



Learning in a Covid-19 World:

The Impact of Covid-19 on Early Childhood Education

REPORT



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Introduction

The ongoing coronavirus pandemic has had a profound impact on all aspects of life around the world. In Aotearoa New Zealand, significant disruption to early childhood education has occurred through national lockdown (when early childhood education services were closed), local lockdown (in Auckland), closure of individual services (in response to possible Covid-19 cases), and from the ongoing uncertainty and new requirements (for example, cleaning and social distancing).

At 11.59pm on Wednesday 25 March 2020 all centre-based early childhood services had to close their doors because of the Covid-19 pandemic and community transmission. Services were encouraged to provide some form of distance learning.¹

New Zealand moved to Alert Level 3 at 11.59pm on Monday 27 April 2020, which allowed all early childhood services to open for children of essential workers. However, most children remained at home during Level 3. On Monday 18 May 2020 early childhood services fully reopened as the country moved into Alert Level 2.

For five weeks kaiako¹, parents and whānau collaboratively supported children across New Zealand to learn at home. This situation created unique challenges. Support was put in place including:

- two television channels – Home Learning | Papa Kāinga TV, in English; and Mauri Reo, Mauri Ora, in te reo Māori
- resource kits for children who were identified as likely to require additional learning resources in their homes
- websites on wellbeing and learning at home for parents and kaiako.

Through this difficult time services have innovated, working with parents and whānau to provide education and care differently, engaging with children, families, and whānau in new ways.

The virus continues to spread in other countries, and we continue to record new cases in managed isolation at the border. The possibility remains that early childhood education services may have to return to teaching and learning from home as part of new regional or national lockdowns.

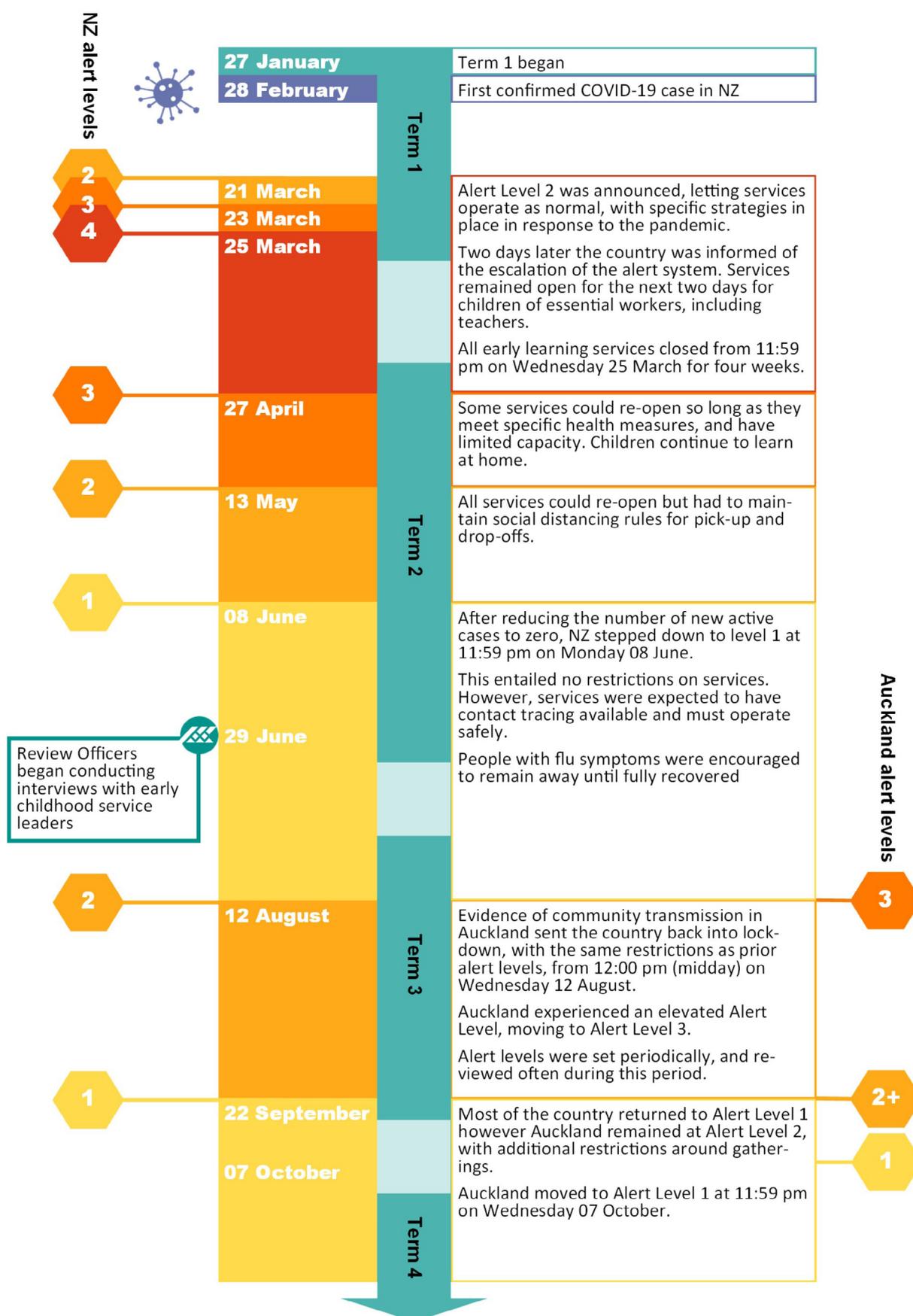
1. In this context, kaiako includes all teachers, educators and other adults who have responsibility for the care and education of children in an early childhood education setting.

The national lockdown and continued disruption caused by Covid-19 instigated a dramatic shift in the way that early childhood education services operate. These changes have the potential to impact on the learning and wellbeing of children in early childhood education. The Education Review Office (ERO) has undertaken this investigation to:

- understand how early childhood education services responded to Covid-19 and what it was like for the centre managers, teachers, children, parents and whānau
- identify the lessons learnt by services when operating during a lockdown and supporting children to transition back to the classroom
- examine the impact of Covid-19 on children's wellbeing and engagement, and the ongoing challenges for services
- identify the successful innovations that have occurred under Covid-19 that have been adopted by services and could help them prepare for future events.

We need to learn these lessons quickly to inform how we respond to future lockdowns.

