

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL 29 JANUARY 2021

COVID-19 EDUCATION UPDATE

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 the:
 - a) national lockdown and implications for Worcestershire settings and schools from 4 January 2021, specifically in relation to remote learning; and
 - b) handling of Covid-19 cases and mass testing in settings and schools.

Background

2. The Panel requested an update at its January meeting on the work being carried out to support Education settings and schools during the Covid-19 period.
3. Schools remained open to all pupils until the end of the Autumn term.
4. Schools with secondary aged students and Further Education (FE) colleges received information and instruction regarding Covid-19 testing over the Christmas period. Additional meetings with headteachers have been held since the announcement in relation to the implementation of testing in schools and will continue whilst it remains helpful and will be broadened as and more is learnt about the roll-out of testing for the primary school sector.
5. On Wednesday 6 January, the Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson MP) made a [statement to Parliament on closure of education settings during national lockdown](#).
6. Education Incident Planning meetings have continued from the Autumn term as a mechanism to receive feedback and discuss the challenges that schools and settings are facing in managing the impact of the national lockdown.

Overview of national lockdown for education provision

7. On the 5 January, the Government announced a period of national lockdown. During this period schools, alternative provision (AP), special schools, colleges and wraparound childcare and other out-of-school activities for children were advised that they should restrict attendance to vulnerable children and young people and the children of critical workers only. All other pupils and students should not attend and should learn remotely until February half term.

8. Early years provision should continue to remain open and should continue to allow all children to attend full time or their usual timetable hours. This includes early years registered nurseries and childminders, maintained nursery schools, as well as nursery classes in schools and other pre-reception provision on school sites.

9. Of the 497 funded providers, there are currently 7 that have made the decision to close until at least half-term; these are primarily childminders who are either extremely clinically vulnerable themselves or live with someone who is.

10. The criteria for vulnerable learners was extended to also include those who may have difficulty engaging with remote education at home (for example due to a lack of devices or quiet space to study) and all children with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). Schools have been advised to review all children receiving Special Educational Needs (SEN) support to monitor whether they should be offered onsite school provision rather than remote learning. The critical worker list refers to children with at least one parent or carer who is listed as a critical worker being eligible for a place. It is not necessary for both parents to be critical workers. In addition, the list has been updated to include new workforces whose work is critical following the end of the EU transition period.

Attendance Rates

11. Year on year, mainstream school attendance has previously been the same or better for each phase and this is also reflected in national figures (approximately 94-96%). June 2020 figures showed a drop due to the pandemic but by the end of December, the figures had improved greatly due to wider school-reopening, supported by Worcestershire Children First (WCF), and are now similar to pre-pandemic levels (96% for Primary, 94% for Secondary).

12. During December, data was collected by the Department for Education (DfE) daily. Of the Worcestershire schools reporting to the DfE that they had opened, 99% reported as being fully open, the same as the national average in December. Headteachers across both maintained schools and academies reported high levels of attendance, and the DfE reporting figures show an attendance rate of 89.5% in Worcestershire schools compared to a national average of 84.1% in December.

13. Special schools reported a lower return for children with very complex needs (81% attendance rate in December) as may be expected. A multi-agency approach will be taken, including intensive planning and support, to get children into school and ensure provision of education is appropriate.

14. School attendance reporting to the DfE resumed from 11 January. Restricted attendance is resulting in significantly lower attendance than last term. At the time of reporting, there is approximately 15% attendance compared to a national attendance figure of approximately 13%.

15. At the end of the first week of the Spring Term, over 80% of early years providers had reopened as normal, without any restrictions to attendance. According to the weekly attendance data collection, this is expected to rise to 88% by the end of week 2. The numbers of children attending an early years setting remains similar to that found in the Autumn Term. This indicates an overall drop in attendance which is to be expected; some parents/carers are choosing to keep their children at home.

16. We are working very closely with Special Schools as all children who attend Special Schools are categorised as vulnerable. Regular conversations are ongoing, especially regarding the challenges for making education provision. We recognise the complexity of the issues faced and the need to prioritise students on the basis of risk assessments and capacity available in special schools.

