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How has Covid-19 Impacted on Playwork – One Year on from Returning from Lockdown

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ABSTRACT

When playwork settings re-opened in July 2020 after the first lockdown in March 2020, playwork as a profession demonstrated its adaptable and flexible nature for children to access the provision. This included open access provision becoming closed access and bookable, a reduction in the number of children, resources, and space to play, and increased cleaning. As part of a longitudinal study, now one year how are open access settings (adventure playgrounds and mobile play provision) and closed access settings (breakfast clubs, after-school clubs, and holiday playschemes) operating? An online survey was completed by 42 participants, 31 who ran closed access and 11 who ran open-access settings. Results indicated that all settings were running the same number of days and hours pre-March lockdown, however, fewer children are attending with a smaller number of staff, this being more noticeable within closed access settings. It appears the open access adventure playgrounds are operating as they were pre-March 2020 lockdown, however, the closed access childcare provision, e.g. after-school clubs are still running as they were in July 2020. Although funding has been made available to support aspects such as extra cleaning, playwork settings are concerned with being able to open and continue to operate.

KEYWORDS

Playwork; Covid-19; open access; closed access; play

Introduction

Playwork is the professional practice to describe adults who support children's play and has been defined as:

A highly skilled profession that enriches and enhances provision for children's play.

It takes place where adults support children's play, but it is not driven by prescribed education or care outcomes (SkillsActive, 2010, p. 3)

The practice of playwork can be in an array of contexts and settings that included adventure playgrounds, breakfast clubs, after-school clubs, holiday playschemes, and mobile play projects that go into children and young people's communities. Playwork has developed from the open-access of adventure playgrounds (Newstead, 2017) and the closed

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access of childcare (Cranwell, 2003) and both have been considered as a type of Community of Practice (CoP) (King, 2021a; 2021b; King & Newstead, 2020). Playwork provides an approach to play that facilitates children's play, supports development and well-being and advocates the importance of play (King & Newstead, 2021), and focuses on the process of play (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group (PPSG), 2005). The focus on the process of play and facilitation enables playwork practice to be undertaken in a range of settings and contexts and reflects the adaptable and versatile nature of the profession (King, 2021d). This adaptability and versatility are also reflected in the need for playwork to access funding where playwork settings have to "change" their practice to meet the funding requirements. Funding has been recognised as a barrier to playwork practice (King, 2015; King & Waibel, 2016), and this has been heightened since the austerity measures were brought into the UK in 2008 (Voce, 2015).

In March 2020, the United Kingdom went into the first national lockdown on the 23rd of March (Institute for Government (IfG), 2021) in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This resulted in most child-related settings to close except where key working professionals (mostly the "blue light" professions of the police, ambulance, and fire and those working in healthcare and essential shops) had a setting for their children to be cared for whilst they worked. At the start of the March 2020 lockdown, a question was posed on an online playwork discussion forum "Should playworkers be considered as key workers?". This question was the start of a longitudinal study on how playwork has responded and coped during the current Covid-19 pandemic in the UK at the start of the March 2020 lockdown (King, 2021c, 2021d) and when playwork settings re-opened in July 2020 (King, 2021a; 2021b). When adventure playgrounds and out-of-school provision re-opened there was a reduction in the number of children allowed to attend at any one time, a reduction in resources available and space to play. Policies and procedures, including risk assessments had to be revised and cleaning was continuous. This study considers how playwork settings have continued to run one year after the July 2020 re-opening. Playwork provision, whether an adventure playground or an out-of-school club are for many children safe and stimulating places to play, however changes had to be made for them to re-open and run in July 2020. With the lockdown restrictions gradually being reduced, for example social distancing in outdoor space being lifted, this study provided an opportunity to compare how play provision was running compared to pre-March 2020 lockdown, before the first of the longitudinal study was undertaken.

Adventure playgrounds are situated in the heart of a community and provide a space for children and young people to play and are free to use. The open access policy enables children to enter and leave the setting when they choose to, although numbers are monitored, and the provision is free of charge to use. Before the March 2020 lockdown, a "typical" day at an adventure playground as described by adventure playground playworkers (King, 2021b) is summarised in Table 1:

When we compare with the more closed access childcare, for example, an after-school club setting children are booked in to attend and there is a charge for parents and carers to use the setting, Table 2 shows a "typical" day as described by playworkers/childcare workers in these settings (King, 2021a):

Many after-school club settings may also run a breakfast club (8am to 9am before the school day) referred to as "wraparound care" which is defined as:

Table 1. A ‘Typical’ Adventure Playground pre-March 2020 lockdown (Source King, 2021b).

Access	Opening Times	Age Range	Attendance Range	Staff Range	Addition to Play
Open	Term-Time Monday to Friday 3.30pm to 7pm Saturday 10am to 5pm Holiday Monday to Friday 10am to 5pm Saturday 10am to 5pm	4–17 years	Between 25–80 Up to 200 a day (not all at the same time)	3–6 core staff (plus 5–10 seasonal staff)	Provide food Youth Club Run bespoke sessions

Before school childcare (for example, breakfast clubs), after school childcare (for example, regular provision that runs until 6pm or later) (Department of Education (DoE), 2016, p.3)

In addition to offering a breakfast club and after-school club setting, holiday playschemes, or holiday childcare provision may be offered where “holiday childcare” we mean childcare that is available through schools during the school holidays” (DoE, 2016). A holiday playscheme may run in school holidays often from 8 am to 6 pm and run like a “typical after-school club” but for a longer period.

The 2011 UK Census recorded 13,380 childcare settings within the UK (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2021). This would include all forms of childcare, including daycare and nurseries, in addition to breakfast clubs, after-school clubs, and holiday playschemes. The figure may also include adventure playgrounds. It is difficult to narrow down the specific numbers for these three settings. One measure on the number of settings relates to the need for a setting to be registered and inspected. For example, in England registration is compulsory on the Childcare Register if any setting has children attending who are 5 and up to the age of 8 years and runs for more than 2 h a day (Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), 2017) or is open for more than 14 days a year. However, if the setting is part of the school, run by somebody who is employed by the school or has at least “one child attending the early years or childcare provision is a pupil of the school (including Reception)” (Ofsted, 2017, p. 3), then compulsory registration is not required. Settings which run for less than 2 h a day or less than 14 days or has children aged 8 years or over can register on the voluntary register.