FIGURE 1: Covid-19 Alert Levels and the implications for early childhood services



About this report

ERO spoke to 400 early childhood education services to understand the impact of Covid-19 at English medium early childhood education services. ERO is deeply grateful to leaders and kaiako who gave up their time to discuss their experiences throughout the changing Alert Levels. The successes they found, and challenges they faced, have provided valuable insights about how early childhood education services responded to Covid-19. ERO has endeavoured to capture these experiences, which have formed the backbone of this report.

In this report, ERO is seeking to understand:

- the impact of Covid-19 on children, whānau and early childhood education services
- how services responded to the Covid-19 crisis, and what lessons can be learned
- what the challenges are going forward.

From late June through to mid-August, a month after services had reopened under Covid-19 Alert Level 2, ERO Review Officers conducted in-depth interviews with leaders² from 400 early childhood services. From these interviews, we drew a representative sample for a more detailed analysis of the information and perspectives provided.

The leaders and kaiako interviewed were from across New Zealand, in a variety of urban and rural areas, and included services of different sizes. Three different types of early childhood education services were involved in these interviews: education and care services; kindergartens; and home-based services. A full list of the interview questions we asked can be found in Appendix 1.

This report sets out what we have found about the impact of Covid-19 to date:

- **Part 1** sets out the impact on children, whānau and services
- **Part 2** sets out ongoing challenges
- **Part 3** sets out key lessons going forward and practical steps services and the sector can take to respond to ongoing challenges.

2. Leaders are defined as those taking a leadership role. For example: a centre manager, head teacher or visiting teacher.

Part 1: The impact on children, whānau and services

The Covid-19 pandemic meant that early childhood education services had to quickly adapt to a range of new experiences, from supporting children and whānau at home, to making sure their staff were able to continue to teach from their homes. This section describes what it was like for services as they prepared for lockdown, supported their children and staff during lockdown, and then moved out of lockdown.

This report sets out what leaders from a range of services told us about the following five areas:

1. Getting ready for lockdown
2. Supporting children and whānau wellbeing
3. Supporting learning in lockdown
4. Staff wellbeing
5. Moving out of lockdown

In each section, we set out what happened, what challenges were faced by leaders, kaiako, children, their parents and whānau, and what responses leaders reported were effective. We then draw this together to identify the key learnings going forward and the practical steps services can take to be ready to respond to future lockdowns.

1. Getting ready for lockdown

What happened?

On Monday 23 March 2020, the announcement was made that New Zealand would be moving to Alert Level 3 and 48 hours later would move to Alert Level 4.

This announcement provided a two-day transition for services to prepare their children, whānau and staff to move to Alert Level 4.

Leading up to and during the lockdown, the Ministry of Education (the Ministry) sent out regular bulletins for services. A wide range of information was covered in the bulletins including guidance about planning and preparation for each of the alert levels. In addition to the bulletins, the Ministry's regional offices phoned services and helped to clarify any questions leaders had.

What worked well?

Overall, service leaders identified three key things that worked well to help them prepare for the lockdown:

- getting children ready
- having pandemic plans
- getting regular information from the Ministry of Education.

Getting children ready

One in five service leaders told us about how kaiako focused on supporting children to understand and manage the impact of Covid-19. A leader shared one example of how this was done with ERO:

Having pandemic plans

ERO did not specifically ask leaders about whether they had a pandemic plan, however, 14 percent of leaders told ERO that they had an existing plan in place. Leaders said that their pandemic plans provided them with a list of things to do to minimise the spread of infection and support the wellbeing of their staff and children.

These plans, and the supporting health and safety documentation, were added to by services throughout the different alert levels and are likely to be a useful resource for ongoing pandemic planning. About one in ten leaders said that they now had systems in place for future lockdowns (e.g. a pandemic plan), which they did not have prior to the lockdown.

“Prior to lockdown the public health nurse visited to teach the children about germs and hygiene practices, this was helpful to maintain children’s self-care on return.”

Service leader

“We were quite well prepared so as soon as they made the call – we had packs made up with paper, pens and hot cross buns.”

Service leader

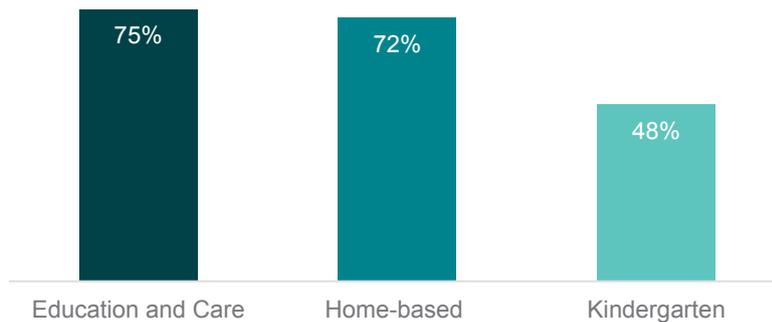
“It happened so fast.
We were not prepared for it.
We now have a pandemic policy.
Initially we didn’t know how to communicate with families and now we know how to do it – we will look into online assessment more – we used Zoom to connect with our families – now we have it in place.”

Service leader

Getting regular information from the Ministry of Education

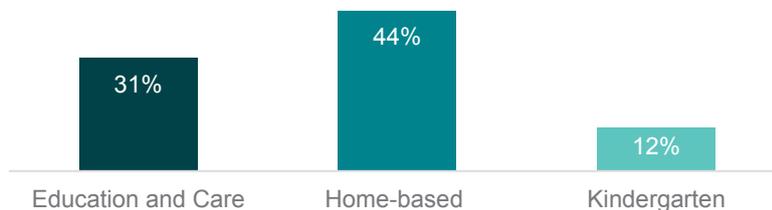
Three quarters of the leaders indicated that they thought the bulletins provided “very useful and succinct information”. As this is an established form of communication it worked well for early childhood services. More than a quarter of leaders indicated that the additional communication with regional offices was helpful. It also gave leaders a point of contact to seek further advice, which was especially important when transitioning between Covid-19 Alert Levels.

FIGURE 2: Percentage of leaders who reported that Ministry of Education bulletins were helpful to them throughout alert levels, by service type



Ministry of Education regional office contact was appreciated by leaders interviewed by ERO (Figure 3), particularly those from home-based services (44 percent) and education and care services (31 percent).

FIGURE 3: Percentage of leaders who told us they appreciated the support provided by the Ministry’s regional offices, by service type



Services that were part of a larger or umbrella organisation³ often had additional guidance available to them from their senior leaders. This often related to what each alert level meant for their practice and for the service. This was a view shared by around two-thirds of leaders who were part of a larger or umbrella organisation (65 percent), compared to a third of stand-alone services (34 percent).

