseries, whilst childcare and nurseries are excluded for other countries. This is likely to be playing only a small, if any, role in driving lower attendance rates in Wales given low infection rates amongst younger children.

Differences by area and pupil characteristics

Partly reflecting differing rates of infection, there were also significant differences in attendance rates within countries for different areas, types of school and by the age of pupils. The analysis that is possible differs by country, given the data available.

In Figure 3.2, we show the average school attendance rate over the 2020 autumn term by local authority or council. Panel (a) shows the pattern for the whole term, and figure (b) excludes the last week of term when attendance dropped sharply in some parts of England and by even more in Wales, where many schools also closed for the last week of term. For Scotland, this covers the period from reopening in mid-August through to the last week of term in December. For England, this covers the week starting 7 September (the first full week of term) through to the last week before end of term. In Wales, the data by local authority only starts from early October. This misses the first two weeks of term in September when attendance was not compulsory and the last two weeks of September when attendance was relatively high (as compared with the rest of the 2020 Autumn term).²⁹ Unfortunately, there is no local area data for Northern Ireland.

²⁹ The net effect of this missing data for September on average school attendance in Wales is relatively small, however. Average school attendance in Wales was 79 per cent across the whole term of data and 77 per cent excluding September. This difference in time periods cannot explain the dramatically lower levels of school attendance seen across local authorities in Wales in the maps below.

As one would expect given the national trends, average attendance in Scottish council areas was generally higher than in England and Wales. In many cases, attendance rates were above 90 per cent, falling to 85-90 per cent in much of the central belt. The lowest rates of attendance were in Glasgow, Ayrshire and West Dunbartonshire, though still about 87 per cent in all three cases. As there was no dramatic drop in attendance in the last week of term in Scotland, these patterns mostly hold including and excluding the last week of term.

In England, average attendance levels were lower, with much more variation by local area. Average attendance was lowest in urban areas across the North West and Yorkshire, particularly Oldham and Rochdale, where average attendance was below 80 per cent. Attendance was also low in cities across the Midlands, e.g. below 80 per cent in Sandwell in Birmingham. Average attendance across the whole term was also low in much of Kent, the Thames estuary and East London. These low levels can mostly be explained by a sharp drop in the last week of term.

Figure 3.2: School attendance rates by area across Great Britain during the 2020 autumn term



Source and notes: Data for England starts w/c 7 September (<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>); Data for Wales starts w/c 5 October (<https://gov.wales/pupils-present-maintained-schools-7-september-18-december-2020>); Data for Scotland starts from w/c 17 August (<https://public.tableau.com/profile/sq.eas.learninganalysis#!/vizhome/COVID19-SchoolsandChildcareInformation/Introduction>). Half-term and holiday dates are excluded.

Average attendance was lowest across local authorities in Wales, with average attendance below 75 per cent in many areas in south Wales, including Swansea, Neath Port Talbot, Merthyr Tydfil, Blaenau Gwent and Newport. These very low levels can mostly be explained by the very sharp drops in school attendance and early school closures in the last week of term. However, the low levels of school attendance in these areas are still visible if we exclude the final week of term. The drops in attendance and school closures in the last week of term will also have meant pupils did genuinely lose significant amounts of face-to-face schooling time.

Looking across the whole of Great Britain, the areas with the highest school attendance are almost all rural areas. This includes many of the rural local authorities in Scotland, north and south of the central belt of urban areas. It includes Gwynedd in Wales, much of south and south-west England, Cumbria, Herefordshire and parts of East Anglia.

The areas with the lowest attendance rates also tend to be more disadvantaged local authorities and those with lower prior educational attainment. For example, in England, some of the lowest school attendance rates were seen in Oldham, Sandwell, Rochdale and Knowsley, all areas with a relatively high share of children eligible for free school meals and low prior GCSE results (we discuss this in more detail in a further paper looking at absence rates over the Autumn Term in England).³⁰ In Wales, the lowest school attendance rates are seen in Merthyr Tydfil, Blaenau Gwent, Swansea and Neath Port Talbot, all areas with above average shares of children eligible for free school meals. In Northern Ireland, grammar schools also showed higher levels of in-person attendance than other secondary schools (Figure 3.4). Given that the share of pupils eligible for free school meals is much lower in grammar schools (14 per cent) than in other secondary schools (38 per cent) in Northern Ireland, it seems highly likely that disadvantaged pupils missed more in-person schooling in Northern Ireland.³¹

The Scottish Government helpfully presents even more detail and shows how school attendance rates vary by small local areas and levels of disadvantage over time. This shows that, for example, attendance rates in mid-November were lowest in the most deprived areas (85 per cent) and highest in the least deprived areas (93 per cent).³² This pattern was repeated throughout the autumn term and is highly unlikely to be a uniquely Scottish phenomenon.

School attendance levels were also clearly lower for older age groups throughout the autumn term. Figure 3.3 shows the attendance rates for primary and secondary schools in England over the course of the Autumn Term. This shows that attendance rates were clearly lower in secondary schools than in primary schools throughout the term. This fits with ONS evidence showing higher infection rates for older children at the time.³³ Absence rates are normally higher in secondary schools than primary schools, though the difference is typically small. For the last five years, average absences imply an attendance rate of 96 per cent for primary schools and just under 95 per cent for secondary schools.³⁴

³⁰ <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/school-attendance-and-lost-schooling-across-england-since-full-reopening/>

³¹ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolments-northern-ireland-summary-data>

³² Data for 11 November, 2020, but the pattern is very stable over time.

³³

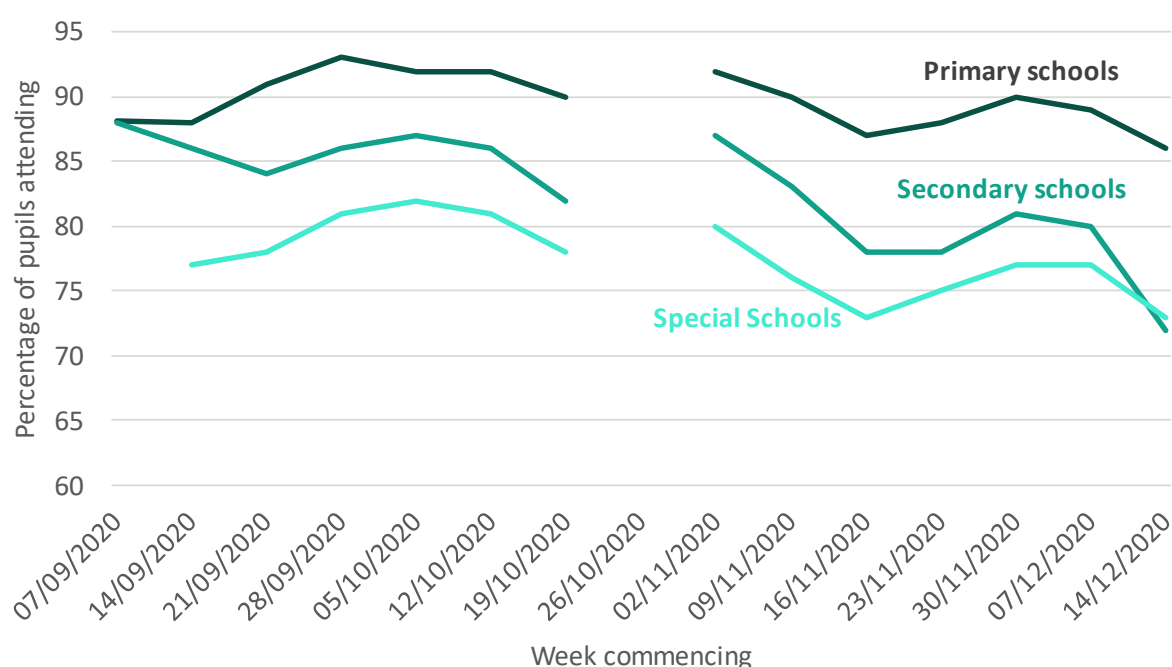
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/coronaviruscovid19infectionsurveys/pilot/8january2021>

³⁴ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england>

Over the course of the term, attendance in primary schools in England was mostly around 90 per cent, but fell to a low of 86 per cent in the last week of term. In secondary schools in England, attendance fell from over 85 per cent through most of September to 82 per cent by the end of October. Secondary school attendance rose back up to 87 per cent after half-term, before falling over the rest of term. A further dramatic fall in the last week of term led to a low of 72 per cent at the end of the autumn term.

