

LEAP's response to the Covid-19 pandemic



January 2021

Introduction

It's been nearly one year since the UK's first national lockdown in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Covid-19 continues to wreak havoc on people, economies and healthcare systems around the world. At the time of writing, England is again in lockdown and the UK has recorded more than 100,000 coronavirus deaths.

The virus and secondary impacts of the pandemic have disproportionately affected disadvantaged areas and Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic communities. This is of major concern to LEAP as a public health initiative operating in four deprived wards¹, where 59% of 0–3 year olds are from a BAME background².

The Covid-19 crisis has had, and will continue to have, a significant adverse effect on children aged 0–3. Pregnancy and the early years form a crucial stage in children's development. Families who were already experiencing adversities may find that their challenges have intensified; other families will face new issues.

The pandemic has been extraordinarily testing for parents' mental health and family relationships. It has added to the existing stresses of pregnancy and parenting young children. Sadly, it has also created conditions for domestic and child abuse to escalate.

Young children and their families have not had consistent access to the play facilities, outdoor spaces, groups, children's centres, services and care that support their health, wellbeing and development. Many childcare providers are facing financial difficulties, with some closing permanently.

All of this will impact negatively on families across the social spectrum but particularly those facing disadvantage. The pandemic is clearly exacerbating educational, socioeconomic and health inequalities that existed before.

The limitations on face-to-face contact present a barrier for professionals and social support networks in identifying and meeting families' needs. "Pregnancy, birth, the early months and, to some extent, the first two years should be considered as an additional 'risk factor' for lockdown harms to children", according to a recently published report from the First 1001 Days Movement³. This is due to infants' susceptibility to the environment; dependency on parents, services and social support; and invisibility to professionals.

¹ LEAP wards are now within the top 8 most deprived wards in Lambeth, with Coldharbour being the most deprived ward in Lambeth overall when looking at 2019 Index of Multiple Deprivation average score rank.

² Source: DataNet as at April 2020. This excludes children not registered with a GP in the borough.

³ First 1001 Days Movement (2021) *Working for babies: Lockdown lessons from local systems*

As we emerge from this pandemic, undetected needs will become apparent, services will be playing catch-up, resources will be diminished, and the level of available support for families is unlikely to meet demand⁴.

LEAP exists to improve the life chances of babies and very young children because evidence demonstrates that the earliest years of life are a vital time in which children's brains develop rapidly and foundations are laid for the future.

The need for support at the very beginning of children's lives has never been so clear.

During the pandemic, LEAP has continuously monitored local and national provision, public messaging and intelligence, including insights from parents.

This has helped us determine how LEAP can best support partners and contribute to the wider Covid-19 response in Lambeth. For example, we included activity packs in food parcels for children's centre clients and provided backing for Healthy Living Platform in its leadership of the borough's emergency food response.

This report sets out the role LEAP has played so far in five broad categories:

1. Service continuity and adaptation including support for digital delivery
2. Financial support for service providers
3. Communication and information for families
4. Changes to the LEAP portfolio
5. Learning.



Image: Front of LEAP leaflet updating families on our offer (May 2020)

Our Covid-19 activity has been intrinsically linked with our response to heightened awareness and widespread discussion of systemic racism since the killing of George Floyd last June. We recognise the racial disparities in how the pandemic is affecting families. Reducing inequality is central to LEAP's public health approach.

In 2020 we explored the impacts of systemic racism, identified areas of action for LEAP, and celebrated Black families and figures. Most of our thinking and initiatives around race equality are not detailed in this document as they have been driven by more than Covid-19 and integrated into the wider programme. However, they have been an important part of our provision for families, workforce communications and Core team activity during the pandemic.

