

## **CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL**

**15 OCTOBER 2020**

### **COVID-19 OCTOBER EDUCATION UPDATE**

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#### **Summary**

1. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education and Skills and the Director of Children's Services have been invited to the meeting to update the Panel on developments relating to:
  - a) an update of wider reopening of Worcestershire settings and schools from 1 September 2020; and
  - b) an update on the handling of COVID-19 cases in settings and schools.

#### **Background**

2. Scrutiny requested an update on the work being carried out to support Education settings and schools during the COVID-19 period.

#### **Progress following September full re-opening of school provision**

3. Following Government guidance, all children and young people, in all year groups, returned to school full-time from the beginning of September 2020.

#### **Risk Assessments for September full opening**

4. Worcestershire Children's First (WCF) provided all Local Authority (LA) maintained schools (including voluntary aided) with a Risk Assessment addendum form including additional questions to highlight risks in relation to; Public Health, Health & Safety, Accommodation and Staffing).
5. Through this process, one site was unable to open as planned following a review of the risk assessment by specialist teams. Worcestershire County Council's (WCC) Health and Safety Team were unable to sign off the risk assessment due to concerns over the water supply at the Lea Street site for outreach for Beacon Pupil Referral Unit and which accommodates onsite provision for children and young people receiving support from the Medical Education Team. As an interim measure, portable toilets and a bottled water supply have been provided on site to enable staff and pupils to return whilst the water supply is made safe. The impact on education provision was a one-week delay in return to site. During this time, the children received their education at alternative sites or via remote learning.
6. As a part of the continued offer of support for all education settings across the county, specialist teams are now offering to support Academies in their infection prevention and control processes. A checklist, based on our risk assessment

addendum and latest guidance, has been created by specialist teams and will be shared with Academies to support them to conduct a self-assessment. Any queries or concerns raised through this process can then be discussed and addressed through a webinar and series of surgery events that will be available for all schools and include learning from outbreak case examples.

### **Reopening Attendance Rates**

7. Full reopening commenced from 1 September 2020. Feedback from the Education Planning Group of phase leads reported a positive experience for staff and children and a relatively smooth start to the term in logistical terms.

8. Data is collected by the Department for Education (DfE) on a daily basis. Of the schools reporting to the DfE they had opened, 97.7% on 1 October reported as being fully open, compared to a national average of 92.4%. Our head teachers across both maintained and academies reported high levels of attendance, and DfE reporting figures show a 91.6% attendance rate in Worcestershire schools compared to a national average of 88.7% (on 1 October 2020).

9. Special schools reported a lower return for children with very complex needs (80% attendance rate on 1 October 2020) but that is to be expected and as a multi-agency approach there will be intensive planning and support to get children into school and ensure provision of education is appropriate.

### **The handling of outbreaks in schools and other settings**

10. Worcestershire County Council Public Health team has responded swiftly to the COVID-19 pandemic. Publishing a robust Outbreak Control Plan (OCP) which has a Local Outbreak Response Team (LORT) at its centre, responding to local outbreaks in settings and communities and working with partners such as Public Health England, Herefordshire & Worcestershire Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) and Worcestershire Regulatory Services (WRS) to reduce the risk of further transmission of COVID-19 as well as the national Test & Trace service. The LORT is now fully operational 7 days a week from 9am to 6pm.

11. The LORT recognised an increase in volume of enquiries from the first week of September as schools returned which impacted on resource capacity. Additional resource was mobilised immediately to assist the LORT and enable the Public Health professionals to focus on infection prevention and control. Through this period, key improvements have been made to the process for schools contacting the LORT, including the refining of the school notification form to create a more streamlined experience for schools.

