

Impact of Covid-19 on OSCs: follow-up survey

Introduction

The Out of School Alliance conducted a survey of its members and other providers of wraparound care (before, after-school and holiday clubs) from 2 to 14 August 2020. The aim was to follow-up on our previous survey, which was conducted in the middle of May, to see how providers are faring now, following more than four months of closure and with the prospects for re-opening in September remaining uncertain.

Respondents

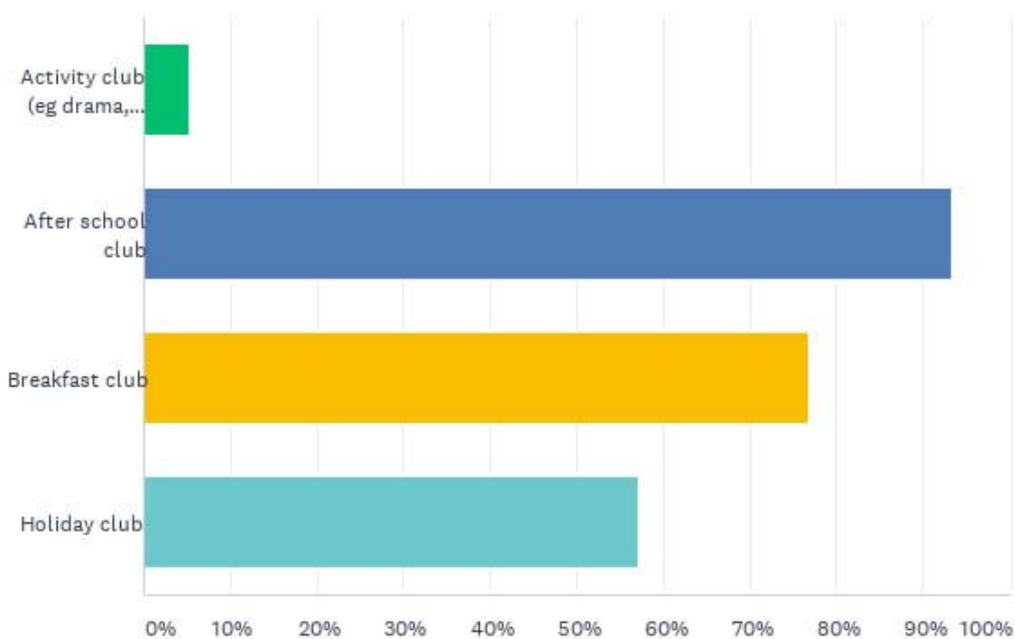
A total of 620 people completed the survey. Of these, 93% run an after-school club, 77% run a breakfast club, and 57% run a holiday club. Just over 5% of respondents ran a club for a particular activity such as drama, sport, etc.

The average number of childcare places at each type of club is:

- Breakfast club: 45 places
- After-school club: 53 places
- Holiday club: 46 places

The number of childcare places provided by the respondents to this survey is approximately 68,200.

Fig 1: Types of out of school club operated by respondents



Experience of OSCs from lockdown to end of summer term

Just under 11% of before and after-school clubs were able to remain open throughout the lockdown period and up to the end of the summer term. A little more than half of those that were open cared for only key worker children throughout; the remainder cared for key worker children initially and then also children from eligible years for the second half of the summer term.

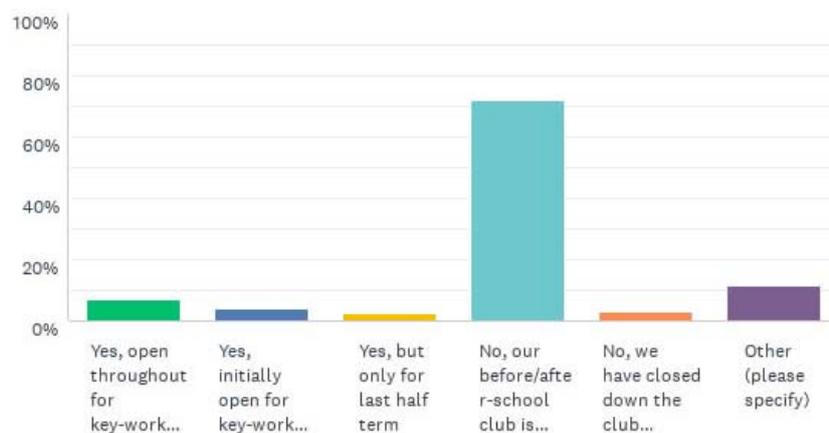
Many providers reported that they initially opened to support key worker children at the start of lockdown but were forced to close after just a few weeks due to low numbers making it financially unviable. Other providers opened for key worker children but were then forced to close from 1 June (when more childcare settings were supposed to be able to open) because the introduction of new rules about only operating on school sites, only taking children from one school, or having to keep the children in exactly the same bubbles as the school, made it impossible for them to operate.

