

## **Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee**

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**Date of Meeting:** 05 August 2020

**Report Title:** COVID-19 Education Update

**Portfolio Holder:** Cllr Kathryn Flavell, Portfolio Holder for Children and Families

**Senior Officer:** Mark Palethorpe, Executive Director of People

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### **1. Report summary**

- 1.1. Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee received a report in June regarding how Children's Services, working together with our partners, have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. These are unprecedented times for the Council, and for our children, young people and families.
- 1.2. This report provides an update on the work that has been undertaken in Education in response to this national and international public health emergency in line with the government decision to reopen schools.
- 1.3. We have many challenges ahead. COVID-19 is and will continue to have a significant impact on our children, young people and families. The strain of COVID-19 and lockdown has increased pressures for families. The mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and families has been affected. Children and young people have missed out on education. Lockdown has reduced the visibility of children, allowing harm to remain hidden. The likely economic recession that will follow as a result of COVID-19 will increase the number of children living in poverty and will exacerbate the current inequalities. The legacy of this will be an increased demand for services over the next year but also in the longer term, with an increased cost to the Council and our partnerships.

## **2. Recommendation/s**

- 2.1 Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to note:
- the progress to date; and,
  - the issues outlined in this report.

## **3. Reasons for Recommendation/s**

- 3.1. To enable members to scrutinise arrangements for children to ensure we have the right support in place to help children achieve the best outcomes. To put on public record a summary of our response to date.

## **4. Other Options Considered**

- 4.1. Not applicable.

## **5. Background**

- 5.1. At its meeting of 22 June, the Committee received a report regarding the response of Children's Services to the COVID-19 pandemic which provided the background to the coronavirus, the initial outbreak and the spread of the virus.
- 5.2 Children's Services continue to respond to the pandemic, and have continued to operate to ensure our children and families are effectively safeguarded and supported during this time.
- 5.3 We have worked closely with schools throughout this period. Guidance has been changing rapidly. Cheshire East schools have been very responsive and flexible to changing the way they work to accommodate pupils, including vulnerable children and children of keyworkers.

### **Support to Schools**

- 5.4 We have established a range of support for schools, including calls from a linked officer to offer support and check on their wellbeing, which initially were carried out daily and are now weekly. This has ensured we have strong communication, and concerns are shared and resolved together. Schools have reported that they feel supported and listened to and we are continuing to receive positive feedback from schools on the support and leadership from Cheshire East throughout COVID-19.

- 5.5 We have developed specific guidance for schools on a range of topics including safeguarding, risk assessments, testing and HR matters. Regular briefings are sent to schools sharing the latest advice and guidance. We are continuing to provide intensive support to schools to those that need it.

### **Phased Opening of Schools**

- 5.4 On 10 May, the Prime Minister announced the phased wider opening of education settings to specific year groups would commence from 1 June. Following this, we held extensive discussions with all key stakeholders; teaching unions, school heads and the Cheshire East Parent Carer Forum, to determine how we could safely implement this within Cheshire East. An Education Recovery group was established to plan for the phased wider opening of schools. This group includes all phases of education and the diocese.
- 5.5 We agreed a Cheshire East position on the phased opening which included a two-week period from 1 June to allow for preparation of classrooms and implementation of the significant changes that needed to be made to ensure safe working practices. This also included welcoming priority year groups back in a staged approach so arrangements could be reviewed after each stage and adjusted if needed.
- 5.6 Letters were sent to all parents and carers to communicate our plans and offer reassurance that the safety of everyone within our schools was our priority. All schools completed a risk assessment of their arrangements. For all our 68 maintained schools, we quality assured the risk assessments and ensured these were compliant with the government guidance. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was delivered to all schools and colleges in advance of the phased opening.
- 5.7 From 15 June, schools reopened to all eligible nursery-aged pupils on a limited and controlled basis where staffing capacity and space allowed. From 22 June, all Reception and Year 1 pupils were welcomed back to Primary Schools. Year 6 pupils returned on 29 June where schools had enough space to do so with social distancing in place.
- 5.8 We were pleased that over 2,300 pupils from Year 6 attended schools, which was a greater number than we originally thought would be

possible to accommodate. Many schools that did not have space for Year 6 pupils alongside other pupils were creative and used other ways to enable pupils to say goodbye, such as using school fields, twilight sessions and weekend sessions. Some secondary schools carried out online transitions and virtual tours to prepare Year 6 pupils for their start at their new schools in September.