Remote Learning

17. Approximately 85% of our school pupil population are being supported with remote learning from home.

18. The temporary continuity direction makes it clear that schools have a duty to provide remote education for state-funded, school-age children. Further clarification about what remote learning is has also been published, including:

- Remote education: a broad term encompassing any learning that happens outside of the classroom, with the teacher not present in the same location as the pupils.
- Digital remote education: often known as online learning, this is remote learning delivered through digital technologies.
- Blended learning: a mix of face-to-face and remote methods. An example would be the 'flipped classroom', where main input happens remotely (for example through video), while practice and tutoring happen in class.
- Synchronous education: this is live; asynchronous education is when the material is prepared by the teacher and accessed by the pupil at a later date.

19. The national guidance for remote education states that the remote education provision should be equivalent in length to the core teaching pupils would receive in school and will include both recorded or live direct teaching time, and time for pupils to complete tasks and assignments independently. The amount of remote education provided should be, as a minimum:

- Key Stage 1: 3 hours a day on average across the cohort, with less for younger children
- Key Stage 2: 4 hours a day
- Key Stages 3 and 4: 5 hours a day

20. Previous guidance stated that primary schools should set work totalling around three hours a day, and four hours at secondary.

21. Further support to schools was published by Ofsted on 11 January to describe [What's working well in remote education](#).

22. The Worcestershire School Improvement Team are working with schools to develop further written guidance and CPD for remote learning in the current Lockdown context to support schools in the following areas:

- Models of provision
- Encouraging access and engagement, parents, staff and pupils
- Developing pedagogy best suited to remote learning and the needs of learners
- Quality Assurance processes and safeguarding

Remote learning for Vulnerable Learners

23. For any pupil with an EHCP not attending onsite provision in mainstream schools during the period of lockdown, remote learning should be in place to ensure continuity and progression. Current guidance from the DfE is available (attached at Appendix 1). Updated guidance is expected shortly.

24. It is important to note that at present there has been no change to the law in regard to the provision of special educational provision outlined in EHCPs. This means that schools will need to consider carefully how they will differentiate the remote learning experience for individual children and young people with EHCPs. Where schools are concerned about their ability to provide for learners this should be noted in individual risk assessments and raised with the SEN team.

25. For Children Looked After (CLA) who are learning remotely, the Virtual School have put into place 'Keeping in Touch' contacts with schools, in addition to the termly Personal Education Plan meeting. These meetings review the levels of engagement and progress for each individual CLA. In addition, a focus is given to the child / young person's social, emotional and mental health needs.

IT Devices including Laptops

26. During the Summer Term 2020, Worcestershire County Council (the Council) and WCF teams started the distribution of laptops to particular groups of disadvantaged pupils, in line with DfE guidance.

27. The following criteria were used to check requests from schools and families:

- a) Children open to Social Care – they must have a Child in Need Plan, a Child Protection Plan or be looked after. 850 laptops have been provided to date for this group of learners, and requests are still being processed as they are received
- b) Last academic year's year 10 pupils at a maintained school and eligible for Free School Meals. 150 devices were distributed and the criteria does not apply to this academic year, in line with guidance.

28. In addition, each Worcestershire school has access to the DfE's IT device roll out programme. This has been available during the autumn term to support children who were learning at home when self-isolating.

29. During the latest national lockdown, the DfE had invited schools to request the devices they need and the information to date indicates that secondary and middle schools have either placed orders or have already received devices. Latest guidance from DfE is that primary schools and other settings including special schools, alternative provision and PRUs will be invited to order by 22 January, starting with the most disadvantaged areas in England. The DfE will contact each school as soon as they can order. Most orders will be delivered within 2 working days of an order being placed, and DfE will aim to deliver all within 5 working days.

30. Last term, WCF and the Council set up a process to contact all schools that were supporting pupils through remote learning as a result of being a close contact of a positive case of Covid in school. One of the questions schools were asked was about the availability and access to devices for remote learners. The majority of schools advised that they had enough devices, and where there were issues, they were provided with the DfE contact details for follow up. Additionally, some schools have provided their own devices or had support from local businesses to purchase additional equipment for distribution.