“The Association did an excellent job at providing uniform information for us to follow. As individuals we didn’t have to come up with processes ourselves.”

Service leader

3. We considered services to be part of an umbrella organisation where three or more separate services sat under the same management. In many cases, this meant that service leaders reported to a larger governing organisation. These governing bodies are generally responsible for broad policy guidance.

What was challenging?

One of the main challenges was the speed with which the Covid-19 pandemic developed and the need for leaders to act quickly. The Ministry bulletins at the end of each day kept people informed. For one in ten leaders (10 percent), the volume of information presented a challenge. Some leaders told us this contributed to the elevation of stress levels.

Understanding what was required and keeping up with the changing situation was challenging. This was twice as likely to be raised as a concern in stand-alone services (16 percent) compared to services who were part of a larger organisation or association (8 percent) and was most evident in education and care services and home-based services.

FIGURE 4: Percentage of leaders who reported challenges both with the volume of information and understanding what was required, by service type

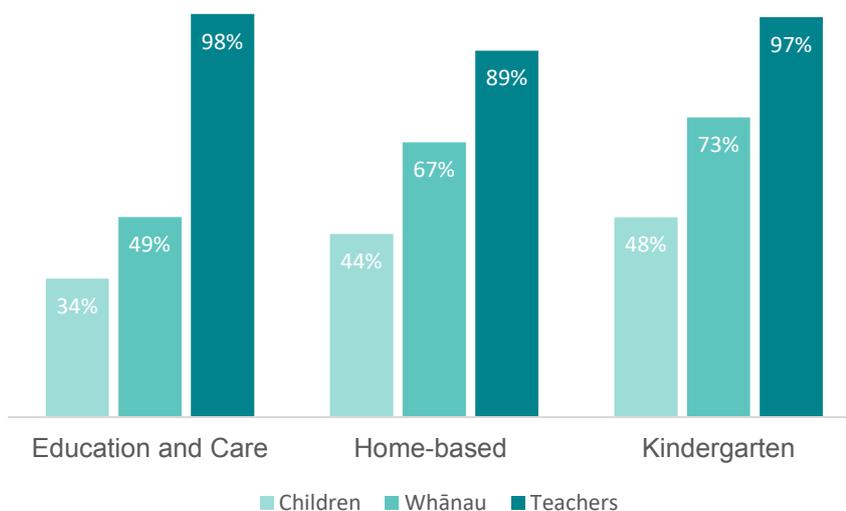


2. Supporting child and whānau wellbeing

What happened?

Parent wellbeing is critical for child wellbeing. Overall, 55 percent of leaders identified a strong focus on supporting the wellbeing of parents and whānau. In kindergartens, nearly three-quarters of leaders said they supported parent and whānau wellbeing during the lockdown. Between a third and half of services talked about directly supporting children's wellbeing.

FIGURE 5: Percentage of leaders who reported providing wellbeing support for their children, parents, whānau and staff during the lockdown, by service type



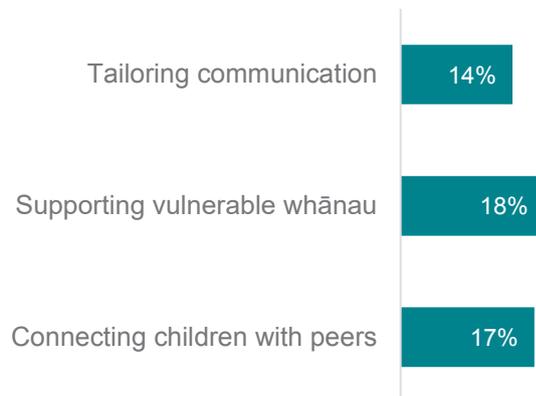
A total 84 percent of leaders and kaiako reported having regular communication with parents, whānau and children over the lockdown period. Most communication occurred online, and was focused on children’s learning, whānau wellbeing and information sharing about the levels of Covid-19 and its implications for the service. Regular communication with parents, whānau and children over the lockdown period was common across all services, irrespective of the type of service.

What worked?

Overall, service leaders identified three key things that worked well in responding to child and whānau wellbeing (Figure 6):

- tailoring communication
- supporting vulnerable whānau
- connecting children with peers.

FIGURE 6: Percentage of leaders who reported using different strategies to support child, parent and whānau wellbeing



Tailoring communication

Leaders and kaiako were responsive to whānau needs and adapted the type and level of support required. There were a number of reasons for whānau requiring a tailored approach, two of the key themes were:

- Developing communication methods to overcome parents’ language needs. This could include utilising the language expertise within the teaching team, liaising with an older child in the family who then communicates to the parent, and employing a community navigator to liaise with identified families.
- Supporting children with additional needs, including services offering programmes tailored to children’s specific needs.

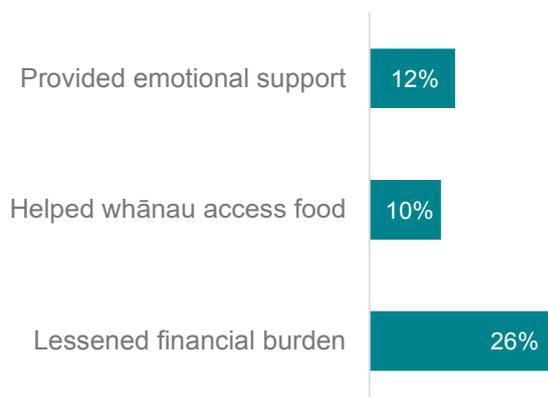
“A child who had been working with a speech language therapist (SLT) prior to lockdown. When I phoned the home, the parent was worried about their child missing out on good stuff from the SLT. As teachers had worked with the SLT, we were able to talk about the strategies used. As we did, the parent said “oh, that’s easy, I’m doing that.”

Service leader

Supporting vulnerable whānau

More than half (55 percent) of leaders told ERO that they were supporting the wellbeing of whānau, both during and after lockdown (Figure 7). About a fifth of leaders from all services talked about supporting the families they felt were particularly vulnerable, as identified by the service, to access the resources they needed to manage themselves and their household. This included providing emotional support (12 percent) and assisting in the provision of food (10 percent). Leaders also supported parents and whānau by easing the financial burden (for example by reducing fees) to help to keep the service available to all their children.

FIGURE 7: Percentage of leaders who reported different types of support that was provided to parents and whānau



Some kaiako supported whānau through this time by working with local iwi and support agencies such as KidsCan, Food Response and Whānau Ora to broker support for these families. They assisted in identifying whānau that required additional support and distributed food parcels and clothing. This level of support was most common in kindergartens and small services, who primarily helped by providing food.