12. A key role of the LORT is to support schools in the event of a positive case. Upon notification of symptomatic or confirmed positive Children and Young People (CYP) or staff, the LORT undertake a risk assessment, support testing, provide infection prevention control and self-isolation advice, contact tracing and public health action to prevent any further transmission within the setting or wider community. In schools, this has involved support and advice when school bubbles have to be collapsed to prevent further transmission. To further support education settings, the LORT notify the Education COVID Response Team when a bubble is collapsed so that a Liaison Person can be identified to contact the school and offer further support,

advice and guidance. This process has been well received by schools. The process has been refined following each bubble closure and support is now offered to the school to identify issues and offer suggested solutions around themes such as free school meals, vulnerable learners, media enquiries, communication for parents and support for staff.

13. The standard operating procedures for schools are well used and have been refined following feedback through Education Incident planning meetings, with representatives from across school phases and types. On 18 September, a specific scenario planning session was held to review, and stress test a range of potential situations and work through the stages of response and reaction. The scenarios were used to further test the protective measures and controls that schools have put in place, the Operational Control/ Standard Operating Procedures (OCP) standard operating procedures and the resilience of both local settings and the wider system. This session was very well received. Breakout sessions were used to work through the scenarios and key learning from the first few weeks of the autumn term was consolidated and built upon.

14. WCC has committed to supporting schools and settings to stay open and provide education in a safe and appropriate way. Additional resource has been earmarked to support the Liaison Person role to assist schools with practical measures when outbreaks occur and to coordinate the learning and feed this back to schools; along with being the education link to the District Incident Management Team meetings that have been established to develop a district specific system wide approach to the management of COVID-19 across each district council region within Worcestershire.

## **Remote Learning**

15. On 1 October the Education Secretary announced further support to help children learn from home if they have to self-isolate. A new temporary Continuity Direction (under the Coronavirus Act 2020) means schools have a duty to provide education at home, as they do when children are in the classroom.

16. Part of the Worcestershire Liaison process with schools who have partial or full bubble closures is to ensure that the school(s) enact their Remote Learning plans. The School Improvement Team are rolling out CPD to schools on Effective Remote Learning and the first session webinar has been delivered to 29 schools with more sessions planned.

## **Education Transport**

17. Following significant planning throughout the summer, the transport team have ensured that the provision of dedicated home to school transport is safe, available and compliant with the most up to date guidance issued by both the Department for Education and the Department for Transport. Measures introduced include addition of extra buses, creation of “closed” services which would have been open to the public and coordinated seating plans.

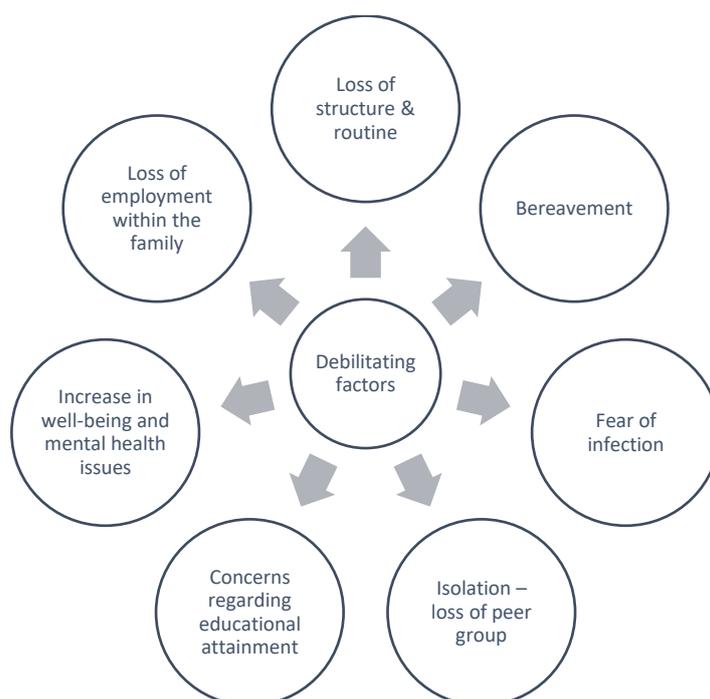
18. Dedicated Schools Transport for Mainstream and SEND pupils has been operating relatively smoothly from the start of the new term. Reports from operators indicate that most pupils have adapted to the seating plans. From Tuesday 6 October

young people in year 7 and above are required to wear face coverings on home to school transport unless exemptions apply to them. This measure has been changed to respond to the growth in positive cases and an achievable control measure that promotes a continuity of approach