A further 2% of providers (just 15 clubs) re-opened for the final half term only.

The vast majority of before and after-school clubs (72%) remained closed from lockdown right through to the end of the summer term.

Just under 3% of respondents reported that they have already taken the decision to permanently close their setting.

Fig 2: Has your before/after-school club been open since lockdown started?



Holiday clubs summer 2020

We asked providers who usually ran holiday clubs, whether they have been able to open over the summer holidays this year.

Of those providers who normally offered a holiday club in the summer, just 13% said that they had been open as usual, 39% were open but were offering fewer childcare places, and 37% had not opened at all.

Some respondents reported that even though they were open, they were open for fewer weeks, or for only a couple of days a week, or for shorter hours than their usual holiday provision. Several mentioned that they were only open as a favour to parents, or in response to a request from the school, and were in fact running at a loss.

Fig 3. If you usually run a holiday club, have you opened for summer holidays this year?



With the official guidance for holiday clubs being released very late (less than three weeks before the start of the holidays) some providers had already taken the decision not to open for the summer because at the point at which they needed to commit to hiring venues, recruiting temporary staff, and marketing to parents (typically 6 to 8 weeks before opening) they still did not know under what conditions they would be allowed to operate.

Clubs re-opening autumn 2020

We asked providers who are hoping to re-open their before and after-school clubs from the start of the new school year in September, what potential issues they thought were most likely to be a problem.

Over half of providers (55%) were worried that the space needed in order to maintain social distancing between the different groups of children was likely to be a problem. This is because most providers typically rent just one or two rooms from a school or community building, and don't have the flexibility to simply spread out into additional accommodation.

A similar proportion (54%) were concerned about a possible fall in demand for wraparound childcare places due to changes in parents' circumstances (eg working from home, redundancy).

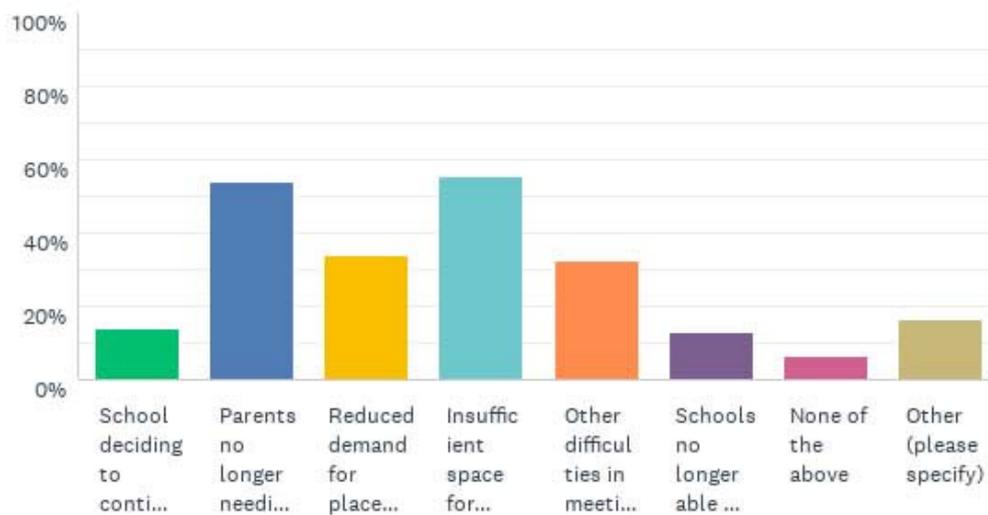
34% were worried that the school's approach to re-opening could present them with problems. For example if the school operated staggered start and finish times, or only had

half the classes in on alternate days/weeks, this would reduce the demand at certain times or on certain days, making staffing difficult or uneconomic.

Nearly 33% were concerned that they might have problems following other government guidance with regards to keeping staff and children safe. As the guidance for providers of wraparound childcare from September had not been published at the time of the survey (and still has not yet been published at the time of writing this report) providers don't know what additional steps they will be expected to take.

Providers (14%) were also worried that schools that had temporarily taken over the provision of childcare for key worker children during lockdown might continue to do so, thereby forcing existing out of school clubs out of business. There were also concerns (13%) that schools' own increased space requirements for Covid-19 might mean that they could no longer accommodate the existing before and after-school clubs on their premises.

Fig 4: Anticipated challenges with re-opening in September



In addition, many providers reported that schools were being extremely cautious and simply refusing to have any external lettings, or providers on site, meaning that the clubs have nowhere to operate. (As Ofsted-registered settings, clubs can't simply move their operation elsewhere at a moment's notice, even if they were able to find a suitable alternative venue.)