Connecting children with their peers

Having a good sense of belonging contributes to a child's wellbeing and affects their engagement in learning.ⁱⁱ Supporting children's connections with their peers was also something that some leaders and kaiako talked about as part of their learning plans. A leader shared:

"Zoom meetings were held between small groups of children to help them connect with their peers."

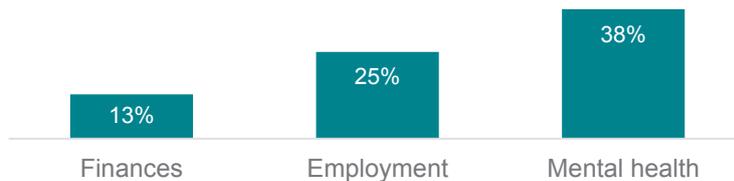
Service leader

What was challenging?

More than a third of leaders were concerned about parental anxiety and, in a few cases (5 percent), leaders indicated that this had affected children's attendance at the service after lockdown. This was often because "there was still a lot of fear in the community."

The most common concern of parents, reported by leaders that ERO interviewed, was their anxiety about what might happen next and the "fear of the unknown". Leaders also told us that the parents and whānau at their service expressed concern about their employment and their finances during the lockdown (Figure 8).

FIGURE 8: Key concerns of parents and whānau reported by early childhood service leaders



A quarter of leaders reported that they spent time reassuring whānau and had established good processes to manage the additional health and safety requirements resulting from Covid-19. The view expressed by this centre manager was reflective of others.

A few leaders reported that communicating with parents who had English as an additional language about Covid-19 and the implications of various levels was challenging. This made sharing important messages during lockdown more complicated.

"An ongoing challenge is managing community anxiety and we have endeavoured to do so through relevant communication. Parents have appreciated the communication and the calm approach of kaiako. People were scared about what was potentially going to happen. We were working to keep people calm."

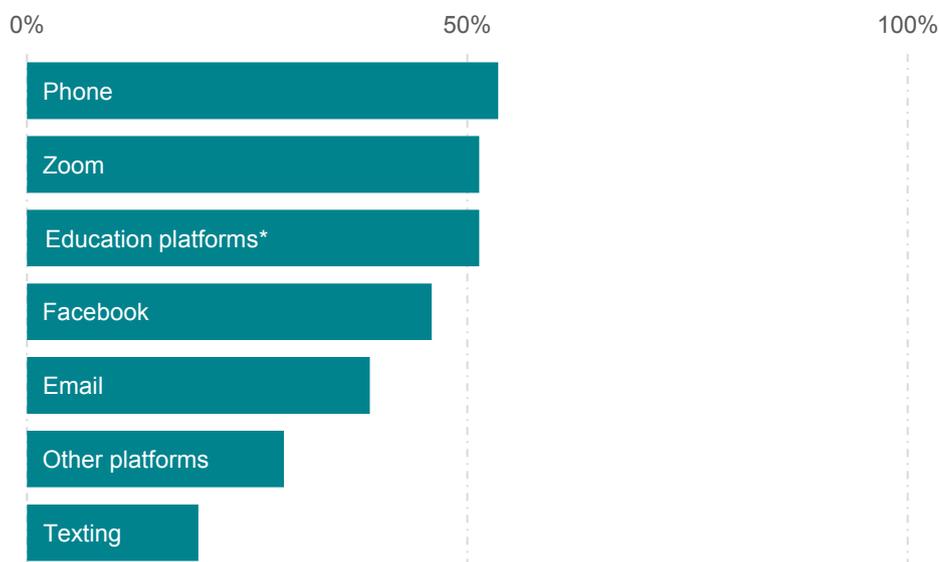
Service leader

3. Supporting learning in lockdown

What happened?

At Alert Level 4, early childhood education services were closed but available for distance learning. Nine out of ten leaders told us they provided some form of teaching and learning for children during lockdown. Leaders and kaiako communicated with parents and whānau using a range of technologies and platforms. The most common of these (Figure 9) were phone calls, Zoom, Facebook, and online early childhood education platforms (each reported by close to 50 percent of leaders). The method of communication chosen depended on what technology was available to parents and whānau, and in some cases what families were most comfortable using.

FIGURE 9: *The percentage of leaders and kaiako who used different tools to communicate with parents and whānau.*



*Most commonly referred to were Storypark or Educa

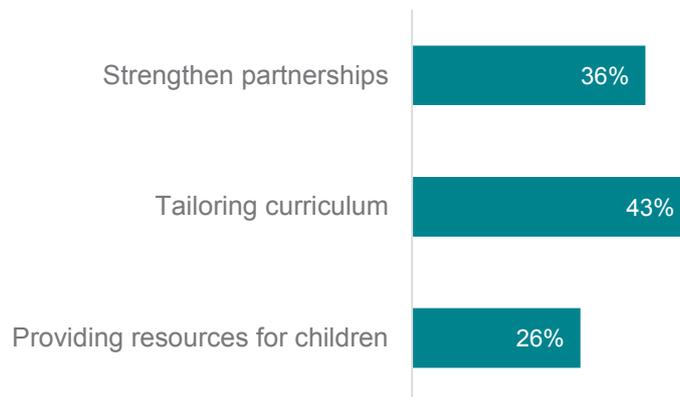
Hard copy resource packs for early childhood education services were provided by the Ministry of Education to support communities in areas of greatest need.ⁱⁱⁱ These packs contained resources that children may not be able to access easily when early childhood services were closed. They included picture books, stationery, art materials, and written information to help whānau support children's learning at home.

What worked?

Overall, service leaders identified three key things that worked well in supporting children to learn during the first lockdown:

- using technology to strengthen partnerships
- tailoring curriculum
- providing children with additional resources.

FIGURE 10: Percentage of leaders who discussed different strategies to support children's learning in lockdown



Using technology to strengthen partnerships and support learning

Just over a third (36 percent) of leaders reported that the increased interaction with parents and whānau improved the flow of communication and the collaborative focus on children's learning in a play-based context. The comments to the right are reflective of the views of many leaders ERO interviewed:

Overall, 18 percent of leaders have indicated that they would like to continue building on the use of digital technology to support the learning of children in their services.

"We feel that we have developed a deeper connection with parents and partnerships are more connected with them than before the lockdown."

Service leader

"Educators and visiting teachers are having conversations with children and families about what they had been doing during their time at home. This has resulted in increased parent voice in current planning."