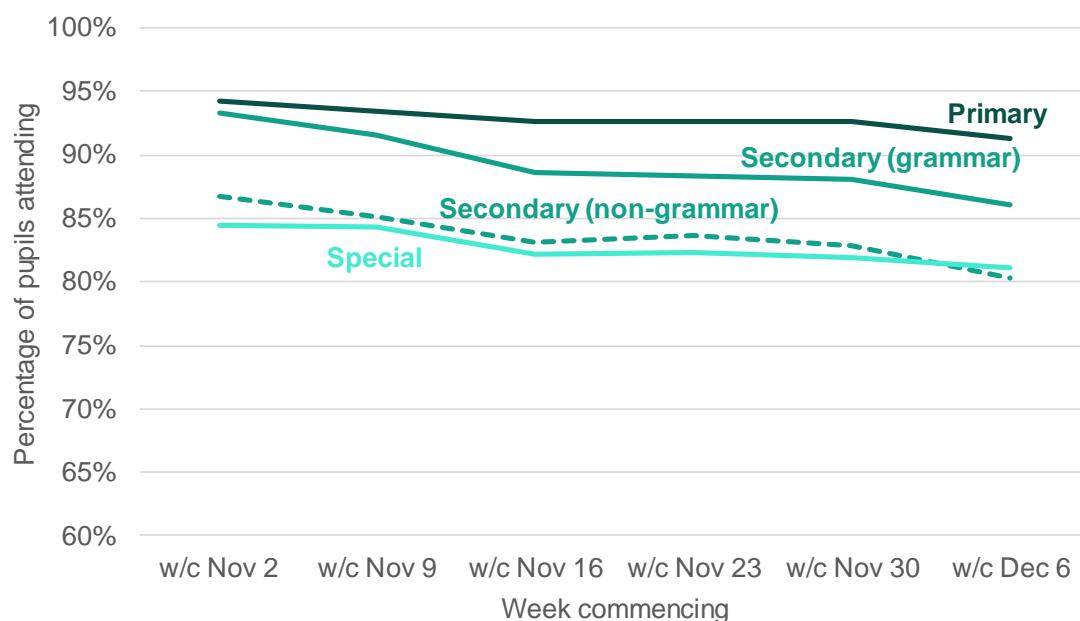
A similar pattern by phase can be seen for Northern Ireland (Figure 3.4), though data by phase on in-person attendance is only available from the start of November. This shows much higher levels of school attendance in primary schools, which fell from 94 per cent at the start of November to closer to 90 per cent in early December. Secondary school attendance was lower throughout and fell by more. Amongst grammar schools, secondary school attendance fell from 93 per cent at the start of November to 86 per cent in early December, whilst it fell from 87 to 80 per cent amongst other secondary schools. All schools in Northern Ireland then switched to remote learning in the last week of term.

Figure 3.3: School attendance rates by phase of education in England



Sources and notes: (<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>).

Figure 3.4: School attendance rates by phase of education in Northern Ireland



Sources and notes: (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/management-information-attendance-pupils-and-workforce-schools>).

Figure 3.5 shows further detail for Wales and Scotland, which collected data by individual year groups. This data is shown for a period of high school attendance in both Wales and Scotland (mid-November) and for a period of low attendance (second week of December).

In Scotland, attendance was uniformly high (over 90 per cent) across primary school year groups in both November and December. Attendance was lower amongst older pupils in secondary schools, with a small drop between November and December. Attendance was lowest at 82 per cent in mid-December for S3 in Scotland, the equivalent of Year 10 in England and Wales, and around 83 per cent for S2 and S4.

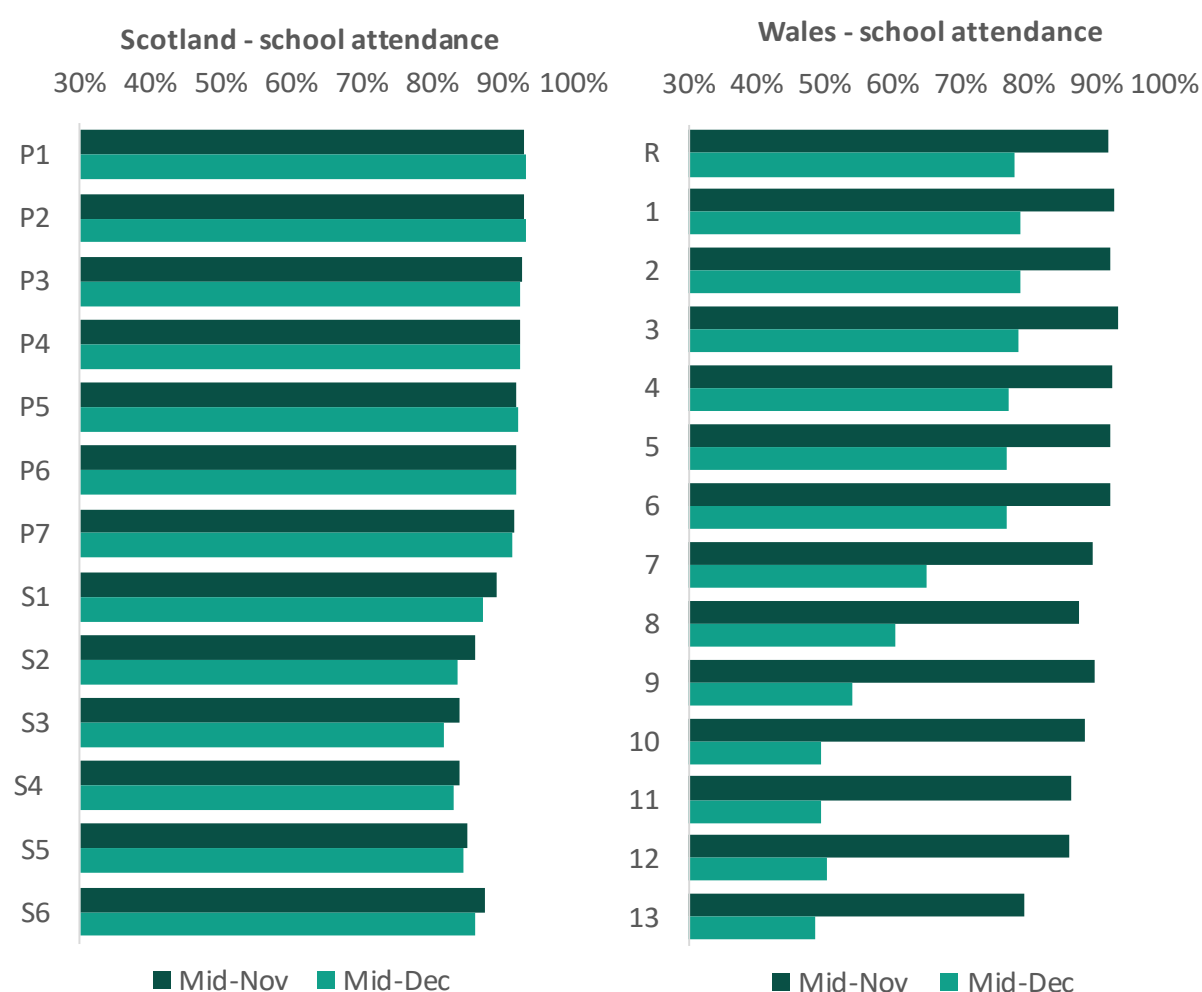
In Wales, a similar picture to Scotland can be seen for mid-November. Primary school attendance was uniformly high across all year groups (over 90 per cent) and only a few percentage points lower in secondary year groups (down to 86 per cent for Year 11 and 12, and 80 per cent for Year 13). The drop in school attendance in Wales in mid-December can then be seen across all year groups, but particularly for secondary schools. Attendance dropped to just under 80 per cent across primary school year groups, but fell to 55-65 per cent for Year 7-9 and to about 50 per cent for Year 10 and above.