In Wales, all settings are registered with the Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) if they have children under the age of 12 years and run for more than 2 h a day or more than

Table 2. A ‘Typical’ Adventure Playground July 2020 (Source King, 2021b).

Access	Opening Times	Age Range	Attendance Range
Closed and Bookable	Term-Time Monday to Friday 3.30pm to 7pm Saturday 10am to 5pm Holiday Monday to Friday 10am to 5pm Saturday 10am to 5pm	4–17 years	In ‘Bubbles’ of 15–20 and designated time slots allocated

5 days a year (Welsh Government (WG), 2016). The registration of childcare provision in Northern Ireland is under the Health and Social Services Board (HSSB) for settings that have children under the age of 12 years that run for over 2 h a day (Department Health, Social Services & Public Safety (DHSSPS), 2012). In Scotland, registration of out-of-school provision is with the Care Inspectorate (Scottish Government (SG), 2017) within the Scottish Social Services Council. All settings then run for more than 2 h a day (legislation.gov, 2021) and on at least 6 days per year, and care for children aged 15 years or under have to register. However, exceptions are made if supervised activity clubs “operate during term time often for less than two hours at the beginning or end of the school day” (SG, 2019, p. 14) or a holiday club which although they operate for more than 2 h a day “their primary function is to provide activities for children” (p. 14).

Although it is difficult to provide exact numbers of adventure playgrounds and out-of-school settings across the UK as some are registered and others not, they provided an important place for children and young people to mix and play pre-March 2020 lockdown. When the first lockdown was in place, the impact on playwork was immediate where settings did not remain open to support key working families (and later on vulnerable children). Many settings closed and the staff was furloughed, some provisions remained open but with no face-to-face delivery and settings had to be adaptive and flexible to support children, young people, and their families within the community (King, 2021d). This involved adventure playgrounds acting as food banks and undertaking playwork outreach work by providing play resources to families (King, 2021d) or working with primary schools supporting teachers running hubs (King, 2021e). For most settings, these remained closed until July 2020 when the first lockdown in the UK was eased. During this period of the first lockdown, the original question that started this longitudinal study of “Should playworkers be considered as key workers?” prompted the response that playwork and the Covid-19 situation by supporting health and well-being and providing care to an individual through Supporting Government Key Workers, having a distinct playwork approach to play and developing relationships (King, 2021d). Although playwork was not deemed a key working role within the UK Government guidelines (GOV.UK, 2022), the practitioners and managers responsible for playwork practice across the different settings felt they had an important role to play both during the lockdown and when re-opening again in July 2020.

When settings were able to re-open in July 2020, and not all were able to, guidelines were put in place about the use of indoor and outdoor space, numbers attending and resources that can be used (King, 2021a, 2021b). For adventure playgrounds, there was an initial move from being open access to becoming closed access with parents and carers having to pre-book their children to use these settings and numbers limited in groups or “bubbles” of 15–20 children (King, 2021b). Each bookable session was for 2 h, and resources were limited due to increasing hygiene requirements of cleaning and only the outdoor space was used. Before opening, a lot of preparation had to be put in place including increased cleaning and re-organisation of the site which resulted in a reduction of numbers, access, and delivery of playwork.

However, a positive aspect of re-opening enabled the targeting of new funding streams and a new target audience. When adventure playgrounds re-opened in July 2020, Table 3 shows how adventure playground workers described the changes in relation to moving

Table 3. A ‘Typical’ After-School Club pre-March 2020 lockdown (Source King, 2021a).

Access	Opening Times	Age Range	Number	Snack	Space	Activities
Closed and children collected or made their own way depending on their age	After-School from 3pm to 6pm	4–11 years	Average 30–40	Children self-select their snack	Supervised indoor and outdoor space children free to choose what they wanted to go	Range of resources and equipment children could choose to do

from an open access setting to a closed access setting where children had to be booked in for allocated time-slots (King, 2021a):

For the after-school club setting, Table 4 shows the changes described by playworkers/ childcare workers that was undertaken for settings to run in July 2020 (King, 2021a):

To re-open safely and maintain service, there was an increase in hygiene and the revision of policies where children were in designated “bubbles” that were supervised by designated staff. There was a change in the play space and staff noticed changes in some of the children’s play behaviour where it was more challenging and more 1:1 with interaction with staff (King, 2021c).

Since the re-opening of settings in July 2020, the UK went into further lockdowns. In England on the 5th of November 2020 and the 6th of January 2021 (IoG, 2021). In Wales, a second lockdown was introduced on the 23rd of October 2020 and a third on the 19th of December 2021, Scotland went into a second lockdown on the 5th of January 2021 (WP, 2021), and in Northern Ireland, lockdowns were introduced on 27th of November 2020 and 26th December 2020 (Welsh Parliament (WP), 2021). When the final lockdowns were eventually lifted in 2021, playwork settings were able to re-open and gradually restrictions were reduced about social distancing and how many people could meet in a group. The need for children to play and socialise was reflected in the funding that was made available to Local Authorities in parts of the UK, for example, the £5 million “Summer of Fun” in Wales (Welsh Government, 2021a) and the £15 million “Get into Summer” in Scotland (Scottish Government (SG), 2021).

By July 2021, a year after the first lockdown restrictions were lifted how have playwork settings (adventure playgrounds, breakfast clubs, after-school clubs, holiday playschemes, and mobile play provision) been able to deliver their service? This is the focus of this study through a three-month online survey. Playwork settings demonstrated the versatile and adaptable nature of the profession in respect of the changes in policy and practice between pre-lockdown in March 2020 and re-opening post-lockdown in July 2020. With restrictions gradually being reduced in 2021, it is important to follow-up on how playwork settings are currently operating and continue to provide play provision for children and young people during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Table 4. A ‘Typical’ After-School Club July 2020 (Source King, 2021a).