The lack of published guidance was cited as a problem by many providers. Without the official guidance clubs are unsure whether they will be allowed to open off schools sites, whether they will be able to take children from different schools, and what size bubbles they need to maintain. Without this information they don't know whether they will be able to open at all, and if they do open, how many children they can accommodate.

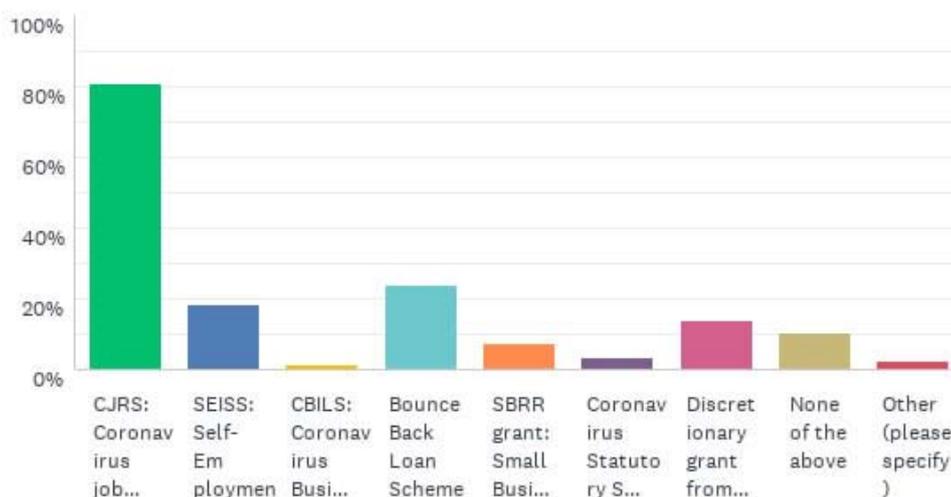
Although some schools have been very welcoming and keen to work in partnership with providers to ensure that there is suitable childcare for their pupils from the start of term, other providers report that schools are being very inflexible. Two common issues are schools demanding that clubs keep bubbles of children exactly the same as at school, and that clubs have the same staff for each bubble, which is very difficult for clubs to achieve as they typically operate with part time staff who work on different days of the week. Without the published guidance for wraparound providers, it is impossible for providers to challenge any of the demands or conditions being insisted on by schools.

Financial support and sustainability

We asked providers what financial support they had already accessed or planned to access.

The vast majority (81%) had made use of the furlough scheme, and 24% had accessed the Bounce Back Loan. But other forms of support were less applicable to providers of out of school childcare: only 18% had been able to benefit from the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) and 14% had received a discretionary grant through the local authority. 10% of respondents had not been able to benefit from any of the listed forms of financial support.

Fig 5: Types of financial support accessed by providers

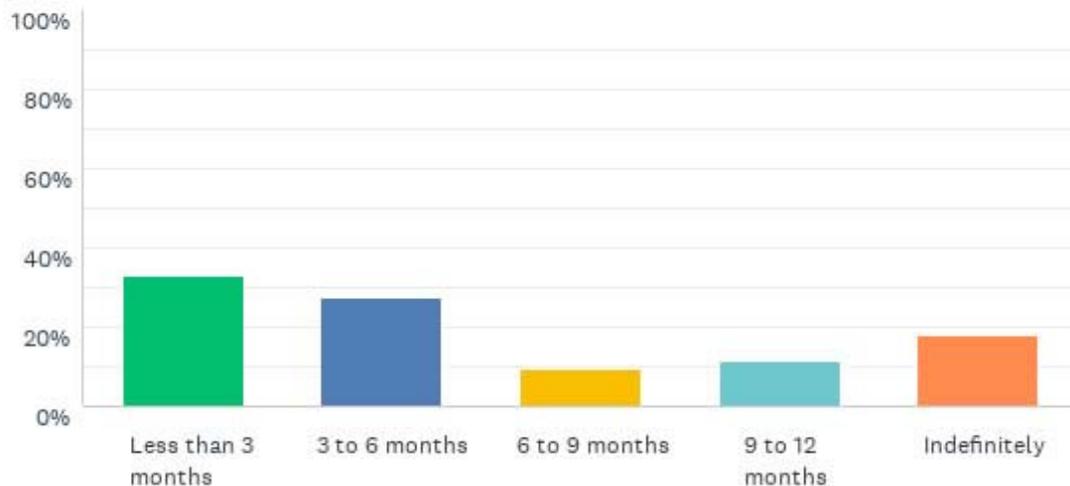


We also asked providers how long they thought they would be able to keep their club in business from September if occupancy rates were slow to return to pre-Covid levels:

- 33% thought that they would fold within three months
- 28% thought they could last for between three and six months
- 10% between six and nine months
- 12% thought they could last for up to a year
- A surprising 18% thought that they would be able to continue indefinitely.