Across the UK, the schools with the lowest attendance rates are special schools. In Scotland, attendance rates at special schools was about 86 per cent in both mid-November and mid-December. In Northern Ireland, attendance in special schools was slightly lower, falling from just under 85 per cent at the start of November to just over 80 per cent in mid-December (Figure 3.4). In England, attendance at special schools was notably lower. It started at 77 per cent in early September, grew to a high of 82 per cent in early October and then fell back to 73 per cent by the end of term (Figure 3.3).

Some of this will reflect rational decisions not to attend school, given that pupils at special schools are more likely to suffer from medical conditions that make them more vulnerable to the virus. However, it also highlights the importance of providing extra support to pupils,

particularly given the additional problems many pupils with special educational needs and disabilities faced during lockdown (as we detailed in our previous report).

Figure 3.5: School attendance rates by year group in Scotland and Wales



Notes and sources for Wales: Figures covers all pupils in maintained settings. Mid-November relates to the w/c 9 Nov (<https://gov.wales/pupils-present-maintained-schools-7-september-27-november-2020>) and mid-December covers the w/c 6 December. **Notes and sources for Scotland:** Mid-November relates to 11 November and Mid-December relates to 11 December (<https://public.tableau.com/profile/sg.eas.learninganalysis#!/vizhome/COVID19-SchoolsandChildcareInformation/Introduction>).

Summary

In summary, the trends in attendance over the autumn term mostly coincided with differences in case numbers, with falls across all countries during October and large falls in attendance in December in much of Wales and parts of England when cases were increasing rapidly. Through most of the autumn term, attendance rates were lowest in Wales and generally higher in Scotland and Northern Ireland, where cases were generally lower. However, some of these differences also result from the fact that Scotland and Northern started their school years (as normal) during August when cases were at their lowest. This enabled pupils to gain more face-

to-face schooling time in Scotland and Northern Ireland, though schools in Northern Ireland were also closed for in-person schooling for two weeks over the autumn term.

There is also clear evidence of differences across local authorities, matching the spread of the virus, with the biggest differences across local authorities in England and Wales. In England, attendance rates were lowest across urban areas in the North West, Yorkshire, Midlands, East London and around the Thames estuary. In Wales, attendance rates were lowest of all, particularly in many of the south Wales valleys. Attendance rates were also generally lower for more disadvantaged areas across England, Scotland and Wales. This risks a widening of educational inequalities without greater catch-up resources focused on more disadvantaged schools and pupils.

Attendance rates were also lower for secondary-age pupils, particularly when case numbers were increasing rapidly, as was the case in parts of England and Wales during December. This implies a greater loss in learning time for secondary-age pupils. Governments across the UK have already decided to largely cancel normal, external examinations for 2021 and shift to some kind of internal or teacher assessments. However, the loss of learning time for other secondary-age year groups (e.g. year 9, year 10 and year 12) have been substantial too, particularly in England and Wales. This also implies a need for extra catch-up and/or adapting assessments and examinations for a number of future years too.

Lastly, school attendance rates were lowest for pupils at special schools. Given inadequate levels of support during the first lockdown, this implies a need for greater support and catch up going forwards. We discuss this as part of wider issues relating to special education needs and disabilities in section 5.

Section 4: Catch-up support

In light of the large losses in learning time during the first lockdown, all four nations have announced extra resources to help pupils catch-up. However, they differ markedly in terms of the level of resources and focus. In this section, we describe and compare plans that have been announced so far, which are summarised in Table 4.1. Given the ongoing closure of schools to most pupils during the current lockdown, it seems likely that policymakers will want to add to these plans.

England

For England, the Department for Education has put in place two broad programmes: a one-off catch-up premium (£650m); and, the National Tutoring Programme (£250m for pupils aged 5-16). The one-off catch-up premium represents an additional £80 per pupil aged 5-16 in state-funded schools, with a higher amount of £240 per pupil in special schools, alternative provision and hospital schools. Schools are then free to use the catch-up premium in the ways they see best.

The National Tutoring Programme (NTP) is an additional £250m fund targeted at disadvantaged pupils and schools (a further £96m is available for sixth forms and colleges for similar purposes). One element provides a 75 per cent subsidy towards the cost of private tuition from a list of approved partners. As well as bespoke tutoring, it includes a range of structured programmes, such as the

Nuffield Early Language Intervention.³⁵ Some of these programmes last about 20 weeks and are likely to have been disrupted by the ongoing lockdown.

Whilst the NTP is intended to be focused on disadvantaged pupils, particularly those eligible for the Pupil Premium, no firm rules exist for which pupils are eligible for subsidised tuition. Caps will, however, be introduced if local demand exceeds supply. The second component of the NTP is a set of Academic Mentors attached to particular schools. These academic mentors will be trained by Teach First and will provide one-to-one and additional support to pupils throughout the school. Only disadvantaged schools are eligible to host these mentors.³⁶

It seems likely that both programmes will continue beyond the initial planned time horizon given difficulties providing tutoring during the current lockdown. Indeed, the Prime Minister has already announced a further £300m for catch-up programmes over the next year.³⁷

The overall package of funding amounts to about £1.2bn for pupils aged 5-16 in state-funded schools across England, or about £174 per pupil in total. This makes it the second largest amount of support per pupil across all four nations. However, less than 30 per cent of the funding and support has been focused on disadvantaged pupils so far. Most of the funding has been allocated to schools on the basis of a general catch-up premium.

Wales

In July 2020, the Welsh Government announced an additional £29m of funding for schools between September 2020 and August 2021 as part of its Accelerated Learning Programme (ALP) to help schools “recruit, cover and raise standards.” This funding is intended to grow capacity in the system and is sufficient to recruit an extra 600 teachers and 300 teaching assistants. The Welsh Government also set out an expectation that the priority target groups should be year groups taking exams this school years (years 11, 12 and 13), vulnerable and disadvantaged learners, and pupils in year 7. However, it is up to individual schools to determine how to spend the additional money and which specific groups of pupils to focus on, subject to this generating additional capacity. In the large part, this is expected to result in additional staff or staffing hours. Schools are then expected to report this additional spending through a simple template setting out how the money was spent.

In addition to this funding, the Welsh Government has also provided a further £4m of support (via LAs) for post-16 learners and £7m for learners in exam year groups (years 10-13). Very recently, the Welsh Government had also announced £29m to support vocational learners in colleges.³⁸

The total funding for schools for catch-up (including £29m for the ALP, £4m for post-16 learners and £7m for exam year groups) represents about £88 per pupil in maintained schools in Wales, which is about half the level of catch-up funding allocated or announced for England and Scotland. However, a larger share of funding is allocated towards disadvantaged pupils in Wales. About 50 per cent of the ALP funding has been allocated based on priority or disadvantaged learners.

Scotland

In June 2020, the Scottish Government announced that it would be providing £100m over two years to “help support the return to school and help children recover any lost ground” as part of its

³⁵ <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/nuffield-early-language-intervention/>

³⁶ <https://nationaltutoring.org.uk/ntp-academic-mentors/academic-mentors-faqs>

³⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-55828952>

³⁸ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-55972749>

Education Recovery programme.³⁹ This has since increased to about £300m.⁴⁰ About £80m of this has been allocated to local authorities to recruit an additional 1,400 teachers and 200 extra support staff in schools. In contrast to Wales and England, this funding is explicitly for the recruitment of specific numbers of additional teaching and support staff. About 80 per cent of the £80m is allocated to local authorities on the basis of current teacher numbers and 20 per cent is allocated on the basis of pupils registered as eligible to receive free school meals.