Access	Opening Times	Age Range	Number	Snack	Space	Activities
All children collected	After-School from 3pm to 6pm	4–11 years	‘Bubbles’ of 15 children	Children bring snack or staff make it	Children remain in their ‘Bubbles’ and play either inside or outside	Resources and equipment reduced and rotated between ‘Bubbles’

Method

An online survey was constructed using the Qualtrics® platform with ethical approval granted from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee, Swansea University, and based on the results from two previous studies undertaken with adventure playgrounds (King, 2021b) and after-school clubs (King, 2021c). The survey contained both closed and open questions. The closed questions asked participants to select:

- Which part of the UK their setting(s) is based
- The type of setting they run from adventure playground, breakfast club, after-school club, holiday playscheme and mobile play provision. It was possible the organisation the participant worked for offered one to all of these types of settings, so participants were asked to tick any that were relevant
- For each setting selected, participants were asked to state which days of the week they ran pre-March 2020 lockdown
- For each setting selected, participants were asked which days they ran from July 2021
- For each setting, participants were asked to compare the number of days open, number of children attending and number of staff from March 2020 lockdown to July 2021 with three options: stayed the same, less than or more than

The open questions were based on the results from two previous studies (King, 2021b; 2021c) in relation to access and movement; resources and equipment, the target audience, the play behaviour of the children, policies, and procedures in place, and funding available. Participants were also asked to consider overall how does the setting run in July 2021 compared to pre-March 2020 lockdown.

- From July 2021, how do children and/or young people access your setting and how freely can they move in the setting?
- From July 2021, how are the resources and equipment allocated to the children and/or young people?
- From July 2021, has the target audience your setting provides for changed since pre-March 2020 lockdown?
- From July 2021, how would you describe the play behaviour of the children and young people compared to when you first re-opened in July 2020?
- What Covid-19-related paperwork, cleaning and operational procedures are you still having to do before each session?
- What income and/or funding have you managed to access to keep running?
- Overall, how does the running of your setting compare to how it ran before the first lockdown in March 2020?
- Is there anything else you would like to say or add?

The survey was piloted in September 2021 with five experienced playworkers representing the different settings. Feedback was positive with only the addition of the funding question suggested. The survey was active from September 2021 to December 2021 where participants could click on an anonymous link. The survey was distributed

through both local and national playwork and childcare networks across the UK as well as social media platforms of Twitter® and Facebook®.

Participants

In total 42 responses provided data from around the United Kingdom. There were 20 responses from England, 13 from Wales, 6 from Scotland 1 from Northern Ireland, and 2 ‘others (but connected to the UK). From the 42 responses, a combined total of 91 settings were recorded and Figure 1 provides a breakdown of types of playwork settings:

Most responses ran more than one type of setting where 19 offered wraparound care (breakfast club and after-school club with some also running a holiday playscheme), 12 ran an after-school or holiday playscheme or both, 10 ran an adventure playground (some with holiday playscheme provision) and 1 ran mobile play provision. The demarcation between the wraparound care and after-school club/holiday playscheme and the adventure playground/mobile play provision where the former is closed access and more childcare focused whilst the latter is open access and although there is always a duty of care, there is no childcare responsibility. This provides two population groups to compare concerning closed access childcare and open access and reflect the wide variation where playwork settings operate.

Analysis

The open questions were analysed using the concept of a Framework Analysis (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Framework Analysis allows the use of pre-determined headings and for the analysis of the data to be undertaken within them. The headings were constructed from a prior study when playwork settings (adventure playgrounds, after-school clubs etc.) reopened in July 2020 from the March 2020 lockdown The pre-determined headings of access and movement: resources and equipment, the target audience, the play behaviour of the children, policies, and procedures in place, and funding available. The use of Framework Analysis gives each “participant is allocated a row and each sub-theme (in this

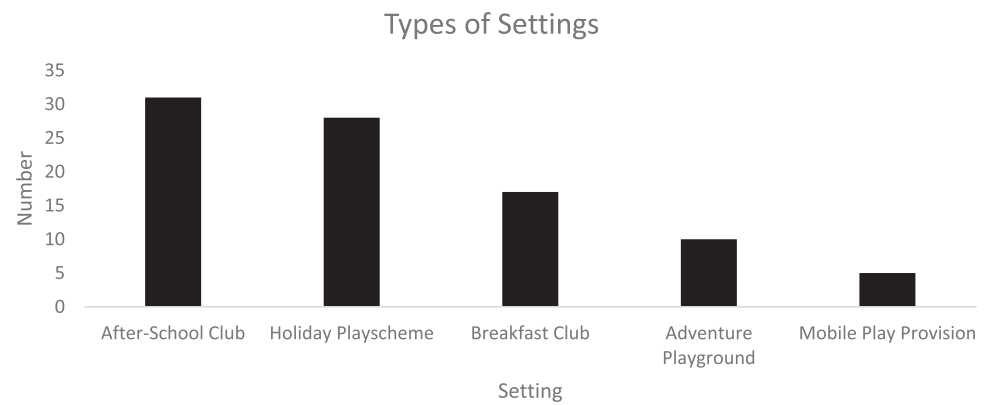


Figure 1. Types of Playwork Settings.

case a heading) a column” (Kiernan & Hill, 2018, p. 251). Framework Analysis enabled continuation of the longitudinal study where pre-determined themes constructed from previous studies undertaken provides continuity from one study to another.

Two Framework Analysis tables were produced using the same headings. One Framework Analysis table was for the closed access settings (breakfast clubs, after-school clubs, and holiday playschemes) and one for the open access (adventure playgrounds and mobile play provision). Once the data from each participant was entered into the relevant Framework Analysis table, a Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) approach was used to construct “themes” within each heading of the Framework Analysis Table. This enabled a like-for-like comparison to be undertaken between the different types of settings both before the March 2020 lockdown and the July 2020 re-opening.

Results

When combining the days of the week for all 91 settings ran pre-lockdown and in July 2021, Figures 2 and 3 show that by July 2021, one year after the return from the first Lockdown in July 2020, most settings were running the same number of days:

Figure 4 shows how the 91 settings hours of running, number of children attending, and staff employed in July 2021 compared to pre-lockdown 2020.

When combining the 91 settings, Figure 4 indicates that most settings were running the same number of hours, however, more settings had fewer children attending, and staff employed. When comparing each setting, the number of children attending for the mobile play provision decreased less compared to the other settings.