- 5.9 From 15 June, secondary schools offered face to face support for Year 10 and Year 12\* pupils (\*Year 11 for alternative provision) in line with the government guidance. Schools were only allowed to have 25% of these pupils on site at any one time, so pupils attended on a rota basis. We asked schools to consider creating targeted provision for 'bubbles' of pupils who are vulnerable to underperformance or disengagement to help to support them in their education.
- 5.10 Pupils of special schools were encouraged to return to school from 15 June based on a review of their individual risk assessment. Priority was given to increasing places to children of key workers and children who have a social worker.
- 5.11 Where schools had capacity, a number also welcomed back pupils from other year groups before the end of term.
- 5.12 Over 11,200 pupils attended schools following the phased opening. The DfE has thanked us for our high attendance. Schools believe this is a result of the phased approach we agreed in Cheshire East, which allowed them to engage with parents and reassure them on all the measures that were being taken to make schools safe, and that our high attendance reflects parental confidence in the safety of our arrangements.
- 5.13 Following the phased opening, key worker pupil attendance increased week by week with over 3,800 key worker pupils attending. The number of vulnerable children attending also continued to increase, with over 1,500 attending, which was very positive, with the main area of increase being children with an Education, Health and Care plan (EHCP). Together with our schools, we successfully managed to accommodate these pupils alongside other year groups. The attendance team have been proactive in ensuring places are available for keyworkers and vulnerable children which supported good attendance from these groups.
- 5.14 The majority of pupils continued to receive remote education during the summer term. We asked schools to ensure that children who were

due to transition between schools in September were supported, and developed a minimum offer for our expectations on transition. We also asked schools to review their home learning arrangements and support for pupils' wellbeing, and ensure that they had regular contact with all children who were not invited back into school to encourage and support learning and wellbeing.

### **Summer Holidays**

- 5.15 The Secretary of State for Education confirmed that schools are not expected to be open over the summer holidays, and there is no expectation that schools should open for vulnerable children and children of critical workers over this period. Teachers, support staff and school leaders deserve a break to recharge and rest.
- 5.16 Following the government's announcement of the COVID-19 Summer Food Fund, schools have applied for the 6 week vouchers to support their free school meal pupils over the summer break.
- 5.17 All emergency contacts for schools have been refreshed in case schools need to be contacted over the holiday period. Link officers will continue to be available over the summer for schools to contact and a central inbox has been set up to receive and respond to any queries from schools.
- 5.18 The Education Recovery Group will continue to meet over the summer to discuss and resolve issues as they arise. School briefings will continue to be circulated with essential updates, although on a less frequent basis than during term time.
- 5.19 We have established a referral process for schools that have concerns about possible attendance in September, or for families that are anxious and need support to facilitate the return to school, so we can support these families over the summer to encourage attendance.

### **Return of all Pupils from September**

- 5.20 On 19 June, the Secretary of State for Education announced that schools would be fully open to all children and young people from September 2020.
- 5.21 The government also announced a £1 billion 'catch up' fund. This recognises that all young people have lost time in education as a result of the pandemic, regardless of their income or background.

£650 million will be shared across all state primary and secondary schools over the academic year 2020-21. Schools' allocations will be calculated on a per pupil basis, providing each mainstream school with a total of £80 for each pupil in years reception through to 11. Special, AP and hospital schools will be provided with £240 for each place for the 2020 to 2021 academic year.