In February 2021, the Scottish Government announced a further “£60m of additional investment in education recovery, including employing more teachers, classroom support staff and facilities management.” No further details are available at the time of writing, but this takes total additional funding for catch-up to about £140m in Scotland.⁴¹

The total funding represents about £200 per pupil in publicly funded schools in Scotland, though this will be spread across two years (or longer depending on the nature of the additional funding announced in February 2021).

In addition to this, the Scottish Government has provided about £200m in general COVID-related support funding to local authorities, part of which could be used to support catch-up in schools.

Northern Ireland

In June 2020, the Northern Irish Executive announced its £11.2m “Engage” programme in June, designed to help disadvantaged children catch up with learning lost during the coronavirus lockdown. This covers the period up to March 2021, with a further £5m expected to be confirmed for the period up to the end of the academic year in June 2021. The funding is intended to be used to secure additional qualified teachers, enabling schools to provide child centred one-to-one or small group teaching support to those pupils who stand to benefit the most.

The funding is being allocated by the Education Authority to individual schools by a set formula, with differing amounts depending on the number of pupils enrolled. In contrast to the rest of the UK, significantly more funding is being provided to disadvantaged schools. In particular, schools with more than 28 per cent of pupils eligible for free school meals have received significantly more funding. Schools in this category with 200-1000 pupils will receive about £25,000 and schools with more than 1,000 pupils about £50,000. This is intended to fund a range of extra teaching resources. In schools where less than 28 per cent of pupils are eligible for free school meals, allocations range from £4,000 to £8,000 and are only intended to fund a small number of substitute teacher days.

In addition, the Northern Ireland Executive provided about £12m for summer activities in schools across Northern Ireland in summer 2020 and additional virtual support for pupils going into year 7.⁴²

The overall package represents about £82 per pupil in state-funded schools in Northern Ireland. Whilst this is the lowest average amount across the UK, like the ALP in Wales, the Engage programme is strongly focused on disadvantaged pupils. Indeed, about half of the funding is explicitly focused towards schools with more disadvantaged intakes.

³⁹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/re-opening-schools/>

⁴⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-55828952>; <https://www.gov.scot/news/remote-learning-to-continue-for-majority/>

⁴¹ <https://www.gov.scot/news/remote-learning-to-continue-for-majority/>

⁴² <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/education-minister-launches-ps112m-engage-programme#skip-link>

Table 4.1: Comparison of school catch-up plans and resources across the UK

	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
Description	Catch-up premium; National Tutoring Programme (NTP)	Accelerating Learning Programme (ALP)	Education Recovery	Engage programme
Purpose and focus	Schools decide how to use catch-up premium; NTP provides subsidised access to tuition for disadvantaged pupils	To generate additional capacity; expected focus on exam year groups, disadvantaged pupils & year 7	To recruit 1,400 additional teachers & 200 extra support staff	To provide additional teaching resources, tuition & substitute teacher days; focused on disadvantaged schools; additional activities in summer 2020
Total funding	£1.2bn over 2020-21 & 2021-22 (Catch-up premium: £650m; NTP: £250m; Extra £300m)	ALP: £29m from Sept 2020 to Aug 2021; Post-16 learners in schools: £4m; £7m for exam year groups	£80m over 2020-21 and 2021-22; Additional £60m announced in February 2021	£16m for 2020-21 <i>(includes £5m to be confirmed for Apr-Jun 2021)</i> £12m for summer activities
Total funding per pupil	£174 per pupil aged 5-16 in state-funded schools	£88 per pupil in maintained schools	£200 per pupil in publicly funded schools	£82 per pupil in state-funded schools
Share focused on disadvantaged pupils	Under 30%	50% of ALP allocated for priority groups	20%	50% of Engage programme allocated to disadvantaged schools
Allocation method	Catch-up premium £80 per pupil NTP: 75% tuition subsidy; academic mentors in disadvantaged schools	50% allocated on pupil numbers; 50% towards priority groups (FSM, BAME, Gypsy/Roma, EAL)	80% allocated based on teacher numbers, 20% based on share of pupils eligible for FSM	Larger amounts provided to schools with higher levels of disadvantage; less deprived schools receive lower amount for substitute teacher days

Notes and sources for England: Catch-up premium and National Tutoring Programme

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/catch-up-premium-coronavirus-covid-19/catch-up-premium>), National Tutoring Programme funding only relates to 5-16 element, a further £100m has been allocated to sixth forms and colleges, an additional £300m was announced by the Prime Minister in January 2021 (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-55828952>), a higher catch-up premium of £240 is available in special schools, alternative provision and hospital schools, pupil numbers are full-time equivalent pupils aged 5-16 in state-funded schools in January 2020 (<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>). **Notes and sources**

for Wales: Accelerated Learning Programme (<https://gov.wales/recruit-recover-raise-standards-accelerating-learning-programme.html>); number of full-time equivalent pupils in maintained schools in January 2020 (<https://gov.wales/schools-census-results-january-2020>); **Notes and sources for**

Scotland: Education Recovery funding (<https://www.gov.scot/news/funding-for-more-teachers/>, <https://www.gov.scot/publications/education-recovery-further-additional-funding-2020-2021-local-authority-allocations/>), number of pupils in publicly funded schools in September 2020 (<https://www.gov.scot/publications/summary-statistics-schools-scotland-2020/pages/3/>); (<https://www.gov.scot/news/remote-learning-to-continue-for-majority/>). **Notes and sources for**

Northern Ireland: Engage programme (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/guidance-engage-programme-schools>), pupils in all schools, excluding independent schools, in 2019-20 (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/school-enrolments-northern-ireland-summary-data>).

Comparison across the UK

Looking across all the catch-up plans, the overall scale of resources looks modest in comparison with lost learning time. As shown in our earlier report, the lost weeks of schooling during lockdown for most pupils equated to about 14 weeks in England (though some pupils in target year groups were able to return in June/July 2020), 13 weeks in Wales, 11 weeks in Scotland and 12 weeks in Northern Ireland. This lost schooling has been compounded by lower attendance during the 2020 autumn term due to rising infection levels and the ongoing closure of schools to most pupils during early 2021. This will have been partly mitigated by home and remote learning. However, this clearly cannot fully compensate for lost schooling. High-quality evidence from the Netherlands shows that reductions in educational progress closely corresponded to the actual eight weeks schools were closed (i.e. pupils in 2020 were eight weeks behind compared with pupil in a normal year).⁴³

Of the four countries, the plans in Scotland provide the most in per pupil terms (£200 per pupil) and slightly less in England (£174 per pupil). The amounts provided in Wales (£88 per pupil) and Northern Ireland (£82) are notably lower. It should be noted, however, that plans for England and Scotland include extra funding that has been announced, but yet to be allocated in a precise way. Excluding these figures, catch-up funding in England and Scotland would still be higher.

However, even the large plans for England seem modest compared with the scale of the challenge and losses in learning time. The £80 catch-up premium would be just enough to pay for 10 per cent of the cost of a teaching assistant for a class of 30 pupils for one year, and the £250m NTP could pay for subsidised access to six hours of one-to-one tuition for 1.4 million disadvantaged pupils eligible for the Pupil Premium.⁴⁴ Such calculations are only illustrative, actual costs and types of provision could be very different. However, when set against the approximate loss of potential learning time of about 14 weeks for most pupils in England over the first lockdown, the overall catch-up package looks very modest. This learning loss will clearly have increased over the current lockdown.