Service leader

Tailoring the curriculum: using family environments as opportunities for learning

Focusing on the localised curriculum was a strategy that was discussed in 43 percent of the interviews we analysed. Kaiako built on the learning opportunities that were available in the home and community. They supported parents to notice these opportunities, recognise their significance, and use these to extend their child's learning. The importance of play-based learning was promoted through this approach. For example, leaders talked about:

- cooking and highlighting the maths component in measuring ingredients
- going on a bear hunt and counting the number of bears in windows spotted when out walking⁴
- gathering and foraging activities so that children could share their treasures
- celebrating Easter and Anzac Day.

A wide range of methods were used to engage children in their learning, these included:

- online circle times that allowed children to connect with each other
- videos of science experiments with children being encouraged to try it themselves and share their learning back through photographs or videos
- sharing links to websites to extend learning
- video clips of kaiako singing, reading stories and offering yoga sessions for and with children.

Providing children with additional resources

Around a quarter of early childhood leaders told us their service provided their own resource packs for children. Leaders approached this in a range of ways and for different purposes.

"Developing packs to support two different groups of children in the kindergarten for example, for children transitioning to school. Their packs supported them to get ready for school and, for the younger children, their resources were specifically made for their learning from home."

Service leader

"Craft packs were used as a tool for ongoing engagement with parents and whānau about their children's play and learning."

Service leader

4. Placing a teddy bear in a window so children could see them when out walking was an idea many New Zealand homes used during lockdown.

A shared view was that parents appreciated all resource packs provided. This quote reflects the type of feedback provided on resource packs:

“Parents were very grateful and children enjoyed all of them. Even the box in which the resources were sent was used to make a rocket ship.”

Service leader

In addition to these key actions, some service leaders reported that establishing good routines for online learning was also important. Together many kaiako and whānau established a pattern of engagement that was both supportive and responsive. Leaders reported that using digital technology to regularly communicate with children and whānau meant that “kaiako were an ongoing part of children’s daily lives.” Moreover, children saw their kaiako on the screen and this helped to maintain the connection they had. Some leaders expressed that this may have contributed to children’s smooth transitions back into the service. Leaders were mindful of not overloading parents during lockdown:

“They were cautious of not bombarding the parents as they were working from home and home schooling primary aged children – it was a real balancing act.”

Service leader

What was challenging?

Seventeen percent of leaders identified that it was challenging to support learning during the lockdown for children who did not have access to the internet or a digital device. Internet connectivity was reported as problem because of where whānau lived. For example, some households were in rural areas with poor internet coverage. In these situations, kaiako said that they phoned parents regularly, often initiating the phone calls because some parents may not have had enough credit on their phone.

To support parents and whānau, the Ministry of Education distributed hard copy resource packs with activities and learning material for children. These were distributed to the communities in greatest need. Some of the families that received these packs had limited resources at home and relied on hard copy resources to enhance their child’s learning. For example, one leader told us:

“Our families appreciated the resource packs as many of them did not have toys or play resources at home.”

Service leader

4. Supporting staff wellbeing

What happened?

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to many unique challenges for leaders and kaiako. They have experienced competing demands of working from home, transitioning to distance teaching and in some cases teaching their own children. Some leaders and kaiako also took on additional roles such as brokering support for vulnerable families and anxious parents.

What worked?

Overall, service leaders identified three key things that worked well to support the wellbeing of kaiako and centre staff:

- regular communication with staff
- the wage subsidy
- drawing on wider support.

FIGURE 11: Percentage of leaders who felt these actions had supported staff wellbeing



Regular communication with staff

Remaining in regular contact with kaiako was identified by 72 percent of leaders as the strategy they had used most often to support staff. Contact was at both a personal and professional level and a view shared by many was that “it was nice to touch base and know we were OK and all in it together”. Employers also sought to reduce kaiako anxiety by using a wide range of strategies to support their individual circumstances. The following are examples shared with ERO:

“Prior to lockdown, we had to consider staff who were identified as being at risk. No pressure was placed on them, we just wanted to support their wellbeing. These kaiako were able to come back to work when they were ready.”

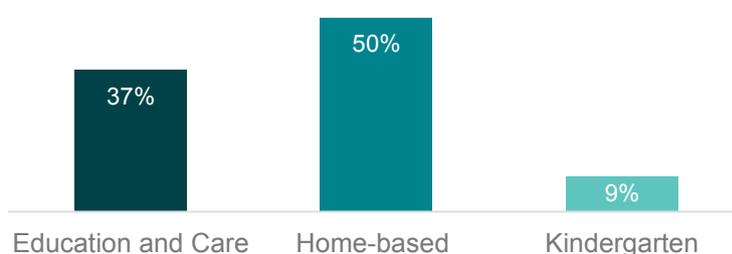
Service leader



The wage subsidy

Half of the leaders ERO spoke to indicated they had accessed the government wage subsidy; however actual uptake may have been higher. A leader shared that “securing the government wage subsidy was critical to improving the job security and peace of mind of staff” reducing stress and the overall impact of Covid-19. A third of leaders from education and care services, and half of those from home-based services, told us they had needed to access the wage subsidy (Figure 12).

FIGURE 12: Percentage of leaders who told ERO they accessed the Government wage subsidy, by service type



Leaders drawing on wider support

Leaders had considerable responsibility for staff, child and whānau wellbeing during the lead up to lockdown and particularly at Alert Levels 1 and 2. Leaders who were part of a larger organisation were often able to access support from their senior managers, who provided reassurance and clarification about what was required of them to correctly respond to the evolving advice set out by Government (notably through the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health). In some cases, leaders from standalone services had established their own networks which provided them with support and guidance related to Covid-19. This mostly occurred in education and care services, with managers who were responsible for one or two small to medium sized services.⁶

5. The Employee Assistance Programme is a confidential programme that offers practical assistance to employees when personal or work issues arise that may impact on their ability to do their job or affect their wellbeing. This includes professional and confidential counselling services.

6. A small early childhood service for this sample is a roll of less than 50 children. A medium service is one with at least 50 children, but less than 100.

What was challenging?

Around one in three leaders said that their kaiako were experiencing anxiety. This was most commonly related to the uncertainty created by the changing Covid-19 situation, but also referred to job security and added worry for those people who were considered medically vulnerable.