Regarding staff, both the adventure playground and mobile play provision had lost fewer staff members compared to the breakfast clubs, after-school clubs, and holiday playschemes.

For these settings, the staff is being employed compared to pre-lockdown 2020. The findings from this study provide an overall picture where the number of days and

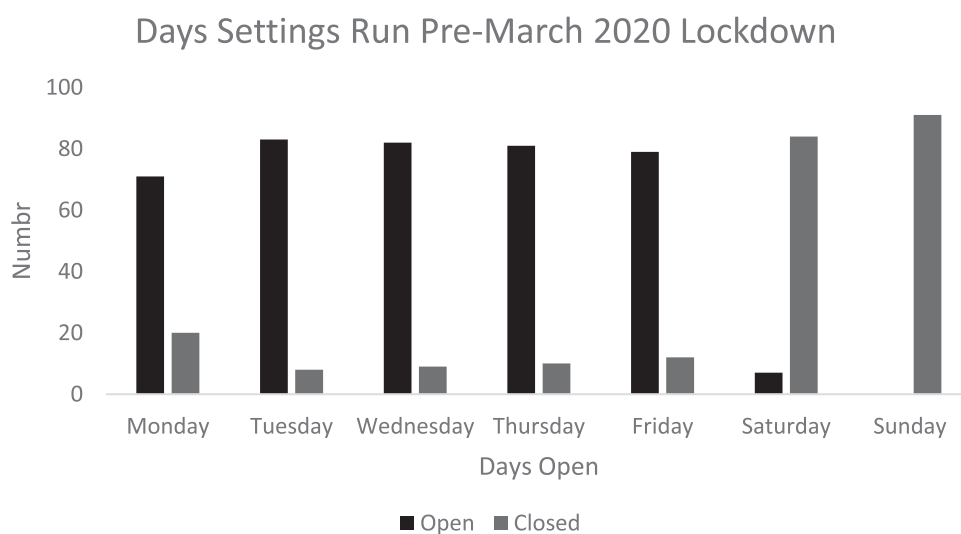


Figure 2. Days Settings Ran Pre-March 2020 Lockdown.

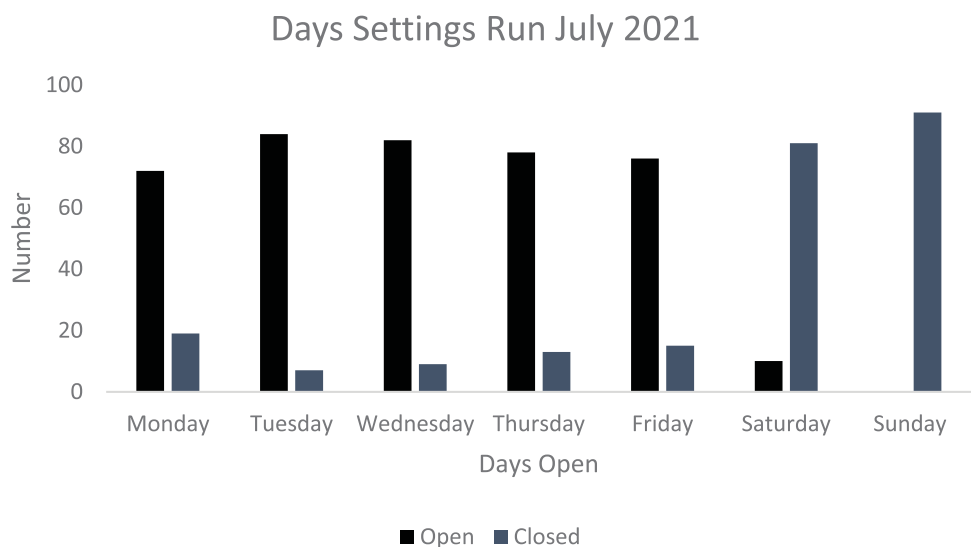


Figure 3. Days Settings Run July 2021.

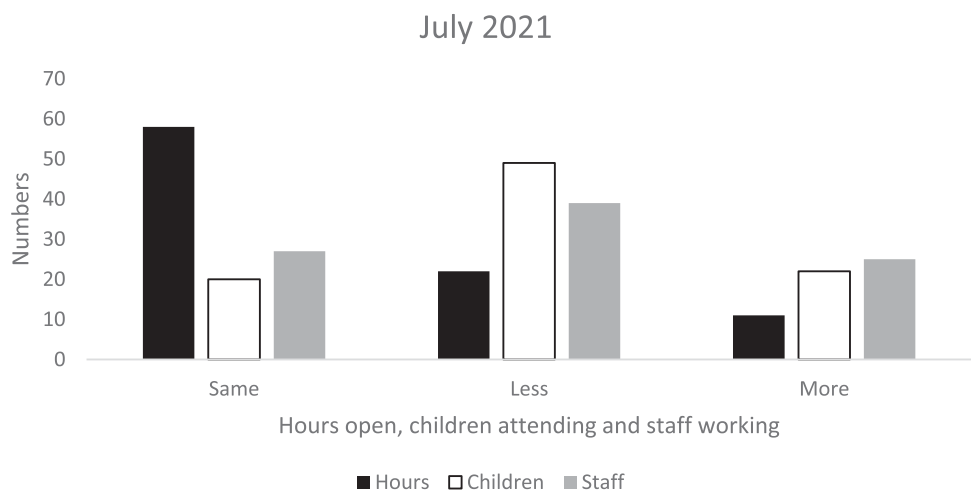


Figure 4. Comparison of Hours Open, Number of Children Attending and Staff Employed Between Pre-March 2020 Lockdown and July 2021.

hours settings run is close to the pre-March 2020 lockdown, however, the number of children attending is less, and for the closed access provision, there is a decrease in staff being employed.

The Framework Analysis using the headings of access, movement, resources, and equipment; target audience, play behaviour, Covid-19 operational procedures, and funding was undertaken separately from the closed access (Wraparound care, after-school club/holiday playscheme) and open access adventure playground/holiday playscheme and mobile play provision and enabled a comparison to both how settings ran pre-covid in March 2020 and post-lockdown in July 2020.