In Scotland and Wales, the extra plans seem sufficient to increase staffing levels by modest amounts as well. In Scotland, the funding announced in 2020 provides for an extra 1,400 teachers, about three per cent of the current teacher workforce of 52,000, 200 extra support staff, about one per cent of the 15,000 support staff workforce. Plans announced in February 2021 will add to this. In Wales, the 600 extra teachers is just under three per cent of the current teaching workforce, or fewer than one for every two schools in Wales.

The empirical evidence presented in our earlier report also showed that disadvantaged pupils are likely to have lost most learning time over lockdown. Of the four plans, both the Engage programme in Northern Ireland and the ALP programme in Wales are strongly targeted towards more disadvantaged schools, with about 50 per cent of the funding targeted at more disadvantaged schools. In England and Scotland, modest amounts of the extra funding (20-30 per cent) are targeted towards more disadvantaged pupils.

In summary, all four nations have announced packages of catch-up funding. However, even before the current lockdown, these plans seemed modest and insufficient right across the UK given the scale of the challenge. With the further closure of schools to most pupils, policymakers should be adding to these resources and focusing a greater share of these resources on more disadvantaged pupils.

⁴³ <https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/ve4z7>

⁴⁴ <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/2020--annual-report-on-education-spending-in-England-schools.pdf>

Section 5: Special educational needs and disabilities

Changes to education provision during the first lockdown led to significant changes to the day-to-day lives of many children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).⁴⁵ In England, 3.3 per cent of all pupils in schools have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) – a document that sets out the child’s needs and the extra help they should receive following a formal assessment. A further 12.1 per cent of pupils have SEN support, without an EHCP.⁴⁶

As evidenced during the period of school closures in the spring and summer terms in 2020, children with SEND can have significant problems accessing virtual support and resources while learning from home. In addition, the individualised nature of children’s learning pathways means that tailored advice for parents on how to deliver learning activities is often required, sometimes alongside physical resources required for specific activities. Meanwhile, many children with complex needs missed out on essential support, such as speech and language therapy, and one-on-one support.

In the autumn term, all children, except some who were particularly vulnerable to the virus, were encouraged to attend school in all four countries. However, many will have been asked to self-isolate at home for periods to control the spread of the virus, while in some areas local lockdowns led to schools closing temporarily. Children with SEND are more likely than other children to have conditions which make them more vulnerable to the detrimental health costs of Covid-19, making attendance at school more difficult. Indeed, the pandemic appears to have exaggerated the pre-existing trend of children in England with an EHC Plan being less likely to attend school in a given week than other children. In the autumn term 2020, 81 per cent of children with an EHC plan in England attended school, compared with 87 per cent of children overall.⁴⁷ In this section we review the support that was provided by the four UK governments for children with SEND who were unable to attend school in the autumn term.

Children unable to attend in the school term

The duties on local authorities to evaluate the educational and other needs of children, and to provide support that is suitable to these needs were temporarily modified in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland during the first lockdown. The modifications were later removed, and at the time of writing relevant authorities’ duties to assess children’s needs and provide suitable support remain unmodified. However, it remains an open question whether the renewed school closures in the spring term 2021 will lead some countries to reintroduce such modifications.

⁴⁵ The term ‘Special Educational Need or Disability (SEND)’ is used in both England and Northern Ireland. In Wales, the term ‘Additional Learning Needs’ is used to define a similar set of needs to those described by SEND. In Scotland, the term ‘Additional Support Needs’ is used to define the broader set of needs of children or young people who, for whatever reason, require additional support, in the long or short term, in order to help them make the most of their school education and to be included fully in their learning. For simplicity, throughout this section we use the phrase ‘SEND’ to cover the definitions used in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the term ‘additional support needs’ to describe the definition used in Scotland.

⁴⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-special-educational-needs-sen>

⁴⁷ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/2020-week-50#dataBlock-a2e8be65-67ba-4f95-b56b-50b90c03cd2f-tables>

Children with SEND have educational and health needs that vary in complexity and type. We have reviewed the support provided to children unable to attend school during the autumn term in three broad categories: the educational support provided to all children with SEND, the support from specialists such as speech and language therapists committed by governments, and support for children whose needs have been identified as requiring a formal plan such as an EHC Plan. Our findings are summarised in Figure 5.1. Some of the support that children with SEND require when working from home, such as access to a remote learning environment, coincides with the support required by all children, regardless of their level of need. In this section we will focus only on the support that governments have committed to providing over and above this wider support.

Figure 5.1 Support for children with SEND unable to attend school in the autumn term

	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
Educational support for children with SEND without an EHCP or equivalent	Online lessons provided by Oak National Academy; local discretion advised in provision.	Local discretion advised; no specific resources	Schools to have a plan to support children to learn remotely and to have communicated this to parents; advice and signposting available online	EA and HSC provided input to schools' plans; resources available online for parents
Support from specialists such as therapists	Local authorities (LAs) to consider alternative modes of delivery (e.g. online); local discretion advised	LAs advised to consider alternative modes of delivery (e.g. online); local discretion advised	LAs advised to work across organisations, including Allied Health Services	Local alternative modes of delivery advised
Support for children with EHCP or equivalent	LAs, schools and health partners to cooperate in provision; local discretion advised	LAs and schools to work with parents and pupils to agree contingency arrangements	Approaches to supporting children to 'build upon and recognise' needs that have arisen since the pandemic	Proposals to provide support via a variety of specific interventions
Funding for support	Approximately £27m of the Catch Up premium earmarked for special schools (£240/place)	No specific funding (funding later announced)	No specific funding	£6.3m million to support children with SEND; approximately £83 per pupil with SEND

Notes and sources: Total funding in England calculated based on 1.49% of pupils in England attending special schools (source: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>); Funding per pupil in Northern Ireland is calculated based on 76,306 pupils in NI having SEND in 2017 (source: <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/publications/special-educational-needs>).

As described in Figure 5.1, detailed guidance for how schools and local authorities were to support children with SEND (who did not have an EHCP or equivalent) who had to work from home during the autumn term was lacking in all four countries, as were tangible measures of support. Guidance

tends to advise local discretion; for instance, in England guidance states that ‘teachers and schools are likely to know [pupils’] needs best, and how they can be most effectively met’.⁴⁸ Similarly, guidance in Wales says that ‘it is not appropriate to apply “blanket policies”’.⁴⁹ While sensible, this kind of advice alone may be insufficient, with one study involving school and college leaders in England in August 2020 finding a clear need for ‘guidance on special education delivery expectations, including how pupils who do not return are supported’.⁵⁰ Guidance in Scotland offers some more tangible suggestions for practitioners aiming to support children with a variety of additional support needs, providing links to external resources where relevant.⁵¹ In Northern Ireland, while detailed guidance to schools is lacking at a national level, it appears that some planning support was provided to schools by the Education Authority and by Health and Social Care.⁵²

When it comes to ensuring that children with SEND have access to support from specialists such as therapists, guidance in all four countries notes that local discretion in the provision of these services is advised, with alternative modes of delivery such as online video meetings advised where face-to-face meetings are not appropriate.

Guidance on support for children with needs that have been identified via an EHC Plan or equivalent varies between countries.⁵³ In England and Wales, guidance stated the duty of local authorities to secure provision, and advised working with schools, health partners and families in securing suitable provision. In Scotland, guidance states that local authorities and schools should provide support for children which builds upon and recognises any needs that have arisen since the pandemic with respect to additional support needs. In Northern Ireland, a cross-departmental ‘Vulnerable Children and Young People’s Plan’ proposes a range of support mechanisms to support vulnerable children, including those with a statement of special educational needs, such as offering online resources for schools and families, providing specialist advice and maintaining contact with families by phone.⁵⁴ It is unclear to what extent these have been made available in practice. Training for teachers in Northern Ireland has been developed, as have resources for parents to use at home.⁵⁵

Given the extra resources that might be required to support children with SEND, the additional funding national governments provide to local authorities and schools to meet these costs are arguably a more important indicator of the likelihood that children will receive adequate support. In the *Catch-up plans* section above we described the extra resources announced by nations to support pupils to catch up. Here, we discuss only additional funding made available specifically to support children with SEND.