19. Monitoring of train use and management of peak services and stations focused on Hagley and Worcester and during the first week of term we received reports from West Midlands Trains (WMT) detailing their management of any issues. Reporting continued throughout early September as colleges returned and additional carriages were on hand to be deployed where needed.

## Back to School

20. Children and young people in the UK are expected to return to school full-time as of September 2020, following an unprecedented period of absence. It is important to recognise that CYP will have been presented with negative and positive experiences during lockdown and the approach to enhancing their well-being should be differentiated accordingly. It is the varying continuum of adverse experiences that is the key focus of staff in WCF because it has been hypothesised nationally that some will find the transition (returning to education settings) too difficult and will not return. Reasons for this will be multiple and complex effecting the child, the parent and in some cases the whole family, as exemplified below:

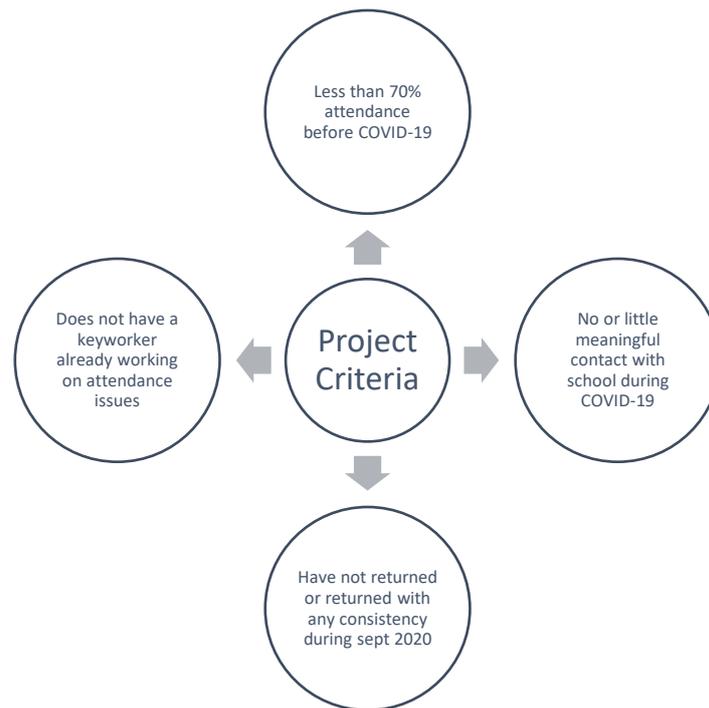


21. WCF understand the need for an intensive programme to identify and then support the children most likely to struggle with going 'Back to School' (BTS). A CYP registered as continually absent will not, on its own, be a reason for Children's Social Care to undertake an assessment at level 4. Therefore, WCF are instigating partnership working to ensure a timely and proportionate response to the inevitable. As an organisation responsible for delivering statutory children's

services, we know that missing school amplifies already existing vulnerabilities and that school is a protective factor for children experiencing challenges.