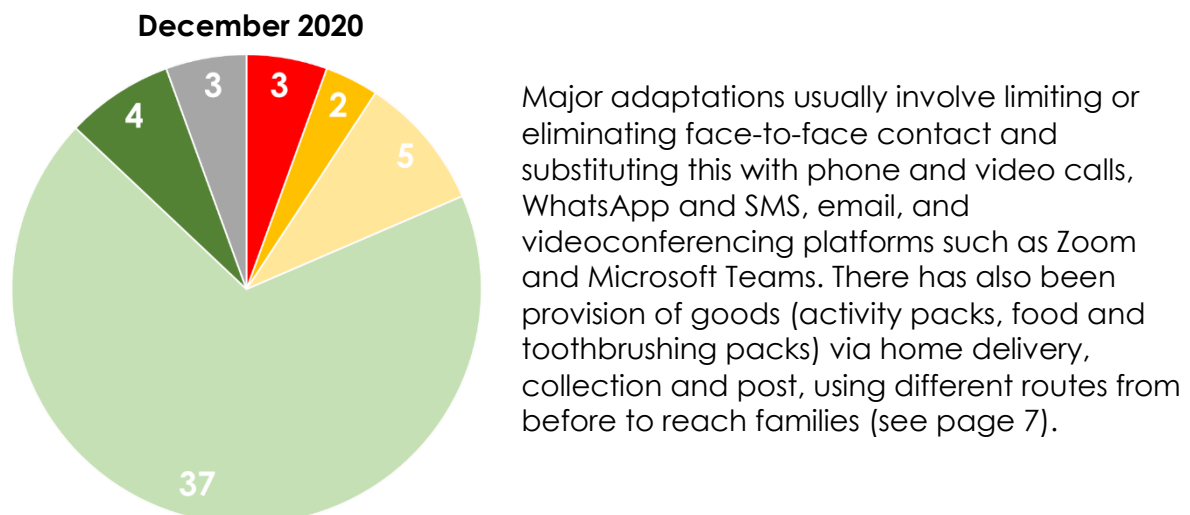
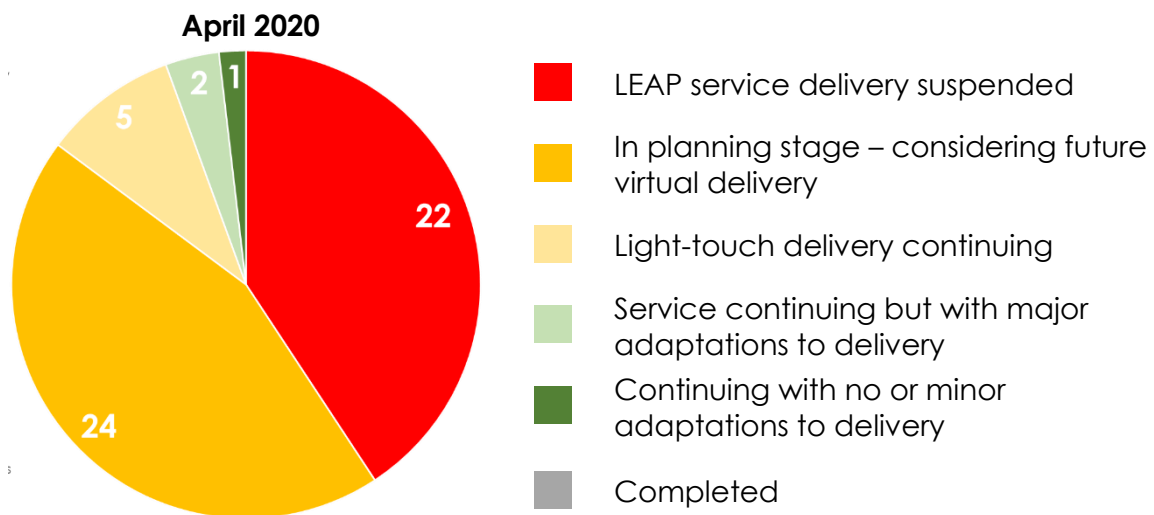
⁴ These issues are explored, along with policy recommendations, in an Early Years Recovery Briefing produced by a partnership of children's organisations including LEAP's accountable body, the National Children's Bureau: <https://www.ncb.org.uk/what-we-do/influencing-policy/reports-and-briefings/vision-recovery>

1. Service continuity and adaptation

Before the pandemic, LEAP offered 23 services for families and the local workforce with more than 50 activities between them. Over half these elements entailed group-based delivery and over a quarter, one-to-one support – mostly in person. Others involved distribution of goods and early learning resources or were delivered within early years settings.

Eleven elements of the programme depended on the participation of childcare settings. Twenty-four relied on referrals from health providers, Better Start Workers, early years practitioners and other professionals. Needless to say, physical distancing requirements made it impossible for these services to continue in the way they were originally designed.

LEAP activities vary in their transferability to virtual formats. Nevertheless, we facilitated a quick shift wherever possible. The charts below show the status of 54 elements of the LEAP programme in April 2020 and December 2020. Activities have paused and resumed in response to changing restrictions and some staff redeployment.



Experience and evidence indicate that virtual support and communication are not equivalent to face-to-face. Digital exclusion has also been a real and widespread concern during this crisis.