Closed access

The result for the closed access is shown in [Table 5](#). This included 31 responses that ran a combination of breakfast clubs, after-school clubs and holiday playschemes.

Access

Depending on the age of the child, pre-covid it was not uncommon for children at Key Stage 2 (7 years and above) to make their way to their school-based after-school club.

For a breakfast club, and the holiday playscheme running during the school holidays, children would be dropped off by their parents and carers, usually inside the building or room where the setting runs from. What was clear a year after re-opening, access to the setting is much more controlled where children are collected, and parents and carers have to remain outside, often having to wear a mask:

They are collected from their class rather than making their own way and once in the club their movement indoors is restricted. (Response 39, England)

We still have parents drop off and pick up at the gate and they no longer come on the premises with their child (Response 35, England)

Movement

Once the children had arrived at the setting, there was a dichotomy with the amount of movement children had. For some settings, there was a continuation of children having to be in “bubbles” or their year groups as per the return from lockdown in July 2020:

The provision has improved but we have had to stick to bubbles at times even though Welsh government is allowing things to return to normal (Response 12, Wales)

For some children, the keeping of “bubbles” or in year groups means access around the setting is restricted, although this restriction was often more about indoor space rather than outdoor space:

We work in bubbles now(groups) so that if there is a case we can contain the virus. Outside the children can move freely and mix outside their bubbles (Response 5, Scotland)

For other settings, all “bubbles” and year group clusters had now been removed and children had access to indoor and outdoor space as before:

They move around the club freely now and come in through one of the doors (Response 34, England)

Many breakfast clubs and after-school clubs are held within primary schools. The settings that are run as part of the school would have to adhere to school policies, and this may explain why “bubbles” and year groups are still in place in some provision. This has put an extra strain on settings, summed up by the following comment.

Harder, as you are having to try and keep the school, organization and parents happy at the cost of the children (Response 12, Wales)

No longer ‘bubble’ the children which we’ve found needed for their mental health (Response 33, England)

Table 5. Closed access of Wraparound Care (Breakfast Club, After-School Club and Holiday Playschemes) or After-School and Holiday Playschemes Only.

Access	Movement	Resources and Equipment	Target Audience	Play Behaviour	Policies and Procedures	Overall	Funding
Children collected if in school (after-school club) or dropped off outside by parents (breakfast club or holiday playscheme)	Free to move within setting as no more bubbles/groups Still in bubbles or age groups	Equipment in bubbles or key stage groups and rotated Freely accessed but rotated and cleaned regularly	Same but any new target audience related to funding source	Increased confidence and happier (particularly when restrictions to space and friends removed) Stayed more in their friendship groups More solitary play and less interaction with other children or adults Tried new skills but less able to share	Covid-19 Risk Assessment adhere to government guidelines (for example staff taking lateral flow tests, mask wearing) Regular Cleaning of equipment, hands and touchpoints Change in way snacks are served	Extra pressure on cleaning More paperwork Recruiting and covering staff absences More online communication with parents and with staff	Various Coronavirus Grant Funding through Local Authority Non-coronavirus-related funding through Local Authority Using Reserves Bank Loan None (rely on fee paying)

Resources and equipment

The dichotomy of the settings still operating in “bubbles” and year groups or not had an impact on the resources and equipment available. Where children were in “bubbles” or year groups with limited movement, resources were restricted and rotated between groups. For the children with more movement within the setting, resources were more readily available (often when requested), although some rotation was needed, particularly where resources could not be replaced:

Resources as freely available but much less than pre covid as we haven't had the funds to replace used items or broken items to the same level that we did pre covid (Response 40, England)

What was universal from all the settings (breakfast club, after-school club and holiday playscheme) was the increase in cleaning of both indoor and outdoor resources and equipment:

Rotation of equipment and regular cleaning emphasised between sessions including outdoor equipment (Response 3, 'other' connected to UK)

Target audience

The target audience for childcare provision is aimed at parents and carers who are working or studying, and the majority of the settings were still providing for the families within the school community. For several responses in England who run holiday playscheme settings, the target audience changed with offering free places for disadvantaged children within the Healthy Activities and Food Programme (HAF) (GOV.UK, 2022) administered through the settings local authority.

Before I had parents who paid for the service. Now I only operate holiday club and the parents who use the service are the ones who qualify for the Holiday Activities Food Programme (HAF), so it is Free (Response 42, England)

The offering of free sessions has enabled some settings to run and for others an increase in children attending. For some settings, the target audience decreased due to schools limiting children attending who do not attend the school to fewer parents using the provision as they work from home.

Play behaviour

When asked about the play behaviour of the children who attend one year after the return from the first lockdown in March 2020, there was a noticeable increase in confidence and children were keen to try new skills. However, children tended to either play more solitary or in their friendship groups and sharing of resources could become an issue. This variation is reflected in the following comments:

More expectant and impatient, and less able to share (Response 24, England)

Much better-they all love being able to play together (Response 34, England)

Policies and procedures

All settings are still having to run in line with Government guidelines, and these would be based on being on school premises and/or be registered with Ofsted. The risk assessment in relation to Covid-19 is still in place, and the track and trace system and reporting of any covid cases have resulted in an increase in paperwork. The increased cleaning includes not only the resources and equipment but also touch points and the preparation and serving of snacks. This is reflected in the following comments:

Covid-19 specific risk assessment that is changed ongoing as guidance changes. Covid-19 specific cleaning arrangements including regular cleaning of touchpoints (Response 4, Scotland)

If we have had covid cases then paperwork to the local authority and Ofsted needs to be completed (Response 38, England)

The snacks have been a big change as before the children used to do a self-service snack which they helped to prepare which is now plated up for them by staff (Response 33, England)

Funding

Unless the breakfast club, after-school club, or holiday playscheme is run by the school or funded, most settings rely on the fee-paying parents and carers as they are run more like a business. This has implications on what funding during the Covid-19 pandemic settings could apply for. The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (UK) (Pope and Shearer, 2021) or Furlough Scheme was accessed that applied across the UK. In addition, Covid-related financial support was also accessed in England with the Coronavirus grant funding: local authority payments to small and medium businesses (GOV.UK, 2021), the Childcare Transitional Fund (GOV.SCOT, 2021) in Scotland, and the Welsh Government Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme (C-CAS) (Welsh Government, 2021a) in Wales.