## Referral Criteria and Methodology

22. WCF are working with Schools, Public Health/CCG commissioned services and the University of Worcester to provide support to children and young people. Schools will be required to fulfil their statutory duties for attendance whilst BTS will accept referrals from education settings and partners meeting the following criteria:



23. Referrals will be triaged by WCF to determine the appropriate and proportionate pathway of support. The dedicated staff in the Vulnerable Learners team will be identifying children and young people experiencing complex and entrenched issues preventing their sustained engagement in school. Referrals meeting the criteria will be allocated to an experienced member of staff who will apply the 'Signs of Safety' methodology

*NB: This is a validated, universal tool/model already known to partners. It empowers early important and informative conversation and is integral to safeguarding work.*

## Project Progress

24. Project Progress.

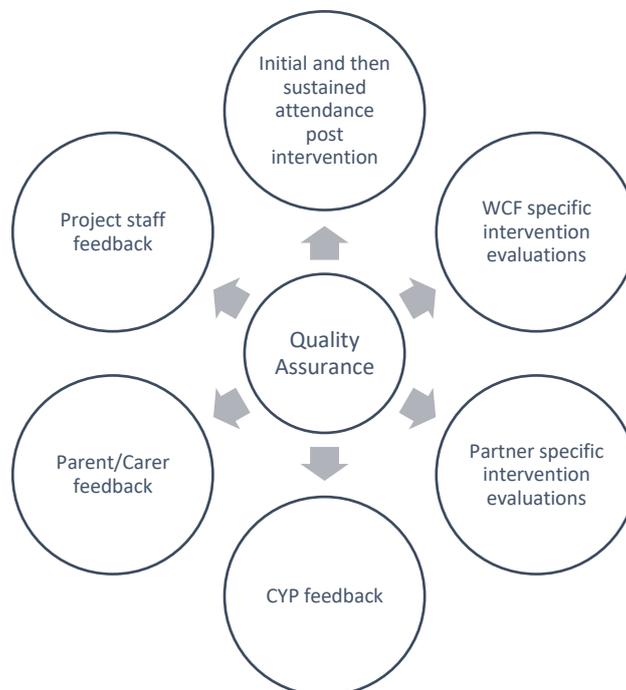
1. The project management group was established in July 2020 led by the Director for Social Care and Safeguarding, Tina Russell with representatives

from each stakeholder service.

2. Towards the end of the summer term, WCF contacted 17 schools identified by data, as most likely to have CYP meeting the project brief. Consenting families from this intelligence formed the early adopter cohort, enabling timely support to commence for them.
3. A referral process has been established for the main project and was communicated to all schools at the start of the new term.
4. The Signs of Safety Tool has been developed, bespoke to the BTS project. Training on the use of the tool with the 18 BTS staff has been completed.
5. Referrals to the project are now being received and twice weekly triage sessions are taking place.
6. The referral tracker and monitoring and reporting dashboard has been created and is in use.
7. A virtual programme of child and parent support has been launched by the CCG along with feedback process to establish experience of virtual programme.
8. A mentoring scheme has been set up in partnership with Worcester university.

## Project Evaluation

25. The project has received funding from What Works for Children's Social Care who will be undertaking a full evaluation on conclusion of the project. Success of BTS will be determined by the following quality assurance mechanisms:



26. As the project progresses, we will be using these to make 'live' improvements to practise and to subsequently analyse whether there is a need to continue the project into the second term of the new academic year. This will depend on whether there is a continued demand for CYP who are yet to return to school and whether there may be additional resource required for the children (especially towards project closure) to sustain their attendance. There will be several

confounding variables which may instigate further extended or new project work in protecting CYP from harm, ensuring they continue to value family life and experience a good education – this is of course, at the heart of everything we do.

## **Purpose of the Meeting**

27. The Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel is asked to:

- consider and comment on the updates provided from the Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Education and Skills and the Director of Children’s Services; and
- determine whether any further information or scrutiny on a particular topic is required.

## **Supporting Information**

- Appendix 1 Back to School presentation

## **Specific Contact Points for this report**

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## **Background Papers**

In the opinion of the proper officer (in this case the Director of Children’s Services) the following are the background papers relating to the subject matter of this report:

- Agenda and Minutes of Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel on 16 June 2020, 17 July 2020, 8 September 2020

[All agendas and minutes are available on the Council's website here.](#)