Since March 2020, LEAP's aim has been to resume delivery in person at the earliest opportunity. However, virtual delivery has added value including greater flexibility for practitioners and families when sessions and appointments are not location-dependent. This can be particularly beneficial for new parents who may struggle to get out of the house. For example, some Breastfeeding Peer Support groups have been better attended online during the pandemic than when they were located in children's centres.

Along with our services, engagement by the LEAP Core Team with providers, partners and volunteers has also adapted. One-to-one support for Parent Champions and their families has been particularly important, as have virtual events that bring practitioners from different services together.

Support for digital delivery

Readiness, skill and IT capability to transition to digital delivery also varied amongst LEAP providers.

Immediately after the first lockdown was announced, we supported services to choose digital platforms, purchase licences, address privacy and security concerns, and coordinate with each other.

In October we circulated a guide with an outline of video-conferencing software that was available with guidance and best practice tips on delivering virtual sessions, including any safeguarding concerns.

The guide was for approximately 50 LEAP-funded personnel to use in planning their virtual delivery.

In late 2020 we surveyed LEAP-funded staff to better understand their capacity for online delivery and their knowledge of available software and its capabilities.

Digital Champions scheme

Being digitally connected and skilled was important before the pandemic for finding employment and educational opportunities; researching and making informed decisions about childcare, education and services; accessing services and benefits; using online tools and resources; and connecting with others.

During the pandemic, the impact of digital exclusion has intensified. Even when families have internet access, devices and IT skills to navigate the virtual world, they may not be well-versed in online safety.

LEAP is scheduled to work closely with community members and within community spaces, creating digital spaces/hubs which the community can access for help.

LEAP will work with some initial partners (for example, Tulse Hill TRA) to roll out a safe and informed Digital Champion model of delivery that enables parents and families to develop their digital skills and confidence, identify local support and prepare for employment. Currently, we are developing a pool of Digital Champions with support from Digital Unite.

Findings from 30 respondents are in the process of being analysed and will be used to develop further resources to help services with upskilling and/or enhancing their delivery of virtual offers.

2. Financial support for service providers

LEAP supported the wider local response by continuing to fund posts for LEAP midwives, health visitors and other practitioners released for redeployment within their organisations. This included funding for NHS staff and other LEAP-funded personnel in the first quarter of 2020/21, during the first acute phase of the pandemic.

Underspend arising from a Covid-related delay in recruiting Parenting Workers was used to fund Circle of Security Parenting training places for 17 Lambeth practitioners. This supported plans to upscale COSP across the borough whilst enabling a pause in service delivery to be used as an opportunity for workforce development.

We flexed our investment in LEAP services to meet current need. For example, the work of our Community and Environmental Health Officer was paused and she was tasked instead with coordinating LEAP's Postnatal Meals service (see page 8) and supporting Lambeth Public Health and Lambeth Food, Health and Safety teams.

Finally, we covered or contributed to Covid-related costs. We purchased a refrigerator, a freezer and a printer to support Healthy Living Platform's work in leading the Lambeth emergency food response and assisted with unexpected costs for LEAP providers of moving to virtual working (e.g., IT equipment for Domestic Violence caseworkers).

3. Communication and information for families

During the pandemic LEAP has used its communications channels – particularly social media – to amplify key public health information and signpost LEAP families to available support and services.

Two mums were successful with Thames Water discounts and three mums and a dad got appointments with Lambeth talking therapy. A carer got support from school about borrowing a laptop from school for their son.

Parent Champion feedback after signposting

Parent Champion volunteers have also played a vital role for LEAP during the pandemic, as community connectors who have access to and relationships with the families LEAP seeks to reach. In addition to feeding back their insights about families' needs during this challenging time, Parent Champions have circulated information about services and support through their own networks of Lambeth parents. In March to December 2020, Parent Champions shared signposting messages on social media with 9,448 estimated views in total.

LEAP has created new digital resources and campaigns for our community.

In April, before advice for parents was widely available, LEAP's Parent and Infant Relationship Service (PAIRS) wrote a simple guide, *Helping Babies, Young Children, Parents and Carers in the COVID-19 Crisis*. This was published on our website⁵ (with over 900 views by January 2021) and printed for distribution with food parcels and activity packs.

In May, a targeted digital advertising campaign on Facebook and Twitter reached 1,000 mobile users accessing the platforms in the LEAP wards. Adverts promoted and linked to the PAIRS Covid-19 advice on our website.