⁴⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/remote-education-good-practice/remote-education-good-practice>

⁴⁹ <https://gov.wales/guidance-supporting-vulnerable-and-disadvantaged-learners-html> Accessed 29/01/2021

⁵⁰ Skipp, A., Hopwood, V., Julius, J., & McLean, D., (2020) Special education during lockdown: Returning to schools and colleges in September [Online] Available at:

<https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wpcontent/uploads/2020/09/Special-schools-during-lockdown.pdf>

⁵¹ <https://education.gov.scot/media/0hucxxbd/practitioners-support-asn-transitions.pdf>

⁵² Correspondence with Education Authority and Department of Education.

⁵³ In Scotland children receive a Co-ordinated Support Plan and in Wales and Northern Ireland a Statement of Special Educational Needs.

⁵⁴ <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-cross-departmental-covid-19-vulnerable-children-and-young-peoples-plan>

⁵⁵ Training: <https://www.eani.org.uk/school-management/children-and-young-peoples-services-training-programme-2020-2021> ; Online resources: <https://www.eani.org.uk/services/pupil-support-services>

In England, the Catch Up Premium did not differentiate between children with and without SEND who attended mainstream schools; only children who attended special schools were awarded a higher rate of support per pupil (£240 compared to £80). While the additional funding for special schools is welcome, over 90 per cent of pupils with SEND in England attend a mainstream school and will not benefit from this funding.⁵⁶ A continuation of funding to support children with SEND in a variety of ways, including direct support to schools and colleges, was later announced (in February 2021) – the funding was worth £42m (around £32 per child with SEND). In Wales and Scotland, no specific funding to support children with SEND was announced during the autumn term, though extra support for local government in general was announced. Wales has since (in February 2021) announced £8.8m of funding to support school age children with additional learning needs – corresponding to approximately £90 per pupil with such needs.^{57,58} The funding will be available for local authorities to use in a variety of ways, including to clear any backlogs that have arisen in the assessment of pupils’ needs and to provide specialist support and improve blended learning. It is possible that funding will yet be announced in Scotland for the 2020-21 academic year to support children with SEND. In Northern Ireland, funding of £6.3m has been made available to the Education Authority to support children with SEND in response to the pandemic, equivalent to approximately £83 per pupil.⁵⁹ It is unclear exactly how the Executive expects schools to use this funding.

Conclusions

At national level, detailed guidance to schools and local authorities describing clearly how they are expected to deliver special education (as distinct from their approach to supporting pupils generally) is lacking in all four UK nations. This is concerning given the risk that many children with SEND will have fallen behind their peers during the first lockdown and are likely to require more support to learn while at home than other pupils. England, Northern Ireland and Wales have to date announced some funding which is ring-fenced to support the provision of education to children with SEND. In England, this funding only applies to the minority of children with SEND who attend special schools. Northern Ireland and Wales are the only nations to have so far announced funding for the 2020-21 academic year specifically to support all children with SEND, equivalent to approximately £83 per pupil with SEND in Northern Ireland and £90 per pupil in Wales.

Section 6: Free School Meals

For many children, the meal that they receive at school is a key part of their diet, and its absence could put a significant strain on families’ already stretched budgets. As our previous report found, during the period of school closures in the spring and summer terms, the approaches to providing free school meals varied widely between countries of the UK. In the autumn term, countries were faced with two distinct challenges: providing free school meals to eligible children who were unable

⁵⁶ 9.6 per cent of pupils with SEND in England attended a special school in 2019/20 <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/special-educational-needs-in-england>

⁵⁷ <https://gov.wales/ps98-million-extra-funding-support-learners-additional-learning-needs-during-coronavirus>

⁵⁸ Amount per pupil calculated by dividing total funding by the number of children with special educational needs in Wales in 2019-20 (source: <https://stats.wales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Schools-and-Teachers/Schools-Census/Pupil-Level-Annual-School-Census/Special-Educational-Needs>)

⁵⁹ Correspondence with Department of Education confirmed overall level of funding.

to attend school during the school term and considering whether, and how, to provide them during the holidays when schools were closed. Since schools closed again from January 2021, the issue of how best to provide meals to all eligible children during term time has again become pressing. We look at each of these issues in turn.

Provision in autumn term

Some children were unable to attend school for various reasons during the autumn term, from having to self-isolate because of the virus to their school closing due to lockdowns. This meant that some children were not able to access the free meal that they were entitled to receive at school. All four countries committed to continue to provide these meals via other means. Their approaches are summarised in Figure 6.1.

In England, the national voucher scheme that had been used in the initial lockdown in 2020 closed at the end of August.⁶⁰ In the autumn term, schools (and their catering providers) were made responsible for providing free school meals to those children who were unable to attend school due to Covid-19. This support was to be provided via the delivery of food parcels which met certain criteria set out in guidance from the Department for Education.⁶¹ These criteria appear to have focused on whether the food provided met certain standards rather than on the monetary value of support given. When schools were closed in the 2021 spring term (see section below), reports emerged that the food parcels families received were inadequate; this may have been the case for some parents in the autumn term too.⁶²

In Wales, delivery of free school meals earlier in 2020 had been funded by the national government at a minimum rate, with local authorities responsible for delivery and granted significant local discretion. Guidance from the Welsh government suggested that the same rate per meal of £3.90 was expected for children who could not attend in the autumn term, and announced funding to cover up to £1.40 per day of this.⁶³

In Scotland, funding was announced to help local authorities support ‘those who need it most’ in a variety of ways according to their discretion, including by ‘addressing food insecurity.’⁶⁴ While this did not include ring-fenced funding to provide free school meal support, some local authorities appear to have taken a variety of approaches to delivering free school meals to those who could not attend during the school term, including direct payments and supermarket vouchers.⁶⁵ As in England, a minimum amount to be spent per meal was not set at a national level. Food provided had to comply with the School Food and Drink National Standards.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ It was later announced that it would reopen in the spring term: <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/government-to-relaunch-national-free-school-meals-voucher-scheme/>

⁶¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance-for-schools#if-food-parcels-are-needed>

⁶² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-55641740>

⁶³ <https://gov.wales/free-school-meal-costs-self-isolating-or-shielding-learners-html>

⁶⁴ <https://www.gov.scot/news/funding-for-those-who-need-it-most/>

⁶⁵ <https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/news/schools/1758169/free-school-meals-payments-for-eligible-children-self-isolating-due-to-coronavirus/>

⁶⁶ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-preparing-start-new-school-term-august-2020-version-2/pages/4/>

In Northern Ireland, schools were closed across the country for two weeks in October in an attempt to reduce the spread of the virus. Funding was announced on 22 October to provide direct payments to the families of children eligible for free school meals during the period of 19-30 October when schools were closed because of the national lockdown.⁶⁷ When schools were open to all pupils, those who were unable to attend school for 10 days or more as a direct result of Covid-19 were offered to opt-in to receiving food parcels while they could not access free meals at school.

Funding for this support appears to have been most generous per child per day in Northern Ireland, but it should be noted that this funding was only made available to pupils who were unable to attend due to school closures in the lockdown in October. In Wales, funding was less generous at the national level, covering up to £1.40 of the £3.90 it was expected that local authorities would spend to support children unable to attend either because they were self-isolating or because of school closures. In England and Scotland, no additional funding to support schools to provide meals in the autumn term was announced.