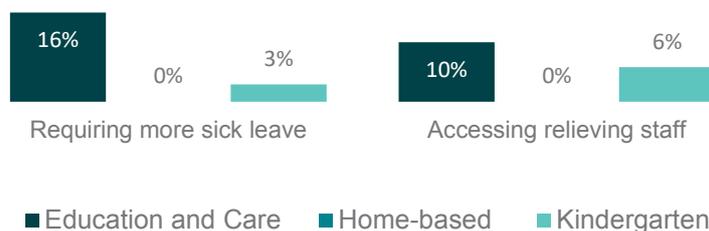
Kaiako spent considerable time reassuring parents who were experiencing anxiety themselves related to, or exacerbated by, Covid-19. Almost a third of leaders said that this placed an extra strain on kaiako, who were also anxious themselves about the changing situation. Leaders and kaiako from kindergarten and education and care services reported similar levels of anxiety.

Some leaders shared that they felt the extra pressure and the ongoing responsibility placed on them was one of the biggest challenges they faced. For example, one leader shared that:



In addition, staff being absent due to sickness or because they were at risk of severe illness from Covid-19 was a challenge for some services. Leaders from 12 percent of services told us that staff took more frequent or extended leave. We found that this was most likely to be discussed by leaders in education and care services (Figure 13). Accessing qualified relievers was identified by 9 percent of leaders as a concern, with this issue most often evident in education and care services. It is likely that home-based services have alternative arrangements in place to cover for when visiting teachers or educators are sick.

FIGURE 13: Percentage of leaders who discussed staff sick leave and difficulty in accessing relieving staff, by service type



5. Moving out of lockdown

What happened?

The Prime Minister announced that “New Zealand would move to Alert level 3 at 11.59pm on Monday 27 April.”^{iv} At Alert Level 3, early childhood services had to follow a number of special requirements – these included:

- if a parent or caregiver was available to look after children at home, then they should do so
- children and staff with higher levels of risk of severe illness should stay home
- if staff or children are sick, then they should stay at home until they are completely well
- the number of children in a group was limited to 10
- home-based early learning activities could resume with multiple families’ children being looked after in one location
- specific public health measures to be used which reduce the chances of respiratory infections
- contact registers must be put in place.^v

A staged reopening was planned, and measures were put in place to reduce the likelihood of transmission of Covid-19.^{vi} Nearly half of leaders and kaiako reported that children’s wellbeing and sense of belonging was a major focus as they transitioned back into the service. Around a third of leaders reported that children transitioned back into the service smoothly.

What worked?

Overall, service leaders identified three key things that worked well:

- gradual reopening
- support for children to transition back into services
- routines and re-familiarisation.

Gradual reopening

More than a third of leaders told us that the gradual reopening supported kaiako, parents and children to transition back into the service. Leaders were mindful of how anxious some kaiako were, and 20 percent of leaders talked about how they had provided some flexibility in the working arrangements for their staff.

Leaders and kaiako reported that the staged reopening enabled them to strengthen health and safety procedures, routines, food services, and the equipment provided. It gave leaders the space to establish and monitor these processes, to ensure that they were running smoothly. An example of how this process was managed is shared opposite:

The gradual reopening meant that a lower number of children attended, which leaders said gave them time to engage with parents, whānau and the children to inform them of the new routines prior to, and at the time of, transitioning back into the service.

Support for children to transition back into services

Leaders highlighted the importance of working with parents to support transitions back into services. Some leaders reported that, because parents were well informed about the new transition process and had shared this information with their child, children were generally happy to say goodbye to their parents at the gate. A strategy that a few leaders told us about, was to create a short video demonstrating the new routines and transition process so that these were familiar to children. This was made for all children but worked particularly well for children who had additional learning needs. Kaiako shared:

“The service provider drafted a set of centre guidelines which were provided to staff for consultation. This was then given out to all staff and families once finalised and was signed by all. Teachers were provided a list of which children would attend each day, along with risk assessments. Contact tracing was in place and teachers took temperatures of children daily. Hand sanitizer was provided and incorporated into daily routines. This helped to ensure effective management of the additional health and safety measures.”

Service leader

“We did a video showing them [children, parents and whānau] what the transition would look like, how children will be brought into the service and the new routine – showing children that kaiako will take your bag, give it a spray, and would greet the child on the porch rather than being brought inside by mum.”

Service leader

Routines and re-familiarisation

Some leaders (16 percent) reported a priority was the importance of re-familiarising children with the routines and introducing them to the “new normal”. As children transitioned back into the early childhood service, 14 percent of leaders reported that they intentionally built on the learning experiences children had had during lockdown. Children had the opportunity to share with kaiako and their peers how they spent their time and were invited to draw pictures representing their experiences. Some leaders told us they had collaborated with whānau on photo displays at their service, showing what children had been doing at home. They shared that kaiako used this information to identify children’s emerging interests. At circle times, children were encouraged to share their feelings of lockdown and to reconnect with their peers. A common view shared by leaders was:



“As children began returning to the centre, teachers spent time letting the children settle in. Stories from home were shared and links were made to centre learning experiences. Children were given time and space to catch up with each other and initiate their own learning experiences at their pace.”

Service leader

What was challenging?

Both families and kaiako were nervous to return to onsite education and care. More than a quarter of leaders said that there was apprehension in their community about how safe it was to re-open; despite the assurance they had been provided by the Government. The Ministry of Education recognised this and shared information acknowledging that “staff may wish to stay at home, for reasons that include: sickness; self-isolation; that they are caring for dependents who have to self-isolate; or that they, or someone they care for has vulnerable health”.^{vii}

Part 2: Ongoing challenges

The ongoing impacts of Covid-19 will continue to be felt by early childhood education services and their children and whānau. In this section, ERO has identified what these ongoing challenges might be.

ERO has identified five possible ongoing challenges for early childhood education services:

1. Ongoing concerns about attendance
2. Possible delay in starting school
3. Increased absences and funding concerns
4. Staffing
5. Financial viability

1. Ongoing concerns about attendance

The Ministry of Education analysis of ECE participation found that attendance fell sharply during lockdown (nationally in Term 2 and in Auckland in Term 3), was slightly down during periods of Alert Level 2, but appeared to have returned to normal levels for most children under Alert Level 1. The Ministry of Education reports that under two-year olds have returned to slightly lower participation levels.^{viii}

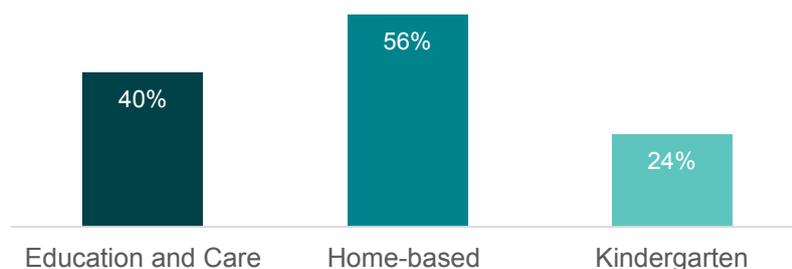
The leaders interviewed by ERO reported a similar picture. Children's attendance at services dropped off prior to the first lockdown (reported by 5 percent of leaders), and parents and whānau were slow to bring their children back to the service under Alert Level 2 (reported by 11 percent of leaders). The most common reason given by leaders (more than half of those reported above) about why children did not return immediately when services fully reopened under Alert Level 2, was parent anxiety about Covid-19.