We also ran an advert in the June edition of Lambeth Talk to achieve wider reach. We linked this in with Infant Mental Health Awareness Week (7-12 June).



Image: digital ad sharing PAIRS advice (May 2020)

We produced a leaflet in May reassuring families that 'We're still here for you'. The leaflet promoted key LEAP services and explained how parents could learn more about what was on offer. We circulated it widely, including in activity packs.

Winter With Us campaign

Recognising that winter 2020–2021 was going to be a particularly difficult time for families, LEAP launched a special campaign, *Winter With Us*. The campaign's key messages are based around:

- Staying connected with the community even during lockdown
- Feeling good through diet, exercise and activities
- Connecting with the outdoors.

Winter With Us runs from November 2020 to March 2021. It consists of a video featuring parents and practitioners (played 358 times as of 25 Jan), a web page with advice and signposting⁶ (viewed 943 times), social media activity and a leaflet drop to housing estates in the LEAP area.

The LEAP Core team and providers have also developed events and initiatives as part of the campaign. For example, the *Winter With Us* phone line offers parents a phone call from a friendly local parent who can tell them about support and activities available at this time. It is aimed at people who may be digitally excluded or feel more comfortable using the phone than going online, and new parents who may be less familiar with local sources of information. We are promoting the phone line across all our digital channels.

⁵ <https://www.leaplambeth.org.uk/emotionalsupport>

⁶ <https://www.leaplambeth.org.uk/families/connecting/winter-with-us>



Image: photography from Winter With Us campaign (November 2020)

LEAP's *Winter With Us* campaign has led to a new working relationship with Repowering London, a Brixton-based charity delivering energy projects.

LEAP has supported Repowering to secure external funding to provide one-to-one energy advice to mothers in the LEAP wards who are at risk of self-disconnection and self-rationing, particularly where fuel poverty is having severe health impacts. Repowering will also pay ten mothers the London Living Wage to take part in some co-production work. The Repowering team also took part in a webinar to educate LEAP staff and other providers about fuel poverty.

4. Changes to the LEAP portfolio

LEAP has adapted its offer beyond simply switching formats. Often this has involved enhancements or additions to existing services to reach families in different ways or address new or changed needs.

For example, LEAP has devised and published website activities⁷ to support home learning, linked to the Early Years Foundation Stage framework.

In addition, LEAP distributed nearly 400 activity packs to support home and outdoor learning, as well as over 400 toothbrush and toothpaste packs. We got them to the families, living in LEAP areas, who most needed them: including the packs in food parcels from Healthy Living Platform; asking children's centre staff, St. Michael's Fellowship and LEAP Family Engagement Workers to give them out; and offering them to families enrolled in LEAP's Making It REAL intervention.

We have introduced some completely new initiatives, notably a postnatal meal service and Digital Champions scheme. See pages 4 and 8 for details.

⁷ <https://www.leaplambeth.org.uk/families/learning/fun-activities-for-early-years>

**DELICIOUS FREE MEALS FOR
LAMBETH FAMILIES WITH
NEW BABIES**



Image: leaflet for postnatal meal service (June 2020)

Postnatal meal service

The first lockdown taught us that parents with new babies were lacking face-to-face contact with services and missing out on family/social visits (which often involve offering food).

In response, LEAP funded Healthy Living Platform (HLP) to provide a postnatal meal service. HLP deliver free, nutritious, freshly cooked meals for Lambeth families with new babies. HLP keeps in contact with families, whilst they are receiving the meals, to offer additional support and signposting as appropriate. It has delivered nearly 2,000 meals to date.

The National Lottery Community Fund has published a feature about the service online⁸.

Some developments that were not primarily driven by Covid-19 have taken on new significance in the current context.

For example, in late 2020 we started remodelling our domestic violence service run by the Gaia Centre. We aim to strengthen the service's early intervention approach by expanding capacity for outreach and better tailoring it to our client group. This change seems particularly important at a time when the pandemic has escalated domestic abuse, restricted help-seeking opportunities and the visibility of survivors, and affected workforce connectedness.

Another example is the Maternity Vulnerability Assessment Tool (MatVAT), a holistic tool for midwives to measure social vulnerability in pregnant women more consistently. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in changed and in some cases reduced face-to-face services for pregnant women. Identifying women with complex social needs is now even more important to ensure that those most in need are offered support at a vital time of change.

We made the difficult decision to end our Group Pregnancy Care service in the acute phase of the first national lockdown. It was hard to envisage this model of antenatal care, which was entirely based on groups of women being together for their antenatal appointments and for social support, being feasible during a time of required physical distancing.