- 5.22 £350 million will fund a National Tutoring Programme which will increase access to high-quality tuition for the most disadvantaged young people. This will help accelerate their academic progress and prevent the gap between them and their more affluent peers widening. The programme will comprise of at least 2 parts in the 2020 to 2021 academic year, including a 5 to 16 programme that will make high-quality tuition available to 5 to 16 year olds in state-funded primary and secondary schools from the second half of autumn term 2020 and a 16 to 19 fund for school sixth forms, colleges and all other 16 to 19 providers to provide small group tutoring activity for disadvantaged 16 to 19 students whose studies have been disrupted as a result of coronavirus (COVID-19).

### ***Safe Working Practices***

- 5.23 As with the phased opening, we have discussed and agreed arrangements for September with all key stakeholders; teaching unions, school heads and the Cheshire East Parent Carer Forum. The Education Recovery Group continues to meet to plan for the full opening of schools and agree a consistent approach across Cheshire East.
- 5.24 We are continuing to provide intensive support to schools around how to implement the DfE guidance to ensure we have a consistent and safe approach across all schools. Some of the changes needed are particularly challenging for schools, for example, the enhanced cleaning requirements. We are developing some principles for schools based on advice from Public Health. We are continuing to liaise with the DfE to clarify issues raised by schools and have continued to regularly update and circulate responses to frequently asked questions.
- 5.25 We have provided all schools with a new risk assessment checklist on their arrangements for pupils from September. Our 68 maintained schools were required to submit the risk assessment checklist before they finished for the summer to provide us with assurance that their risk assessment covers all the appropriate controls. We will ensure the

assessments for all 68 schools comply with the guidance as we did for the phased opening from June.

- 5.26 We have received condition bids from maintained schools and will look to consider some COVID-19 adjustments, if possible, for funding where this meets the eligibility criteria, for example ventilation.
- 5.27 We are establishing a process for schools to report positive cases of COVID-19 so we can manage potential outbreaks. We have attended a session on the local lockdown arrangements and we are linked into a sub group on local lockdowns for schools.

### ***Attendance and Pupil Support***

- 5.28 We are currently developing a set of principles around expectations on attendance for all our schools. We are aware that some parents and children may be anxious about the return in September. Our focus will be on working with families and schools to support children back into education.
- 5.29 We have provided schools with some template letters to adapt for children who have previously had low attendance or little engagement with school during the COVID-19 pandemic to offer reassurance on the measures that will be in place, and encourage attendance. We will be reintroducing fines for non-attendance in a phased way in the autumn to incentivise attendance, but fines will only be used as a last resort where we have exhausted all other ways to engage families.
- 5.30 We recognise the impact that COVID-19 has had on mental health and wellbeing. We will be developing an emotional wellbeing package for use in schools from September. This will include a suite of resources for schools to use with pupils and will provide clarity on the support that is available for schools and families. The pack will include resources for carrying out debriefings with pupils and parents on the impact of lockdown.
- 5.31 We are strongly encouraging schools to consider hot food options when providing free school meals from September as we are mindful that for some children and young people growing up in low income households, their school meal may be the only opportunity to have a healthy, hot meal each day.