In ERO's interviews, leaders in the Auckland and Northland regions were more likely to report an impact on participation in their early childhood service. A view shared by some leaders was that "parents wanted to wait a few weeks before returning" and "there is still a lot of fear in the community". Some leaders (17 percent) talked about responding to concerns in their community by consulting with whānau about when they would return to the service. For some services, this led to extended home-learning or adjusted hours.

When ERO talked to leaders after the first national lockdown, 40 percent said that their enrolment and attendance had been impacted by Covid-19. Some leaders were in a position to manage this situation by filling vacancies with children from their wait list.

Leaders in home-based services were (proportionately) more likely than leaders of other services to describe a negative impact on enrolment and attendance due to Covid-19. Just over half of home-based service leaders interviewed in this study reported a drop in the attendance of children in their service, compared to 40 percent of those in education and care services. Leaders in kindergartens were the least likely (24 percent) to report a negative impact on attendance due to Covid-19 (Figure 14).

FIGURE 14: *Percentage of leaders who reported a negative impact on enrolment and attendance due to Covid-19, by service type*



2. Possible delay in starting school

Ministry of Education analysis shows that there has been an increase in participation of five-year olds attending ECE services,^x indicating a delay in children starting school. A small number of leaders told us that parents had “paused” the transition of their child to school while the country was moving between different Covid-19 Alert Levels. It was suggested that parents were more comfortable with the smaller size of an early childhood service than having their children in a larger primary school. One leader told us that, in their service, a small number of parents were also choosing to keep their five-year old children enrolled at the early childhood service due to anxiety caused by Covid-19.

3. Increased absences and funding concerns

Overall, 15 percent of leaders had experienced an increase in children being absent due to sickness since returning from the first lockdown, which was a growing concern. One service leader said, “frequent absences due to children being sick will affect funding”. Leaders reported that children are now absent for longer periods of time than they would have been previously, due to having to stay home until they are completely well or because someone else in the household is sick.^x Parental anxiety was another reason for a child’s non-attendance.

4. Staffing

Staff being absent due to sickness or because they are at risk of severe illness from Covid-19 was a challenge for some leaders. Twelve percent of leaders told us their staff took more frequent or extended leave. This was commonly mentioned in interviews with leaders from education and care services. Accessing qualified relievers was identified by 9 percent of leaders as a concern, with this issue, again, being most frequently raised by leaders in education and care services.

Other concerns raised were about the inability to recruit staff from overseas, particularly for home-based au pair services.

5. Financial viability

The Household Labour Force Survey indicates that unemployment has risen from 4.2 percent in the March 2020 quarter to 5.3 percent in the September quarter.^{xi}

As a result, the outlook for the economy continues to remain uncertain. The New Zealand Treasury note that financial pressures are likely to continue, stating:



“Unemployment is expected to rise over the coming quarters as border restrictions weigh on activity and fiscal support is eased.”^{xii}

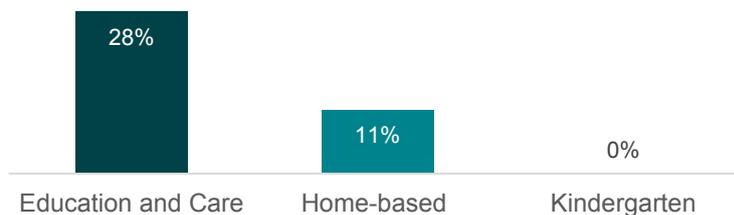
New Zealand
Treasury

However, these early findings occurred at a time when the wage subsidy was still in place and early childhood services were fully funded by the Ministry of Education even if children did not attend. In the interviews there was a growing awareness that, when the subsidy was removed, this may affect enrolments and therefore the financial viability of services. During lockdown some services experienced a loss of revenue as they did not charge fees, so these services may already be under some financial pressure.

Around a quarter (26 percent) of leaders told us they were reducing fees. This was mentioned by service leaders ERO talked to in the Hawke’s Bay, Bay of Plenty and Auckland. These were the same regions that told us they had experienced an impact on participation.

Nearly one fifth of leaders (18 percent) interviewed by ERO were concerned about how Covid-19 may impact on their service. 15 percent of leaders were concerned that their service will already struggle with its ongoing viability under Covid-19. Concern about their ongoing viability was more commonly mentioned by education and care services (Figure 15).

FIGURE 15: Leaders who told us they were concerned about both future lockdowns and the current viability of their service due to Covid-19, by service type



Leaders reported the following reasons for their increased concern about the long-term viability of their service:

- the impact on the employment situation of parents and whānau as the Covid-19 wage subsidy is removed
- a drop in numbers of enrolled and attending children or hours of attendance
- paying rent and other business-related operational costs whilst limited revenue is coming in
- the cost of deep cleaning services and having to purchase additional cleaning materials
- that they were not eligible for the wage subsidy and paid kaiako salary out of any reserves.

Part 3: Looking forward

This report has provided insights into how early childhood education services navigated their way through the initial months of the Covid-19 pandemic and what the ongoing challenges are likely to be. This section reflects on what the key lessons have been for early childhood education services and possible actions for leaders to consider going forward.

What have we learnt?

From the interviews with leaders in early childhood services, ERO has identified eight key lessons:

- The Ministry of Education may need to continue to provide information and support, which was well received by services. Services may need help to develop new ways of working that includes a mix of staff and students teaching and learning from home and onsite, as well as a complete closure of the service.
- Many leaders have developed or reviewed their pandemic plans. New health and safety processes have been established and there has been an increased focus on keeping healthy. These are positive shifts worth embedding.
- The learning partnership between kaiako and parents has been strengthened through increased and regular communication.
- Many children engaged in online learning with their kaiako and peers. This regular engagement and children being able to see their kaiako online is thought to have been a contributing factor to how well children transitioned back into their service.
- Covid-19 has accelerated the use of digital technologies in early childhood teaching and learning. Leaders and kaiako are positive about this outcome and have indicated they would like to build on this moving forward.
- The wellbeing and engagement of many children was well supported. However, additional support will be needed for children whose wellbeing and learning was disrupted due to Covid-19. Leaders and kaiako will need to:
 - identify who these children are and understand the ongoing impact on their wellbeing and learning
 - monitor these children and their families, particularly, children with additional learning needs, health issues, disabilities and children who lacked access to resources and support to learn during lockdown
 - identify what additional support these children need to address any wellbeing and learning issues.