31. This term, pupils who may have difficulty engaging with remote education at home (for example due to a lack of devices or quiet space to study) are included in the list of vulnerable children and young people who may attend school.

32. The DfE has this week launched a Scheme which temporarily increases data allowances for mobile phone users on certain networks. This is so that children and young people can access remote education if their face-to-face education is disrupted. Schools can request mobile data increases when they report a closure or have pupils self-isolating, including those pupils who are clinically extremely vulnerable. Schools can request mobile data increases for children and young people who:

- do not have fixed broadband at home
- cannot afford additional data for their devices
- are experiencing disruption to their face-to-face education.

33. Children with access to a mobile phone on certain networks might be able to benefit. The DfE is also providing internet connections where they are needed.

34. In summary, schools can help disadvantaged pupils to get online using free mobile data increases or 4G wireless routers provided by the DfE. Schools can request this support if each of the following applies:

- a) the school is experiencing disruption to face-to-face education;
- b) the disadvantaged pupils in the school do not have access to the internet at home;
- c) the school has been invited to order laptops and tablets.

35. Parents, carers and pupils cannot apply for digital devices or internet access through this scheme themselves. They should contact their school to discuss requirements for accessing remote education.

36. Schools and settings are kept up to date on all announcements via planning meetings and a regular bulletin.

Free School Meals

37. Schools have the following options for Free School Meals provision for pupils not attending school during the lockdown period.

38. From now up to Friday 12 February:

- a) Schools should continue to use the same process that they have used last term (i.e. for pupils who have been self-isolating) and use this for all eligible pupils.
- b) The Edenred system that schools used for issuing vouchers for the Christmas holiday period is available to be used. This system is initially funded by the Council and schools will be recharged for any vouchers they order.

39. For February half term week 15 to 19 February:

- a) Schools should repeat what they did for the Christmas period which is preferably to use the Edenred system. Further information will be provided w/c 1 February and schools will be advised when orders for vouchers for the half term week can be placed on the system.
- b) If schools used a different process during this time and wish to do this again they have been asked to notify WCF with details.

Ofsted

40. Ofsted will inspect schools of any grade, where it has significant concerns about safeguarding or the quality of remote education being provided.

41. Ofsted will no longer be undertaking school visits as described in the autumn term. Eighteen visits took place in the autumn term, nine to maintained schools and nine to academies.

42. In December, it was announced that while Ofsted's routine graded inspections remain suspended, inspectors will, during the spring term, conduct monitoring inspections of schools most in need of challenge and support ie those previously judged to be providing an inadequate education and some previously judged to require improvement. Those inspections will provide assurance that pupils in those schools are receiving the best possible education, whether through classroom teaching or remote education.

43. Ofsted will not be conducting regular or assurance inspections for early years settings during the first half of the Spring Term. They will continue to register new provision and carry out regulatory work.

Examinations

44. All external examinations have been suspended for 2020/21 academic year.

45. Although the Phonics Screening Check, KS1 and KS2 statutory assessment and moderation have all been cancelled for 2021, schools will still need to make robust teacher assessments for end of Key Stage judgements.

46. The School Improvement Team will be offering virtual courses to support standardisation, moderation and how to accurately assess different standards, as well as CPD on effective sequences to generate writing opportunities. In addition, specific sessions targeted at those staff new to Year 2 and Year 6 will be offered, as well as sessions on writing assessment across years 1, 3, 4 and 5 as writing skills suffered as a result of Lockdown 1.

47. Whilst a final decision on Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Baseline assessments is still awaited, the School Improvement Team are also developing a support package to support professional development and accurate moderation.

48. GCSEs, A and AS level exams will not go ahead this summer. The Secretary of State for Education has asked Ofqual to consult rapidly on an approach for alternative arrangements that will allow students to progress fairly.

49. School and college performance tables will not be published based on exams and assessments from summer 2021

Risk Assessments for schools and settings

50. Guidance received from the DfE on 7 January included a legal requirement for schools to revisit and update their whole school risk assessment. As a part of the continued offer of support for all education settings across the county, all schools have received a checklist to support the review of their risk assessment and an invitation to attend a webinar led by Public Health on 13 January. The webinar included use of the checklist, extra control measures and learning from cases in schools during the autumn term and amendments to processes. Maintained schools are asked to return their updated risk assessment and checklist as an exception report, for Council/WCF assurance.

