

*The changing nature of third  
sector early years family  
support during the covid-19  
pandemic: a qualitative study  
of parents' and workers'  
experiences.*

LAY REPORT

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## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has created many challenges for all sections of society due to the nationwide lockdown restrictions that were imposed by the UK government. The impacts on families have been demonstrated to be wide ranging: from financial to mental health and wellbeing. Third sector community organisations provide much of the available family support, however, they also face key structural challenges including precarious financing sources. This is coupled with the fact that family support greatly depends on building strong relationships with parents and families. The restrictions on face-to-face interactions were likely to have impacted the relationships between organisations and families, and so this research had the aim of investigating what those impacts were from the perspectives of those involved. Specifically, the research set out to answer three main questions:

1. What have been the main impacts faced by families and third sector organisations during the pandemic?
2. What have been the major changes to modes of service delivery during the pandemic and how have workers and families experienced these?
3. What role have third sector support services played for families during the pandemic and how has this changed?

## METHODOLOGY

- Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with both workers and parents from the Glasgow area
- Interviews were conducted online via video-conferencing software
- An emphasis was placed on allowing participants to define the key issues and expand upon them with limited probing or leading questions
- All interviewees were mothers with children in the 0-5 (early years) range
- Interviews were transcribed and participants were given pseudonyms to protect anonymity
- A thematic analysis was conducted with multiple themes emerging in relation to each research question.

## PARTICIPANT PROFILES

### Workers:

Pseudonym	Role	Size of organization
Kate	Practitioner	Medium/large (nationwide coverage)
Linda	Management position	Small (one locality in Glasgow)
Sarah	Practitioner	Small (one locality in Glasgow)
Susan	Counselling specialist	Medium (nationwide coverage)

### Parents:

Pseudonym	Age range of child
Lauren	2-5
Jane	0-2
Hannah	0-2
Erica	0-2

## FINDINGS

- Families experienced many issues surrounding their finances and social isolation as a result of the pandemic. In many cases families faced new issues and were

sometimes not fully aware of the support available to them or how to navigate the system. Families also reported decreased contact time with social support networks including friends and family.

- Organisations faced increased demand and changes in need, forcing them to adapt methods of delivery while they faced issues around funding and capacity. All organisations reported a surge in demand for services that they often found difficult to accommodate using online methods. Organisations also experienced their own issues, specifically with regard to funding sources and staffing issues, but these issues were not felt equally amongst providers. Workers from smaller organisations highlighted more issues with keeping up with demand, partly as a result of having less capacity.
- The new remote methods of delivery were often seen as inadequate and lacked the opportunities for socialisation that formed a crucial part of services before the pandemic. Many participants – including parents and workers – found the new methods of delivery to be overly formal and highlighted that the role of support sessions in facilitating conversation and friendships between parents and workers was lost to a large extent.
- The role of organisations changed in many ways, with many now providing more comprehensive emotional support on an individual level. Financial advice and other forms of material support was also more prevalent. In many cases, support was directed at the whole family in a more comprehensive way than before, and workers often noted that they had an increased awareness of families' circumstances.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- This study has highlighted the diverse ways in which the pandemic has impacted family support services. It is therefore vital that policy takes into account the views of those involved and seeks to involve third sector providers in deliberations.
- Structural weaknesses in the third sector – mainly surrounding finances – were found to have been exacerbated by the pandemic, and as other research has highlighted this trend will likely continue. It is therefore crucial that policymakers realise the

effect that this can have on the resilience and long-term growth of third sector organisations.

- As has been suggested by charities such as Homestart UK, Best Beginnings and the Parent-Infant Foundation (2020) more by way of recovery funding targeted specifically at family support services will be necessary. It would be beneficial for funding to be directed across a wide variety of family support interventions to ensure all organisations are included.
- The '*uneven*' nature of funding patterns that has been noted in the literature (Delahunty, 2021; Harris, 2021; Phillips & Hebb, 2010) has been found to have impacts on service delivery and on workers in this study, highlighting the need for changes specifically targeted at redressing these imbalances.
- It was also found that in many ways, parents have come to rely on third sector services more as their other support networks have decreased. Moreover, the prevailing feeling amongst workers and parents was that families will need more support going forward to mitigate against the various impacts of the pandemic on parents as well as the potential developmental impacts on children. It is therefore also vital that the lived experiences of families and workers be incorporated into policy solutions.

## CONCLUSIONS

The pandemic has presented a range of challenges for third sector family support organisations to contend with, and these have not been experienced equally amongst providers and families. The locality in which they operate and their overall capacity are key factors that could influence the experiences of workers in diverse ways. However, these organisations played a critical role in families lives during the pandemic as social contact was restricted and families faced new obstacles. Organisations reacted to the challenges posed by the pandemic quickly and admirably by adapting to restrictions at-pace amidst structural issues pre-dating the pandemic.