

Flagship SENCO report reveals the impact of Covid-19 on pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and warns of a growing divide during the third lockdown

- **New research highlights the crisis in SEND and challenges of delivering universal inclusive provision and differentiation of SEN support as teaching moved online***
- **An increase in responsibilities, administrative demands and responding to national guidance during the pandemic stretched the role of the SENCO to breaking point***
- **Warning that SEN pupils could fall further behind peers during the third national lockdown ***

New research from Bath Spa University, in collaboration with nasen, has revealed the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), and highlights concerns around the provision of specialist support for children and young people and the impact on Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs).

The *National SENCO Workforce Survey 2020*, which this year captured the experiences of SENCOs in response to the pandemic and the first national lockdown, revealed a key issue with universal inclusive provision and differentiation of SEN support as teaching moved online for the majority of pupils, with almost three-quarters (73%) of SENCOs stating their school experienced challenges with providing virtual support for children with SEN, and 8 in 10 finding it difficult to provide differentiated learning online.

The results also reported a sharp increase in SENCOs workload as schools responded and adapted to the unprecedented situation, which saw them faced with more management tasks and paperwork, including teaching, safeguarding, completing risk assessments and quickly responding to changing national guidance – all impacting a role that was already severely lacking in time pre-pandemic.

Of those surveyed, nearly three-quarters of SENCOs (72%) felt that their schools had experienced challenges in providing support for children and young people with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP) during the lockdown, with over half (56.7%) finding the management of risk assessments a key challenge.

Only 1 in 10 were happy with the support they received during the pandemic, reporting that expectations and guidance changed frequently. Furthermore, nearly two-thirds (64.4%) would have welcomed more support and guidance from central government – findings that have led to recommendations around the provision of national exemplars and guidance in responding to unprecedented events in the future.

Dr Helen Curran, Senior Lecturer in Education: SEN at Bath Spa University, said: “The global pandemic has exposed the existing crisis in SEND, and amplified challenges that SENCOs already faced, such as a lack of time to execute the role.

“We know that schools have worked tirelessly to support young people during the pandemic, facing daily challenges, difficult decisions and changing national guidance. As we get to grips with a third lockdown and return to remote learning, there is a real risk that children with SEND will continue to be disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, unless teachers, SENCOs and pupils are given additional support in areas like providing appropriate and differentiated virtual learning.”

Although the research highlighted a number of challenges as a result of the pandemic, there were some positive experiences of online learning reported for some children with SEND, including a reduction in social communication and interaction anxieties.

Additionally, the majority of SENCOs (84.2%) reported an increased focus on communication with parents and families, and most SENCOs (71%) in academies were satisfied with the support from their Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs.)

Professor Adam Boddison, Chief Executive at nasen commented: “The SENCO Workforce Survey not only shines a spotlight on the strengths and challenges that impact SENCOs in their work, it also exposes some of the hidden challenges that continue to perpetuate inequalities impacting children and young people with SEND and their families.

“The pandemic is having a disproportionate impact on children and young people’s social, emotional and mental health needs, exacerbating social interaction challenges. It is vital that we support them and the mental wellbeing of our education workforce. We would like to see routine wellbeing arrangements put in place following this extended period of national challenge, including priority support for SENCOs.

“Moving forward, it is important that we work collaboratively and share good practice across mainstream, special schools and specialist settings to help all children and young people, particularly those with SEND, to learn and thrive regardless of their background or need.”

Summary of Recommendations from report:

- **Access to and accessibility of virtual learning:** Access to IT for all children needs to be considered as a critical issue and schools should prioritise digital learning to support young people in their future learning. Teachers need to be provided with additional support to help them differentiate for pupils with SEND
- **Provision of central guidance and support:** Guidance should be given to school leaders in advance to allow them time to plan effectively. This includes the provision of national exemplars, e.g., for risk assessments, and the development of SENCO specific guidance for responding to unprecedented events
- **Responding to unprecedented challenges:** Guidance around virtual learning and learning from the positive experiences that SENCOs reported when supported by MATs, including the development of networks and sharing of resources
- **Working with families:** Senior leaders to consider how the benefits reported from a closer relationship with families can continue to be realised in the longer term

The full report, *National SENCO Workforce Survey 2020: Supporting children and young people with special educational needs and their families during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic*, can be viewed here: <https://www.bathspa.ac.uk/projects/senco-workload/>

As part of its commitment to ensuring expertise in SEND is available to every school and setting, nasen will be offering membership for free from January 25th.

To find out more information about nasen and their upcoming free membership, visit:
www.nasen.org.uk/membership.

Additional COVID-19 information and resources can also be found at www.nasen.org.uk/covid-19.

Ends

For more information or to arrange an interview with Dr Helen Curran, please contact Alicia Squadrone on bathspa@grayling.com or call 0117 910 6360.

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Notes to editors

About the research

The National SENCO Workforce Survey 2020: Supporting children and young people with special educational needs and their families during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic focused on the current issues and priorities that SENCOs have identified in relation to the development of Special Educational Needs in their settings. 1,022 individuals contributed to the study, between 24 August and 5 October 2020. Participants stated that they were working as a SENCO, or equivalent, in a school or educational setting in England.

About Bath Spa University

Bath Spa University is where creativity and enterprise meet. Offering a wide range of modern courses across the arts, science, education, social science and business to 7,000 students, the University employs outstanding academic and technical staff to deliver innovative learning opportunities.

Based in stunning countryside just a few minutes from a World Heritage City, Bath Spa University students graduate as engaged global citizens who are ready for the world of work. 96.1 per cent of graduates find themselves in work or further study within six months.

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About nasen

- nasen is the National Association for Special Educational Needs – a charitable organisation that exists to support and champion those working with, and for, children and young people with SEND and learning differences
- nasen seeks to ensure that all education practitioners across early years, schools, post-16

and wider settings are given the information and support required so that children and young people, particularly those with SEND and learning differences, can thrive

- From SENCOs to senior leaders, teachers to TAs, local authorities to leadership boards and beyond, nasen works to ensure that every part of the education workforce is equipped to understand, identify and support those with SEND and learning differences
- For 30 years nasen has worked in partnership with over 25,000 education practitioners across 7,000 schools and settings and are committed to ensuring that their expertise in SEND is available to every school and setting in the UK
- Rooted in research and evidence-informed best practice, nasen provides free resources and support while offering structured programmes of professional development, accredited training and conferences as well as a package of SEND services throughout the UK and internationally
- nasen's work spans the delivery of international programmes of support through to direct, 'on the ground' engagement with schools and settings in the UK through the DfE-funded, Whole School SEND consortium (hosted by nasen) and wider project and programmes
- For further information, visit www.nasen.org.uk
- Follow nasen on Twitter @nasen_org, Facebook @nasen.org or LinkedIn @the-national-association-for-special-educational-needs-nasen