Risk Assessments for individual pupils

51. Mainstream schools will need to revisit and update risk assessments for any pupil with an EHCP who is not attending onsite educational provision as a result of parental preference. Schools should also revisit risk assessments for pupils with EHCPs who are attending more than one provision (for example those who have a dual placement in a mainstream and special school). At present there is no guidance from the DfE suggesting that these placements should cease. However, given the increased risk of transmission due to the new Covid-19 variant, schools should reconsider whether it is possible to meet EHCP outcomes in one setting only in the short term and identify any additional preventative measures which can be put in place to reduce risk where dual placements need to continue.

The handling of outbreaks in schools and other education settings

52. The Local Outbreak Response Team (LORT) changed its opening hours to allow time for LORT staff to manage cases and is now open 7 days a week from 9am to 5pm.

53. The LORT recruited extra staff to manage capacity from schools, care homes and workplaces. The November lockdown saw a reduction in cases in educational settings however, since the beginning of January, cases have increased again and even with attendance in schools being restricted, cases in schools and early years settings continue.

54. A key role of the LORT is to support schools in the event of a positive case. However, many schools that have experienced multiple positive cases and are now able to take action immediately on notification of a positive case (staff or pupil).

These schools can identify the close contacts and arrange for them to start self-isolation. These schools complete a LORT checklist and return it to the LORT for confirmation of action taken or further advice and guidance is provided. For some schools and early years settings the LORT supports the completion of this checklist. Feedback from schools and settings about support from the LORT has been good.

Testing in schools

55. All schools with Year 7 pupils and above have been requested by the DfE to set up testing for their staff and pupils. The planning and guidance for this began before the Christmas break and has developed and amended as the new term has got underway and the impact of the new strain of the virus has been understood and impacted.

56. Schools with Year 7 pupils have received deliveries from central government of testing equipment and supplies.

57. Where schools have received incorrect deliveries, or there are items they need for testing set up which they do not have, the Council/WCF Covid Response Project Management and Logistics Team are working with schools to ensure issues are resolved. Particular issues being addressed are missing items, such as testing supplies, PPE, clinical waste bags, which can be provided by the Council's Logistics Team; issues with clinical waste collection, where schools have been sent a named provider who can support if their usual waste collection service is unable to meet the demand; and flooring where a contact details for a supplier of linoleum flooring has been shared to enable schools to purchase if the flooring for their proposed testing site is not clinically compliant.

58. Schools have been reminded of the importance of following the process set out in the 'How To Guide', Clinical Standard Operating Procedure and the online training to ensure that the tests are carried out accurately and safely. To support with Quality Assurance of testing sites, WCF are working with the Council to identify Testing Managers who can conduct sites visits to schools. Solutions are being progressed at pace.

59. Concerns from Early Years providers and Primary Schools around availability of testing for staff have been fed back to the DfE and further information and guidance is awaited.

60. Testing for primary school staff and school nursery staff is expected to begin from next week utilising a home testing kit procedure. Early Years staff from the wider early years sector will be included as critical workers and prioritised through community testing facilities. Other options to support this group of critical workers through the local testing strategy are being explored.

61. The existing insurance policies that protect the Council and schools remain in place for schools' role in the testing activity. This is subject to Government guidelines being followed together with suitable Covid protections being in place. Schools are reminded to complete risk assessments and ensure clinical compliance of testing sites.

Supporting space capacity in schools

62. Work to increase storage space in schools via the use of storage containers has been extended into this term along with a further project to increase space particularly on secondary school sites to extend outdoor dining areas, covered outdoor space through the provision of marquees. So far, a total of 31 schools have taken up this offer. It is anticipated that all marquees will be delivered to schools during week commencing 18 January 2021. Once delivered, a local contractor will be assisting in erecting the marquees in a suitable position agreed with the school. This is expected to be before February half term.