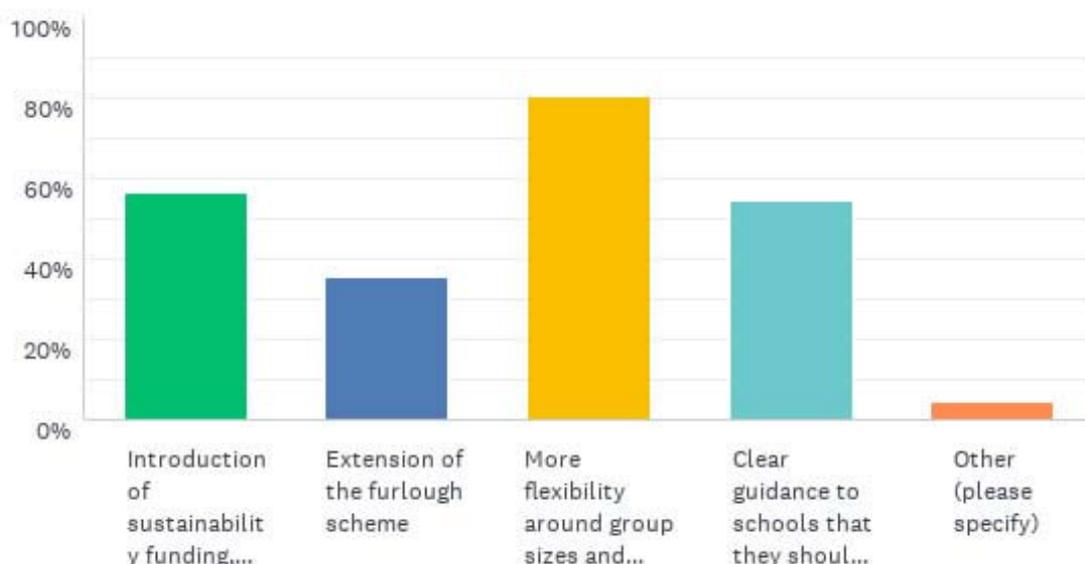
This means that around a third of clubs are likely to face permanent closure before Christmas if numbers don't bounce back quickly and no other support is provided.

Fig 6: How long settings can continue if demand does not return to pre-Covid levels



We asked providers what form of support they would find most helpful in order to remain in business until occupancy levels returned to normal. The measure that would be welcomed by the greatest number of providers (80%) would be more flexibility with regards to the size of groups and the amount of mixing allowed. Being expected to keep the children in small, fixed groups is a significant problem for many providers and makes staffing both difficult and expensive.

Fig 7: What measures or support would be most helpful for remaining open



A high proportion of providers (57%) wanted some form of sustainability funding, or a grant targeted specifically for childcare settings. It is notable that such funding is already being provided for childcare settings by a number of the devolved governments in order to ensure the continued availability of childcare places, but this has not so far been offered in England.

54% of providers said that clear guidance for schools from the DfE to the effect that they should be facilitating the opening of wraparound provision would be helpful, and 35% of providers would find an extension of the furlough scheme beneficial.

Other suggestions or comments made by providers included:

- Clear guidance for schools on the value of wraparound provision and a clear steer from government that they should be working in partnership with providers to ensure that the childcare provision can open. Currently there seem to be many reports of schools being overly cautious or even obstructive.
- Schools recognising that wraparound providers operate under separate guidance from schools, and that clubs don't have to follow the same rules as schools (and often aren't able to due to financial reasons).
- Financial support for owners of clubs. Many clubs are operated as small limited companies, and the owners have not been able to access any financial support. One provider commented that her playworkers are taking home more than her as they benefit from the furlough scheme whereas she has had no income for herself since March.
- Financial incentives for parents who may now be working from home to encourage them to use the wraparound provision.

Conclusion

The repeated delays in publishing guidance for providers of out of school childcare have hampered the sector's ability to plan and prepare for re-opening. The guidance for providers of out of school childcare was only published on 2 June, the day *after* childcare settings and schools were supposed to be re-opening in a limited fashion. (And this guidance included restrictions that meant that some settings which were currently open for key worker children were then forced to close.) The guidance for providers of holiday childcare was only published on 4 July, less than three weeks before holiday clubs were expected to open. And with two weeks to go until the start of term, the guidance for wraparound childcare has still not been published.

In addition, clubs are being hit by the double whammy of a lack of eligibility for most forms of government financial support, whilst also facing increased costs (due to social distancing and other measures) and reduced demand once they re-open. A third of providers are expecting to close in less than three months if the demand for places remains low, and if no other form of support is made available.

The situation for many out of school club providers is grim, with many on the brink of collapse. Without more focus on this sector by government, there is a risk that the push to get more people back to work and get the economy moving will be impeded due to a shortage of childcare for working parents of school-aged children.