Other funding sources that were accessed included in England the Healthy Activities and Food Programme (HAF) (GOV.UK, 2021a) and in Wales the Welsh Government's School Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP) (GOV.Wales, 2021b). Where settings were unable to access funding through any Government sources, there was a reliance on using their own bank reserves, loans, or relying purely on fee-paying parents and carers. There is funding concern around childcare settings:

The childcare sector will lose good childcare providers like my company once there is no more funding (Response 42, England)

When asked for an overall impression on how settings were running in July 2021 compared to the pre-lockdown in March 2020, the settings of breakfast clubs, after-school clubs, and holiday playschemes expressed continual extra pressure on cleaning, the increase in paperwork, and the difficulty of recruiting staff and covering absences. There was also an increase in online communication with parents and with staff.

The following comment from one response summed up the continued impact of Covid-19 on closed access settings:

We have found covid to be a real struggle at times and it definitely had a negative impact. We lost a lot of children and have only started to get our numbers back but still not pre covid

level. We also had staff who left the sector which has become an issue for a few settings (Response 19, Northern Ireland)

Another factor that arose across the areas of play behaviour and policies and procedures from the responses was the impact on both children and staff's well-being having to be considered. As one respondent stated:

I feel that the children being unable to play together for so long has had such a negative effect on their mental health that it will take some time for this to be addressed properly. There seems so little thought given to this that unless there's more help available and training for childcare staff in how to help children we're going to see a lot of problem behaviours with children really struggling to manage (Response 33, England)

This situation with breakfast clubs, after-school clubs, and holiday playschemes reflects a dichotomy where some are running as near to pre-covid where children are free to move and choose the resources and equipment they want to play with (although the resources have reduced) to children still being in "bubbles" or year groups and resources rotated. Although snacks have been re-introduced, self-service and choice have not returned, and this is due to the continued increase in cleaning and hygiene measures that are still in place. There is a continued Covid-19 risk assessment that includes test and trace, parents not accessing indoor space to drop-off or collect children, and mask-wearing.

Open Access

Table 6 shows the results for the open access. This included 11 responses that ran a combination of adventure playgrounds and mobile play provision.

Access and Movement

When adventure playgrounds opened in July 2020 they moved from an open access drop-in to a closed access bookable setting. One year on, adventure playgrounds had returned to the open access, although children may still be registered upon entry to the setting, they are not booked into time-slots and have more freedom to move around:

Children and young people are free to come and go as they please, both within the site and in and out of it (Response 14, Wales)

Resources and equipment

The removal of all "bubbles" and groups has resulted in children and young people now having access to more resources and equipment, although some are only available upon request:

We have gone back to nearly normal setting. Items and springboard ideas are left out and collected up at the end of the day. Items then go on a quarantine table on rotation. Things in storage children can ask for and freely use once handed back in cleaned and placed on the table (Response 37, England)

Table 6. Open access of Adventure Playgrounds and Mobile Play Provision.

Access	Movement	Resources and Equipment	Target Audience	Play Behaviour	Policies and Procedures	Overall	Funding
Open Access but may need to register or sign in	Free to move around	Access to all equipment and resources and some resources brought out upon request	Same but an increase in closed sessions for specific individuals or groups	More confident with increase in social play and locomotor play	Adhering to government guidance (lateral flow and mask wearing in indoor space) Increase in clearing of equipment and hand washing	Same as before Increase outdoor play	Existing Funding only Additional funding from existing funders Various Coronavirus Grant Funding through Local Authority Coronavirus Support Fund through BIG Lottery or Children in Need Non-coronavirus related funding through Local Authority Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (Furlough) Local Funding Sources through charitable trusts and foundations

Target audience

Adventure playgrounds are situated often in urban areas and support local communities. The target audience has remained the same, however the adventure playground setting has been used more by specific groups at allocated times and provides a funding source:

We are having a 200% increase in the number of referrals we are receiving for one to one support for therapeutic playwork interventions (Response 2, 'other' close to the UK)

Play behaviour

Adventure playgrounds, and mobile play provision in children and young people's communities provide space for children to engage in an environment with a wide age range and engage in a lot of physical play. The removal of "bubbles" and more freedom has enabled these two aspects of social play and physical play to return:

They have nearly returned to normal displaying comfort and relationships with each other. The nervous behaviour, questioning and worry does not appear to be displayed and they play appropriate to their age range (Response 37, England)

Policies and procedures

Although adventure playgrounds have indoor space, there is more scope for outdoor play.

Mobile play provision only offers outdoor play as they run in the parks and open spaces in children and young people's communities. There was still more use of the outdoor space and regular cleaning, however, there was no increase in policies or paperwork:

Pretty much back to normal now. Still very thorough cleaning. Not using building for activities, open windows etc. Paperwork includes contact details in case of covid notification but did it before anyway (Response 29, England)

Funding

Adventure playgrounds and mobile play provisions are free of charge for children and young people to attend and rely on accessing funding. Although these settings also used the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (or Furlough) (UK) (HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC), 2020), existing funders provided the funds for settings to run. In addition, as these settings are community-based and non-profit, Covid-related funding was available for example in England through the UK Government/BIG Lottery Coronavirus Community Support Fund (BIG Lottery, 2021) and the Children in Need COVID-19 Next Steps Programme (Children in Need (CIN), 2021). There were also local-funding initiatives available for example the Heart of England Coronavirus Resilience Fund (Heart of England (HoE), 2021). Other funding sources focusing on play were available.

In Wales, there was funding available through the "Summer of Fun" (gov.wales, 2021a) provided by the Welsh Government that provided funds to run play sessions.

It has been through a range of sources that has enabled these open access settings to run across the UK:

Various small grants from charitable trusts and foundations as well as some local council funding (Response 30, Scotland)

Overall, the adventure playground and mobile play provision settings are now very much running as they did pre-lockdown, but with more emphasis on outdoor play. However, to maintain staff numbers and to keep open, one respondent summed it up by stating:

It's been bloody hard! (Respondent 17, England)

This comment resonates on two levels, for the children and young people who use the settings and the staff who run them. This again considers the well-being aspect of children needing to play and the strain on staff to facilitate and support this through post-lockdown.