Education Transport

63. Home to School Transport is being provided for those pupils who meet the criteria under the government guidance. WCF has worked closely with all schools to identify their transport requirements and the team have ensured that the continued 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. The additional local bus services that were introduced to cope with the capacity constraints due to social distancing have been temporarily suspended.

64. In the first Lockdown the majority of contracts across all areas of provision for Children's Services were suspended. During this second lockdown a greater number of contracts are operating.

Wellbeing in Education

65. The Wellbeing for Education Return provides funding and resources to train and support education settings to respond to the wellbeing and mental health needs of pupils and students.

66. This project is being delivered through WCF Education Psychology Team in liaison with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and will seek to build on training already provided to schools, target schools identified as needing to develop inclusion strategies and support the development of local supervision groups for schools.

67. 15 courses (30 sessions) have taken place or are planned from November 2020 to February 2021, this includes 5 specific courses for Alternative Provision and Colleges/Sixth Form providers. Currently 110 people are booked to attend, but because the courses are train the trainer courses, the reach to staff is much greater. There has been extra demand for schools, therefore extra sessions have been facilitated. To develop links with Worcester University, Post-graduate Psychology students have been invited to be part of courses.

Anxiety and Emotionally Based School Avoidance: Meeting the Needs of Anxious Pupils in our Schools training

68. The Educational Psychology Team secured funding from the NHS to deliver the Anxiety and Emotionally based school avoidance training free to all schools in the county. 10 courses are planned between January and March 2021, (5 for those

working with Primary School aged children and 5 for those working with Secondary aged children). Currently 108 people are booked to attend the Primary courses and 32 the Secondary courses. At least 2 further courses will be delivered to Further Education providers. Approximately 5 further courses will be delivered to specific settings in conjunction with the Complex Communication Needs (CCN) Team, most probably all schools with Autism bases. There is a limited amount of NHS funding.

69. During this lockdown, more schools have requested follow up to anxiety support. The Anxiety and Emotional based school avoidance training course has been written and is being trialled w/c 21 January. It has three strands for:

- a) Individual schools;
- b) Further Education providers; and
- c) working with the WCF Autism Team, schools with high prevalence of children and young people with Autism (e.g. Autism Bases).

70. The Educational Psychology Team have also developed a webinar to support parent/carers with primary children with SEND on how to adapt home-schooling. Presented by Dr Laura Jellicoe, from Worcestershire Children First's Education Psychology Team, the video offers parents of primary children with additional needs or special education needs some ideas to support them in home educating their children (<https://www.worcestershire.gov.uk/WCFEducationServices/info/1/support-services/4/educational-psychology>). The team are also being proactive in supporting cases from SEND Team or Virtual School, where parent/carers are identified as having difficulties accessing remote support.

Early Years Sustainability

71. There is an increasing concern from providers about their ongoing financial viability. The financial guidance issued by the DfE indicates that providers should be paid as normal for the Spring Term, based on actual children attending. However, to support ongoing sustainability, the Council has made the decision to support the sector by funding open providers for all registered (eligible) two, three and four-year-old children, irrespective of whether the child takes up their place. For providers who choose to close, other than due to a positive Covid-19 case, funding will not be paid. This is different to the Summer Term arrangements which reflected the DfE guidance at the time and paid all providers for their funded children even when they were closed.

72. In addition, the Council is providing supplementary funding in the Spring Term to support providers whose numbers are significantly lower than in previous years. This was also paid in the Autumn Term and is intended to support ongoing sustainability. Financial support continues to be available for providers with collapsed bubbles and/or short-term financial concerns; this is awarded through an application process as required.

Purpose of the Meeting

73. The Panel is asked to:

- consider and comment on the updates provided by 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 - Full guidance regarding [vulnerable learners and critical workers](#) (updated on 5 January 2021)

Contact Points

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Background Papers

In the opinion of the proper officer (in this case the Assistant Director for Legal and Governance) the following are the background papers relating to the subject matter of this report:

[Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel – Thursday 15th October 2020](#)
[Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel - Tuesday, 8th September, 2020](#)
[Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Panel - Friday, 17th July, 2020](#)

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