## ***Curriculum and Learning***

- 5.32 Two school working groups have been established to review the approach to the curriculum in September, and preparation for remote learning if there is another lockdown. We will be setting minimum standards for schools on remote learning to ensure it is clear that they have a responsibility to deliver the curriculum remotely should another lockdown take place.
- 5.33 We are working with maintained schools to identify where curriculum support may be needed in September. A continual professional development programme will be put in place with a focus on remote learning, emotional wellbeing support for pupils, and catch up strategies.
- 5.34 The East Cheshire Association of Primary Heads (ECAPH) have collected information on what home learning has taken place to date. We will be completing a review of this and then will advise schools on best practice.
- 5.35 All schools have submitted grades in place of examinations for this year, and Ofqual are carrying out moderation. The grades will not be able to be used for comparison purposes.
- 5.36 There will be an opportunity to take exams in the Autumn for pupils that are contesting their grade and schools will need to consider entries for learners early in the autumn term. There may be some issues with venues for such exams as schools will be fully operational when these exams are due to take place.
- 5.37 A consultation will be taking place on adaptation to exams for 2021 which we will be responding to.
- 5.38 Ofsted have announced that they will be carrying out visits to schools and colleges in the autumn term. These visits will look at how schools and colleges are getting pupils back up to speed. The visits will be piloted with volunteer schools and colleges from September, with the full programme starting from October. Routine inspections are planned to resume in January 2021 but this date will be kept under review. We will be supporting our four inadequate schools with their preparations for the Ofsted visits.



## ***Transport***

- 5.39 The DfE guidance for full school opening from September 2020 sets out a new framework for supporting transport to and from schools from the autumn term. The guidance makes a distinction between dedicated school transport (services that are only used to transport pupils to school) and public transport services.
- 5.40 Following publication of the guidance, we have worked with schools to develop a set of principles for travel to school from September. These principles set out what the local authority and schools will do, along with expectations from parents and pupils.
- 5.41 Based on these principles, we have been working to establish the travel to school arrangements required from September 2020. Two surveys have been conducted with families; one for those who are eligible to receive home to school transport from the local authority; the other is aimed at secondary school pupils, in particular to identify those who use public transport. Based on the survey findings and current transport data a decision paper, including options, will be presented to Cabinet in early August.
- 5.42 Promoting active travel to schools remains a key priority. Schools are promoting travel to school by walking or cycling where possible. We are currently working with our Transport and Communication colleagues to look at a campaign around active travel in Cheshire East leading up to the full opening of schools.
- 5.43 Transport Service Solutions (TSS) are starting to organise transport for September, but will not issue the contracts until decisions have been made on travel to school options so that adjustments can be made where necessary. Officers will negotiate contract arrangements with each individual school.
- 5.44 The DfE guidance states that we should group pupils together on transport to reflect the bubbles that are adopted within school where possible. We have reviewed this with our schools and our providers and we are currently looking to create designated seating areas within transport for each bubble to limit mixing between them. The DfE has shared this proposal with other local authorities, most of whom are looking at a similar approach.
- 5.45 Transport for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) is being prioritised to ensure 'meet and greets' can take place

between families and drivers to help children and young people feel settled and supported and arrive at school prepared to learn.

## **Impact and Challenges Ahead**

- 5.46 We have many challenges ahead. COVID-19 is and will continue to have a significant impact on our children, young people and families. The strain of COVID-19 and lockdown has increased pressures for families. We already know that the mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and families has been affected. The likely economic recession that will follow as a result of COVID-19 will increase the number of children living in poverty and will exacerbate the current inequalities.
- 5.47 We are already seeing increased need from children and families. Once all pupils return to school, this will increase the visibility of children and the impact of COVID-19 on all our children and young people will become clearer. There is growing evidence of a gap in knowledge between pupils who have completed home learning and those who haven't, and a need for an intensive review of the curriculum. We are yet to understand the impact of the lack of examinations for young people who would have taken their GCSEs and A Levels this year.
- 5.48 As a result, we expect to see an increased demand on services within Education, such as the Elective Home Education Service, Medical Needs Service, Alternative Provision and Excluded Support Team and the Attendance and Children Out of School Team, as well as wider Children's Services such as Prevention Services and Children's Social Care, and partnership services within health and early help. The legacy of COVID-19 will be an increased demand for services both over the next year but also in the longer term, at increased cost to the Council and the partnership.

## **6. Implications of the Recommendations**

### **6.1. Legal Implications**

- 6.1.1 New legislation has been enacted and guidance has been released in relation to coronavirus.
- 6.1.2 Some legislation allows us to relax some of our statutory requirements in order to support and manage the provision of services to children and families during this time. The Children and

Families Leadership Team have agreed that we will provide services to the higher original statutory requirements and will only apply the relaxations where it is in children's best interests to do so, with a clearly recorded rationale.