The use of Framework Analysis in qualitative research has been which is a systematic process that builds on the evidence and develops links and relationships within the dataset and provides transparency (Kiernan & Hill, 2018), Smith and Firth (2011). The use of pre-existing themes from prior research, supported with comments from the data has enabled a like-for-like comparison of how open access (adventure playgrounds and mobile play provision) and closed access (wraparound care, breakfast clubs, after-school clubs, and holiday playschemes) to construct a longitudinal study from March 2020 to July 2021. This creates an “audit trail”, an important aspect in addressing trustworthiness in qualitative research (Shenton, 2004).

Discussion

As part of a longitudinal study on how Covid-19 has impacted on playwork practice, this follow-up study was undertaken to explore how playwork provision have operated one year on from setting opening in July 2020. Playwork settings, both open access and closed access, provide a space for children to play and socialise within their local communities. When the March 2020 lockdown was introduced in the UK, many playwork settings including the open access adventure playgrounds and the closed access after-school clubs were forced to close. Whilst many playwork settings remained closed and furloughed staff, others provided some form of provision if supporting the local school “hubs”, providing outreach play resources or supplying food to the community as a food bank demonstrating the versatile and adaptable nature of playwork (King, 2021a).

When adventure playgrounds (King, 2021b) and out-of-school settings (King, 2021c) re-opened in July 2020, this versatility and adaptability were once again demonstrated with changes in policy, how the play space was set up, and how playwork practice was undertaken. The result for all types of playwork settings was them all becoming a closed access bookable provision catering for a reduction in the number of children attending, space provided, and resources available. However, for some settings, most notably the adventure playgrounds, this did provide opportunities to access new funding streams. This study was a follow-up study undertaken one year after the re-opening of settings after the first lockdown in March 2020 and indicates further how playwork maintains to be adaptable and flexible to survive (King, 2021d).

When adventure playgrounds re-opened in July 2020 they moved from an open-access provision with children coming and going to a closed access bookable setting with children in “bubbles” of 15--20. One year later, this study has shown how adventure playgrounds have returned to being open access and mobile play provision in children’s communities has returned. The running of adventure playgrounds has returned as set out by the twelve essential elements that define them (Play England, PE, 2008). The picture is different for the closed access childcare settings such as breakfast clubs, after-school clubs, and holiday playschemes. With many of these settings run in schools, and for some by schools, there is a dichotomy on how they are currently run. For some, there has been a return to children having the freedom to move and integrate, whilst for others there is the maintaining of having “bubbles” or year groups so restricting movement and being able to socialise with peers. It appears that whilst the open access adventure playgrounds and mobile play provision have returned to near how they were operating pre-March 2020 lockdown, this is not the case for the closed access out-of-school provision, especially those that operate within primary schools.

Although the number of days settings operate have returned to pre-covid, with an increase in hours, the number of children attending, and staff employed are still lower than March 2020. For the closed access out-of-school settings, reduced numbers will result in less revenue as they rely on fee-paying parents and carers for their children to attend. The open-access settings are free for children to attend and rely on different sources for funding. Funding has always been an issue for adventure playgrounds and mobile play provision to maintain a free service and these settings have utilised Covid-19 funding streams in the last year such as the £199m UK Government/BIG Lottery Coronavirus Community Support Fund (CCSF) (BIG Lottery, 2021) and the Children in Need COVID-19 Next Steps Programme (CIN, 2021) available for not-for-profit organisations such as adventure playgrounds. In addition, Government funding has been made available such as the “Summer of Fun” by the Welsh Government (WG, 2021b) that provided £5m to support children to participate in leisure, recreational, sporting, and cultural activities and was utilised by both open access and closed access settings in Wales. Covid-related funding streams have enabled adventure playgrounds and mobile play settings to run as near to pre-March 2020 as possible.

The closed access settings rely mostly on fee playing parents, and with numbers decreasing, like the number of children is limited and more parents and carers working from home, this has had a big impact (Blanden et al., 2020). Funding in England through the Coronavirus grant funding: local authority payments to small and medium businesses (Gov.uk, 2022) have helped to cover increased cleaning costs. A similar funding stream of £11.2m was provided in Scotland through the Childcare Transitional Fund (gov.scot, 2021) to combat increased cleaning or purchase additional equipment. The closed access children settings also demonstrated how playwork is adaptable and flexible where holiday playschemes were able to offer free places through the English Governments Healthy Activities and Food Programme (HAF) (Gov.uk, 2022), however, for settings only offering wraparound care (breakfast club and after-school club), there was a reliance on using existing reserves or even having to take out bank loans to keep operating. The financial future for some breakfast clubs, after-school clubs, and holiday playschemes are uncertain, as outlined in the report published by the institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) in England:

For providers with income from parent fees, support through the furlough scheme and self-employment grants was a significant help but provided far from full protection (Blandon et al., p. 11).

For all the settings, the number of days they operate has returned to the pre-March levels, however, the number of children attending, and staff employed has decreased, particularly so for the closed access childcare sector. For all the settings, the number of days they operate has returned to the pre-March levels, however, the number of children attending, and staff employed has decreased, particularly so for the closed access childcare sector. This is a particular worry. Recruitment in the playwork and childcare sector has always been difficult concerning the low pay and the hours settings operate. In addition, where settings rely on fee-paying parents and carers when numbers of children reduce, so this has a major financial implication. This was raised by many respondents who fear closure. Whilst adventure playgrounds and mobile play provision reported less of a decrease in numbers of children and staff, their funding provides free access to the setting, so not relying on fee-paying parents. The nature of open access funding has always had to show adaptability and flexibility (King, 2021a) to identifying funding, and for the short-term, this is something the closed access children settings may have to continue to do, for example, the Health Activities and Food Programme (HAF).