Figure 6.1: Approaches to delivering free school meals during school term in autumn 2020

	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
Coverage	All children unable to attend due to self-isolation or school closure	All children unable to attend due to self-isolation or school closure	In at least some local authorities, children unable to attend due to self-isolation or school closure	Children unable to attend due to self-isolation or school closure
How support is provided	Direct provision of food parcels	Varied by local authority	Varied by local authority	Direct provision during school closure, food parcels for those self-isolating
By whom	Catering providers at schools	Collaboration between schools and local authorities	Collaboration between schools and local authorities	Education Authority; individual schools provided food parcels
Level of support	No government funding over and above usual FSM provision, no minimum amount per pupil per day set	Government funding of £420k to cover up to £1.40 of the expected £3.90 per pupil per day	No government funding over and above usual FSM funding, no minimum amount per pupil per day set	Government funding of £2.8m for direct payments during weeks of school closures at £2.70 per child per day

Notes and sources: Total funding in Northern Ireland based direct payments to families during school closures; it does not include additional funding for food parcels, whose total cost is as yet unclear (source: Correspondence with Department of Education).

⁶⁷ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/minister-welcomes-extension-free-school-meal-payments-cover-halloween-break>

Provision in school holidays

Prior to the pandemic, free school meals had usually been provided only during the school term in all UK countries. However, due to the financial strain on many families due to the pandemic, governments in all four countries decided to offer free school meals in some or all of the holidays between Easter and the summer holiday.⁶⁸ Throughout the autumn term, there continued to be considerable public pressure on UK governments to provide free school meals on weekdays during the holidays, including a high-profile public campaign by footballer Marcus Rashford.⁶⁹ By the end of the autumn term, governments in all four countries had announced funding to provide free school meals to children in at least some school holidays, but approaches to delivering these meals, and the timing of the announcements, differed markedly between countries.

Figure 6.2: Approaches to delivering free school meals during school holidays from autumn 2020

	England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland
Announced	Sunday 8 November	Thursday 15 October	Tuesday 20 October	Support for October half term on 22 October; Support for future holidays on 19 November
How support is provided	Local authorities encouraged to use local knowledge in delivering support	Local authorities encouraged to use local knowledge in delivering support	Local authorities encouraged to use local knowledge in delivering support	Direct payments only
Level of support	£170m for Covid Winter Grant Scheme, not ring-fenced for children eligible for FSM; £220m for Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme	£34m funding, expected to be similar to previous rate of £3.90 per child per day	£10m for FSM provision, approx. £2.50 per eligible child per day. Further funding TBC	Expected to cost £40m, set to be similar to previous rate of £2.70 per child per day
Period of support	Winter Grant Scheme covers December 2020 to March 2021; HAF covers Easter, summer and Christmas 2021 (approx. 10 weeks)	All holidays from October break 2020 up to and including Easter 2022 (approx. 19 weeks)	October half term (backdated), Christmas and Easter 2021 (6 weeks)	All holidays from October break 2020 until April 2022 (approx. 19 weeks)

Notes and sources: Total funding in Wales calculated based on initial £11m announced to cover the period October 2020 to Easter 2021 plus the £23m announced to cover all future holidays to Easter 2022 (source: <https://gov.wales/draft-budget-2021-2022>); Funding per child per day in Scotland based on rates used by Scottish Government to calculate funding (source: correspondence with Scottish Government).

As described in Figure 5.2, all UK governments announced funding to support children eligible for

⁶⁸ For further details, see our previous report: <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/education-responses-uk-pandemic/>

⁶⁹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-54725750>

free school meals during the holidays. Early announcements help families to plan their finances; the Welsh Government's early announcement in October,⁷⁰ and the Scottish Government's announcement a few days later, have provided the most certainty to families for the 2020-21 school year. However, in Scotland the announcement arrived when the October holiday was already underway in some local authorities, meaning that children in some local authorities may have missed out on support.⁷¹ The Department for Education's announcement to provide support to children eligible for FSM up to March 2021 arrived on 8 November.⁷² The Northern Ireland Executive's decision to fund support for the October break arrived just ahead of the holiday, while the commitment to fund future holidays arrived last, on 19 November.⁷³

The Northern Irish Executive and Welsh Government have committed to funding free school meals during the holidays for the longest period, covering approximately 19 weeks of school holiday until April 2022. The Scottish Government has committed to cover approximately six weeks of holiday from the October half term to the Easter holiday, inclusive. England's commitment covers the period December to March, and support will not be isolated to the school holidays.

In all countries at least some support is expected to reach all children eligible for free school meals. Approaches to delivering provision in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have remained similar to earlier lockdowns, with the first two granting a significant degree of local discretion to deliver provision in a variety of ways and the latter using only direct financial transfers to families. The UK Government changed its approach to delivering free school meal support during the school holidays in the autumn term compared to previous holidays, granting local authorities discretion and moving away from a national voucher scheme. From Easter 2021, the UK Government is providing support via the Holiday Food and Activities (HAF) programme which seeks to support local authorities to provide holiday clubs which are free for children eligible for FSM to attend, where food is also provided. Although the fund aims to make a place available for all children eligible for FSM, attendance is optional and some children may be unable to attend – for instance if the cost of transport is prohibitive.⁷⁴ Although the approach in Northern Ireland does not grant local discretion to authorities or schools, there is some evidence that direct payments to families offer the greatest flexibility in how the money is used, potentially making it an effective means of delivery.⁷⁵

In Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland we have a clear idea of how much funding in total each eligible child will receive. Children in Wales will receive the most per child per day (£3.90), followed by Northern Ireland (£2.70) and Scotland (£2.50). However, in Scotland families of children eligible for free school meals were also entitled to a one-off payment of £100 per child in December –

⁷⁰ <https://gov.wales/marcus-rashford-mbe-backs-welsh-government-decision-ensure-free-school-meal-provisions-every-school>

⁷¹ <https://www.gov.scot/news/funding-for-those-who-need-it-most/>

⁷² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-winter-package-to-provide-further-support-for-children-and-families>

⁷³ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/minister-welcomes-extension-free-school-meal-payments-cover-halloween-break>; <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/school-holiday-food-grants-be-extended-until-easter-2022>

⁷⁴ Local authorities are asked to ensure that the offer of free holiday club provision is available for all children eligible for free school meals in your area in guidance from the DfE: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/holiday-activities-and-food-programme/holiday-activities-and-food-programme-2021#funding>

⁷⁵ CPAG (2020) The cost of learning in lockdown: family experiences of school closures [Online] Available at: <https://cpag.org.uk/policy-and-campaigns/report/cost-learning-lockdown-family-experiences-school-closures>

support equivalent to five weeks of the support provided in Wales and over seven weeks of direct payments in Northern Ireland.

Funding for the Covid Winter Grant Fund in England is equivalent to nine weeks of providing free school meals to eligible children, but it is unclear how much of the funding will go to children eligible for free school meals.⁷⁶ The funding that does reach eligible children may come in a variety of forms, such as supporting their family to pay their energy bill rather than paying directly for food. Because it is unclear how much of the available funding will reach children eligible for FSM, we cannot estimate how much funding each child will receive, on average. Funding in England for the HAF programme is equivalent to about £157 per child eligible for FSM in England. As described above, not all children will access this funding, and those who do will not receive support for five days per week in the holidays covered. As an indicator of the scheme's generosity compared to other countries, we note that if the scheme operated five days per week and all eligible children benefited, funding per child per day would be considerably lower than the funding in other countries.