- Many leaders and kaiako took on additional work, responsibilities and roles as they supported children and their whānau during and after lockdown. For both leaders and kaiako, this had a toll on their own wellbeing and the impact of this may continue for some time. Monitoring and supporting the wellbeing of leaders and kaiako is critical as we move forward.
- The full impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's enrolment and attendance in early childhood education, and the related impact on early childhood services' viability, has not yet been felt. In the coming months it will be important to continue to monitor the impact of Covid-19 and if this has an impact on the quality of provision.

Key lessons for service leaders and kaiako: Practical actions

Services can take action now in response to these findings and some suggested actions are set out below.

1. Learn from the first phase

Take time to reflect on what worked well and identify any challenges that emerged through the first phase of this pandemic. As a team, consider how improvements should be made and commit to making the necessary changes.

Going forward, work with your team to plan how you will support your children's wellbeing and learning in a Covid-19 world. These plans will need to be flexible enough to accommodate having everyone offsite or some children and staff onsite and some learning and working from home: Possible scenarios to consider include:

- some staff working from home because of concerns about their health or because they are waiting for Covid-19 test results
- children who are unable to participate regularly because of concerns about exposure to Covid-19
- temporary closure due to exposure to Covid-19
- lockdown – all staff and children working and learning at home.

2. Prepare

Having a pandemic plan in place for the service to provide initial guidance about the steps that need to be taken to support the wellbeing of children and staff.

Leaders should ensure they stay up to date with the information shared by government organisations and use this to inform and adapt policies, procedures and practices.

3. Establish clear channels of communication for timely and consistent sharing of messages

Good communication has proven to be an essential tool in helping to alleviate the stress of kaiako, parents and whānau.

Leaders need to balance the amount of information shared. This means communicating the most pertinent facts with the right audience, clearly and succinctly, and being available to answer questions.

4. Encourage innovative approaches to how (and what) curriculum content is delivered

Educational continuity that occurred during the lockdown in March and April was due to committed and innovative leaders and kaiako.

Leaders might consider how they can build on the gains made in kaiako confidence and competence in using digital technologies. Encouraging kaiako to share the creative and innovative approaches they have used during alert levels with others is likely to spark further interest and innovation.

5. Plan for an effective delivery model for remote learning

It is important to establish good routines for online learning. This enables parents and whānau to know when kaiako are available, and to consider how their child might participate.

Leaders and kaiako might establish expectations of the level of participation required by staff and the content they would be expected to deliver and take into consideration the support they may need.

6. Involve parents and whānau in a review of how well the curriculum met their and their child's needs and use this to inform ongoing developments

Consult with parents and whānau to determine what worked well for whānau and their child with online learning. Encourage them to share what they would like to see more of or less of and adjust future curriculum delivery.

7. Monitor your own wellbeing as a leader, and that of staff

Looking after your own wellbeing is essential. As a leader, establish your own support networks and take the time to connect with them. Balancing your work and personal life is important.

Leaders have a direct impact on their staff wellbeing. Effective communication is the first step. It is also important to minimise the stress placed on staff where possible. Leaders could look at the range of tools that are available and use these to support the wellbeing of staff.

Where can services and whānau go to for help?

- [Ministry of Education Covid-19 Information and Advice](#)
- [Ministry of Education Child Wellbeing and Participation Portal](#)
- [New Zealand Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy](#)
- [Healthy Active Learning](#)
- [Te Whāriki Online](#)

Next steps

Covid-19 continues to have impacts. ERO will:

- release further reports in Term 1 next year that share the innovative practices in English and Māori-Medium used by services and schools in responding to Covid-19
- continue to monitor the impact of Covid-19 on student outcomes through ERO's reviews and analysis of education system data.

Endnotes

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Appendix 1:

Key interview questions and prompts

1. How has Covid-19 affected your service(s)?
 - a. What has the impact of transitions into and out of alert levels (lockdown) been for your service(s)?
 - b. What has worked well? What are you most proud of?
 - c. Have you overcome any challenges? How?
 - d. What are your current challenges? What are your key priorities?
 - e. Do you have indications of the longer-term impact for your service(s), for example on roll numbers and staffing?
 - f. If this happened again what would you do differently? Do again?
2. What support have you/your services received pre, during and post changing Alert Levels (lockdown)?
 - a. Have you used resources and support provided by the Ministry of Education and/or other agencies?
 - b. What support has your service(s) needed?
 - c. What has been helpful/useful and why?
 - d. What has been less helpful or useful and why?
 - e. How have you managed additional health and safety measures along with existing health and safety requirements? What aspects have been straightforward? What aspects have been challenging?
3. What do you know about the wellbeing and learning of the children and their parents and whānau in your service(s):
 - a. During lockdown
 - i. What has worked well?
 - ii. What do you know about children's access to, and engagement with, digital, online and hard copy resources?
 - iii. What contact did kaiako in your service(s) have with children and their whānau?
 - iv. How did you/your services support parents and whānau through this time? What did your service(s) do to maintain relationships and stay connected?

- b. Post lockdown
 - i. How are you continuing to support children’s wellbeing and learning?
 - ii. What are your priorities for children’s wellbeing and learning?
 - iii. What do you know about the continued participation and attendance of children at your service(s)? Who is/isn’t attending and why/why not?
- 4. What support have you provided to your staff?
 - a. How have you/your service supported staff during lockdown? What have you done to support staff and stay connected during this time?
 - b. How is the overall wellbeing of staff at your service(s)?
 - c. How has Covid-19 impacted on staff who are in training in your service(s)?
 - d. What is your current staffing situation?

Most interview questions were open-ended and resulted in text data. These data were analysed thematically according to key topics linked to question themes. Then, counts and percentages were calculated in relation to key aspects, such as the number of services that told ERO that they had a pandemic plan in place or had updated their pandemic plan.⁷

Percentage estimates in this report should be treated as indicative. It is possible that more services engaged in innovation, tailored support, or experienced issues than is apparent in these figures.

7. This engagement with early childhood services enabled the gathering of useful business intelligence and evaluative material. We did not set out to accurately quantify the number of centres that experienced particular issues or used particular strategies to foster ongoing learning or re-engagement.



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