This study asked about children's play behaviour, and it appears being able to return to their play-based setting, one year on children are enjoying being back with their peers particularly where they have more freedom of movement, choice of resources and equipment, and being able to choose who they play and socialise with. The removal of "bubbles" or year groups enabled a return to more "freely chosen play" as depicted in the Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005). In addition, the return to freely chosen play was considered by some of the respondents to be important for children's health and well-being. If settings do close this could have an impact on "safe" spaces where children can play. Where settings remain open, the continued cleaning regimes that still have to implement to resources, equipment, and touchpoints can still reduce children's freely chosen play. Play and well-being have been considered about five aspects of Connect, Be active, Take notice, Keep learning and Give (Tonkin & Whitaker, 2021). Playwork settings provide the ideal play space for children and young people to engage in these five aspects when they play. This was illustrated where Well-being Playworkers have supported children and their play before Covid-19 occurred, during the March 2020 lockdown and continue to do so (King, 2021e) where the role of play is considered important in children's well-being (The Children's Society, 2020).

There are still additional cleaning of resources and the need for Covid-19 risk assessments to be in place and updated, for example, to keep in line with the Government's Test and Trace (Biggs et al., 2020). However, it was the closed access childcare settings that reported an increase in paperwork compared to the open access settings, and this again will relate to those that run in, or are run by schools and are registered with the appropriate body of inspection within their UK country. This additional cleaning, paperwork, and in some cases recruiting and replacing staff has provided extra pressure on closed access settings to operate. This is an important aspect to raise as it relates to staff health and well-being where some respondents consider an area of concern.

This study provides a continuation of how Covid-19 still an impact on Playwork from previous studies undertaken in 2020 (King, 2021a; 2021b; 2021c; 2021d, 2021e).

This provides a timeline from March 2020 (first lockdown) to July 2021 and shows how playwork settings, both open access and closed access have been, and need to remain to be both adaptable and flexible (King, 2021d). This is shown in the timeline below:

March 2020: Most playwork open and closed access settings close. Playwork supports the Government Key Workers by providing childcare; using a distinct playwork approach to play to continue to develop positive relationships to support the health and well-being of people and supporting individual people. The impact of Covid-19 on playwork resulted in no practice with staff being furloughed. Where playwork practice was able to continue this was either non-face-to face by providing resources or working in a “hub” located in schools

July 2020: The opening of closed access (childcare) provision involved children returning in “bubbles” or year groups with a reduction in numbers attending, movement within the setting, and resources available. There was a need to revise policies that involved an increase in hygiene measures and staffing. The play space had to be re-organized and more use of the outdoor space. There was an overall financial concern on the viability and sustainability of settings staying open. The play behaviour of children upon their return was challenging and a noticeable increase for children to socially interact with other children and staff.

The opening of open access settings becomes closed access with children booked in for specific time-slots in “bubbles”. This also resulted in a decrease in numbers on how many children attended at any given time. The revision of policies also resulted in an increase in hygiene measures, and this reduced the resources available. The outdoor space had to be re-organised to meet social distancing requirements.

There was less space for children to use or move around in. All these changes made the setting more structured and regulated than before.

Children’s play behaviour at first was cautious and more chaotic, however, children were keen to form friendships with other children and staff. In addition to existing users returning, new targeted users were identified through both current and new funding streams.

July 2021: One year on, closed access (childcare) provisions are running as pre-lockdown in relation to days and hours open. There is a dichotomy of how settings are run with some running as pre-March 2020 lockdown where children are not in “bubbles” or year groups and have free choice of resources or where they want to play. For other closed access settings, they are still operating with children in “bubbles” or year groups and rotating resources. For both operating models, there is still some reduction of resources, particularly as replacing equipment is not possible and extensive hygiene measures are still in place. This has resulted in an increase in paperwork. The number of children attending, and staff employed is less than March 2020, and this has placed a financial strain on some settings where access to Government Covid-19 related funding had either run out or could not be accessed. Children’s play behaviour had become more settled although more solitary play was observed, and children were less inclined to share resources.

For open access settings, one year on, they are running very much as of March 2020. With the settings being free, children in the community have returned and had free choice over the resources and where they want to play. There is still an extensive hygiene regime in place, but in return for being open access, there is less paperwork having to be undertaken (registration of children upon entry). The numbers of children are increasing, and staff has been retained and the targeted sessions have been maintained. Children's play behaviour appears to reflect more pre-March 2020 where physical and socially based play is observed.

The limitation of the study may relate to the number of respondents who took part in the survey, although exact numbers of closed access (breakfast clubs, after-school clubs, holiday playschemes) and open access (adventure playgrounds, mobile play provision) are difficult to pin down. However, when using the themes content analysis, there was not much variation between responses, therefore, this study does provide an accurate picture of how playwork settings were operating one year after returning from the first lockdown in March 2020. More importantly, this study provides an up-to-date picture of how playwork is operating still during the Covid-19 pandemic and contributes to a longitudinal study that started in March 2020.

Conclusion

This study has shown that playwork settings are still operating, both open access and closed access despite the continued impact of Covid-19 since March 2020. Playwork settings continue to be versatile and adaptable (King, 2021d) and with the various Covid-19-related funding that was made available, children have been able to attend breakfast clubs, after-school clubs, holiday playschemes, adventure playgrounds, and mobile play provision.

For the adventure playgrounds and mobile play provision, one year on from re-opening in July 2020 these settings have returned to pre-March lockdown about being open access and children being free to choose how and what they want to play within the setting. For the closed access setting, the return to pre-March lockdown is not as clear-cut. For some, children are not in "bubbles" or year groups and have the freedom of movement and choice as before. For other closed access settings, they are still running as in July 2020 with children in "bubbles" or year groups and resources having to be rotated.

With the Covid-19 assisted funding now coming to an end, both the open access and closed access playwork provision have to continue to look for funding streams to continue to operate. For the adventure playground and mobile play provision, this has historically always been the case. For the closed access settings that have relied on fee-paying parents and carers, this may be more uncharted territory that needs to be explored. Funding continues to be an issue and with decreasing numbers attending and continued increase in cleaning, these important settings that provide space and resources for children to play could be in danger. The impact of Covid-19 in relation to the health and well-being of children and young people will continue to be assessed and researched, however both during lockdown and post-lockdown the importance of play in children's lives has been brought to the public attention. The spaces where children play, the adventure playground, park and out-of-school club have always been considered as important, the need, however, is now greater.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

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