Provision during term from January 2021

In January, following rising rates of Covid-19 infections across the country, schools were closed to most pupils in all four UK nations. All nations committed to continue to provide support to children eligible for free school meals. In Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland support was to continue more or less as it had previously. One exception is in Northern Ireland where schools were told not to provide food on the premises for those children (vulnerable children and the children of key workers) who were expected to continue attending. Instead, children were expected to bring a packed lunch, paid for with the direct payments families received. This prompted concerns that some children were at risk of malnutrition due to the absence of a 'hot, two-course meal'.⁷⁷

The UK Government stood out among the four nations by altering its approach to providing support to all children. Guidance from the DfE to schools in England initially moved away from the emphasis on the National Voucher Scheme seen in the first lockdown in 2020, instead encouraging schools to organise the delivery of food parcels to families.⁷⁸ In its first week, the policy was met with objections from parents, some of whom posted pictures on social media of the food they had received as evidence that they were receiving food worth far less than the £15 per child per week they had received when the national voucher scheme had been in operation.⁷⁹ The week after the guidance was published, new guidance was issued to replace it which gave schools the freedom to decide on the best approach to providing support.⁸⁰ The approach of granting schools local discretion in how to provide support to meet local needs and circumstances has parallels with that employed at a local authority level in Wales and Scotland since early in the first lockdown. Details about the reopening of the national voucher scheme in England were also confirmed on 13 January,

⁷⁶ Announcement states that the cost of providing free school meals to eligible children for two weeks is around £40 million <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-winter-package-to-provide-further-support-for-children-and-families> [Accessed 13/01/21]

⁷⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-55613077>

⁷⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance-for-schools> accessed on 12/01/2021

⁷⁹ E.g. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-55641740>

⁸⁰ <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/edenred-is-back-free-school-meals-voucher-scheme-to-relaunch-monday/>

confirming that it would launch the following Monday (18 January) and would be operated by the same company, Edenred, as in 2020. Guidance now allows schools to offer support either via food parcels, local vouchers or the national voucher scheme, granting schools more local discretion than in the first lockdown when schools could only claim for local vouchers if they couldn't use the national voucher scheme.⁸¹

Conclusions

In our earlier review of the support provided by UK governments during the initial lockdown in 2020, we identified characteristics of support to children eligible for free school meals that appeared important to making sure support was adequate, timely and effective. These included using existing infrastructure to deliver support, providing clear and early expectations to stakeholders and families, delivering sufficient additional funding to support the policy, and granting local discretion where possible.

Wales and Northern Ireland have provided the clearest and earliest expectations for families overall, committing to fund holiday provision for the longest period of the four nations (about 19 weeks), with the Welsh Government's announcement for school holidays in the 2020-21 academic year arriving first among UK nations.

All four countries have to some degree made use of existing infrastructure to deliver support. This is most clearly the case in Northern Ireland where the means of providing support – direct payments to families – has remained consistent since support was announced in response to the first national lockdown. In Wales and Scotland, local authorities were granted local discretion to provide support in line with local needs and circumstances; this is likely to have translated into relying on existing infrastructure in many cases, particularly because it represents a continuation of the means of delivering support seen earlier in the pandemic. In England, the guidance that schools should deliver food parcels to families in the autumn and spring terms when children were unable to attend appears to have failed in many instances; this is likely in part because it requires school caterers to deliver support that is quite different to what they deliver when schools are open.

Among Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, where we can estimate the amount of funding made available to support children eligible for free school meals during the school holiday periods, funding has been most generous per meal in Wales (£3.90), followed by Northern Ireland (£2.70) and Scotland (£2.50). However, in Scotland families of children eligible for free school meals were also entitled to a one-off payment of £100 per child in December – support equivalent to five weeks of the support provided in Wales and over seven weeks of direct payments in Northern Ireland. Overall, then, holiday support appears most generous per child per day in Scotland until the Easter period, after which funding for future holidays has only been confirmed in Wales and Northern Ireland.

⁸¹ <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/no-conditions-on-local-fsm-vouchers-but-schools-need-decent-audit-trail/>

Overall conclusions and policy implications

In this report, we have detailed how attendance and policy support varied across the four nations of the UK during the 2020 autumn term when school re-opened to all pupils. A number of conclusions and policy implications emerge from this analysis. These are all relevant to the choices and options facing policymakers today as they gradually re-open schools again and in the provision of effective catch-up support.

First, there were large differences in school attendance over the 2020 autumn term between countries, over time and within each country. School attendance was generally highest in Scotland at 90-95 per cent over the whole of the term and lowest in Wales, where it was often under 85 per cent. Attendance dropped sharply in the run-up to Christmas, falling to under 70 per cent in Wales in mid-December and to a similar level in many local authorities in London and the Thames estuary. These differences largely match trends in overall community infections, as one would expect.

Attendance rates were generally lower in deprived areas, including the South Wales valleys and many deprived areas of England, such as Oldham, Sandwell, Rochdale, Medway, Havering and Tower Hamlets. Older pupils were also more likely to miss school, particularly when overall community infections were increasing rapidly.

Two clear policy implications result from these trends in attendance. First, these differences in school attendance will have resulted in inequalities in access to face-to-face schooling, which could naturally have longer consequences. Catch-up support may therefore need to be more precisely targeted towards pupils and areas that have missed the most schooling. Second, policymakers should perhaps expect and prepare for these patterns to repeat themselves as schools begin to re-open to more pupils.

One further conclusion from this analysis is a recurring theme that pupils in Scotland might end up missing the least amount of schooling of all pupils across the UK. Because the school year starts and finishes earlier in Scotland, pupils in Scotland missed 11 weeks of normal schooling under the first lockdown (compared with 13-14 weeks in England and Wales for most pupils). Scottish pupils were then able to restart school in the summer months when infections were low. School attendance was then higher throughout the autumn term and Scottish pupils will be among the first to return on 22 February. These latter differences seem more likely to be linked to lower levels of infections in Scotland both throughout the autumn and more recently. This clearly shows that keeping community infections low can have educational benefits too.

The loss of face-to-face schooling during the first lockdown prompted policymakers to launch efforts to promote catch-up. At the time of writing, the total amount of funding for catch-up is largest in Scotland (£200 per pupil) and England (£174 per pupil) and lowest in Wales and Northern Ireland (where the amount available is about half that provided in England so far). A greater amount of catch up funding is targeted at more disadvantaged pupils and schools in Wales and Northern Ireland (about half) than in England and Scotland (about 20-30 per cent). It seems likely that policymakers will want to add to this support in light of the ongoing lockdown and closure of schools to most pupils. However, at present, the overall scale of these catch-up plans seems insufficient and modest as compared with the scale of the problems.

As early years providers re-opened to all children in the summer and autumn of 2020, demand gradually began to recover, but never quite got back to pre-crisis levels. This made extra support necessary to ensure that early years providers did not face significant financial hardship. During the autumn term, this support appears to have been largest in England and Northern Ireland. However, support in England has become less generous from the spring term. Continued financial support is clearly necessary over the current lockdown given reductions in demand. The big uncertainty is how quickly this demand will recover and how quickly financial support is removed.

As we highlighted in our earlier report, children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) are likely to have found the first lockdown extremely hard, given a lack of specific support and resources. Children in special schools also had the lowest levels of attendance over the 2020 autumn term. To date, Northern Ireland and Wales have announced significant catch-up funding and support for children with SEND, with England also implementing extra funding for children with SEND who attend a special school. At a national level, detailed guidance to schools and local authorities describing how they are expected to deliver special education is lacking in all four UK nations. This is concerning given the risk that many children with SEND will have fallen behind their peers during the first lockdown and are likely to require more support to learn while at home than other pupils.

Finally, one issue prominent in public debate has been the provision of free school meals. This is partly because of the efforts of footballer Marcus Rashford's high profile campaign for the provision of support. Governments across the UK sought to provide substitutes for free meals for pupils missing school during the autumn term, and are now continuing to do so during the current lockdown. Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland continued with the methods they used in summer 2020, with quite a bit of local discretion in the case of Wales and Scotland. Policymakers in England chose to move to food parcels instead, which were the subject of much controversy and they have moved back to vouchers. The provision of free meals in the holidays has also been a subject of much controversy. Wales and Northern Ireland have provided the clearest and earliest expectations for families overall, committing to fund holiday provision for the longest period of the four nations (up to April 2022). Support in England has been committed until Christmas 2021 and in Scotland until Easter 2021. While Scotland has so far committed to funding free school meal support for the shortest period, support for free school meals during the school holidays appears most generous per meal in Scotland, followed by Wales and Northern Ireland.