⁸ <https://www.tnlcommunityfund.org.uk/funding/publications/a-better-start/building-trust-with-mums-and-their-babies-through-healthy-meal-deliveries>

5. Learning

Research

Since March 2020, we have been working to gauge the impact of the evolving pandemic on LEAP's target population and workforce, using three distinct phases of research.

For phase 1, we aimed to capture the immediate and likely intermediate and long-term impact of the pandemic for children, families and inequalities in early childhood development (ECD). We focused on how impacts relate to LEAP's portfolio of services and began by gathering opportunistic insights from LEAP families, practitioners and partners. Next, we produced a secondary research briefing, drawing on the emerging research and learning nationally and internationally. The briefing⁹, published in April 2020, groups the findings based on themes emerging from the initial scoping exercise.

For phase 2, we developed a primary research project, using a mixed methods approach to capture the intermediate impacts of the pandemic in LEAP's local context. In late summer and autumn, we conducted fieldwork with families and practitioners to understand the impact of the pandemic on: families' needs, the reach and provision of services, and LEAP's intermediate and long-term outcomes. A webinar will be held on 2 March to share the findings and a written report will follow.

Phase 3 of the research will be led by an independent Evaluation Partner and will explore the long-term impact of the pandemic for children, families, inequalities in ECD and the LEAP programme overall. We anticipate this research will be ongoing.

Insights from LEAP projects

Finally, LEAP projects unrelated to Covid-19 have generated learning that may benefit local responses to the pandemic. GP Connect was a 6-month project in which 'late for immunisations' was used as a proxy indicator for GPs to proactively identify children potentially at risk of poor outcomes. GPs and health visitors (HVs) held routine meetings to discuss children late for immunisations, resulting in additional HV support. A key learning point was the need to consider GP/HV meetings essential practice and take steps to maximise their usefulness. Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, these meetings have been virtual and anecdotal reports suggest that these may be more efficient and productive than face-to-face meetings.

LEAP routinely supervises public health MSc students. In the midst of the pandemic, one student completed a project about food insecurity in Lambeth which included interviews with Lambeth emergency food providers. The findings have been shared with the Lambeth Public Health team.

⁹ Dunne, C. (2020) *LEAP Research brief: The impact of the Covid-19 crisis on children, families and inequalities in early childhood development (ECD)*. Available at <https://www.leaplambeth.org.uk/about-leap/evaluation>

Workforce development

We have also worked to inform and develop the LEAP and wider Lambeth workforce through our series of Knowledge Makes Change (KMC) seminars. On 10 June 2020, the PAIRS team presented a webinar on 'Seeing the world through babies' eyes in times of crisis and change', drawing upon the theme for Infant Mental Health Awareness Week to bolster practitioners' insight into how babies might experience the coronavirus crisis and other disruptions within and beyond their immediate world. The webinar (which had 164 attendees and 254 views) aimed to increase awareness of infant mental health and related resources and good practice, as well as improving understanding of the offer from PAIRS.

Subsequent webinars addressed race and inequality during Black History Month (78 attendees) as well as fuel and food poverty during LEAP's *Winter With Us* campaign (38 attendees). Recordings of past webinars and details of forthcoming ones are posted online¹⁰.

Reflections and future plans

As London has cycled in and out of lockdowns and between tiers, LEAP has remained committed to resuming face-to-face delivery where safe and feasible, whilst continuing to develop our virtual offer and remote working practices.

Our current aim is to move seamlessly between face-to-face and virtual delivery as required, recognising the irreplaceability of in-person interaction whilst exploring how to harness the benefits of the latter long-term.

Covid-19 will impact on families, the economy, the NHS and local government well beyond the point when widespread vaccination coverage is achieved. Indeed, the effects and aftermath of the pandemic will likely shape our local context for the remainder of the LEAP programme and beyond. At LEAP, we are committed to continuously re-evaluating these long-term effects, and to adapting our work where necessary so that it makes the greatest possible contribution to improving young children's outcomes locally.

For now, the response effort is very much still underway. This report reflects a summary of activities from March 2020 to January 2021 and will be updated in due course. We will continue to gather and consider local and national intelligence and insights to inform decision-making about the programme, and to work alongside parents and partners to give children in Coldharbour, Stockwell, Tulse Hill, and Vassall a better start in life.

¹⁰ <https://www.leaplambeth.org.uk/practitioners/whole-service/knowledge-makes-change>