6.1.3 Other new legislation, such as the changes to SEND legislation, has brought new requirements for services, such as the requirement to outline what reasonable adjustments have been made during this time to provide the provision in children's Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). Work is ongoing to ensure we are compliant with these requirements.

6.1.4 We have liaised with our Legal Services colleagues throughout the last few months, to assist with and support our understanding and implementation of all legislation and guidance that affects our services to children and families. We will continue to do so, as appropriate, as we move into the recovery phase.

## **6.2. Financial Implications**

6.2.1 Like many councils, Cheshire East continues to face increased costs and demand pressures at the same time as seeing a significant drop in income. The financial implications of COVID-19 for the whole Council are significant as the additional funding available to the Council for COVID-19 is not sufficient to meet all the additional costs being identified.

6.2.2 As time progresses, it is likely that the increase in costs as a result of COVID-19 will rise further. Some areas are still unknown and dependent on further guidance, including additional home to school transport costs.

6.2.3 We expect to see a rise in demand for services to Education, Prevention and Children's Social Care once more children return to schools and settings. This could result in a significant increase in demand to services over the coming year and in the longer term with significant cost implications.

6.2.4 However, unless the funding available for COVID-19 issues increases there will need to be an urgent need to challenge spend that is not affordable within the Council's level of reserves. The Section 151 officer will be actively monitoring the position and consider further action as required.

6.2.5 Schools are funded through the dedicated schools grant and this has continued to be paid in full throughout the COVID-19 period. Schools have been able to claim for a limited range of additional costs. All applications associated with the period March to July will be submitted in the first window, which closes on 21 July. This has been done at school level directly through to the DfE. Broad financial limits have been set for different sizes of school, as judged by pupil numbers. The DfE has advised that there will be a second application window in the Autumn for additional costs to schools.

### 6.3. **Policy Implications**

6.3.1 Policies are being developed in line with the government guidance, in consultation with key stakeholders and with appropriate advice from Public Health, Legal services and Health and Safety.

### 6.4. **Equality Implications**

6.4.1 Implications of the changes will continue to be reviewed. Public Health England published a report on 16 June 2020 'Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on BAME groups. It concluded that there is clear evidence that COVID-19 does not affect all population groups equally. Death rates from COVID-19 were higher for Black and Asian ethnic groups when compared to White ethnic groups. The report concludes that further national work is required to ensure that COVID-19 recovery strategies actively reduce inequalities caused by the wider determinants of health to create long term sustainable change which is appropriately funded.

6.4.2 We have seen an increase in mental health issues, particularly for parents, as a result of the stress of lockdown. Many issues may still be remaining hidden and may only come to light as lockdown continues to lift.

6.4.3 Some children with additional needs, for example those with autism, could find the change in routine at school and at home particularly challenging and may need additional support to help them through the changes.

### 6.5 **Human Resources Implications**

6.5.1 There have been HR implications to staff working in different ways. HR and Public Health have informed the guidance that has been provided to support schools.

6.5.2 There has been regular communication with schools on HR implications, including through the daily briefings, and good co-operation with the Trade Unions.

## **6.6 Risk Management Implications**

6.6.1 We have developed specific COVID-19 risk registers for Education and all of Children's Services. We are keeping Business Continuity Plans under review. The Children and Families Leadership team are continuing to meet on a regular basis to share information and ensure there is a joint approach to our response and risks are anticipated and mitigated.

## **6.7 Rural Communities Implications**

6.7.1 COVID-19 is having an impact across all communities, including rural communities.

## **6.8 Implications for Children & Young People/Cared for Children**

6.8.1 The contents of this report have outlined the implications for our children and young people.

## **6.9 Public Health Implications**

6.9.1 COVID-19 is a global pandemic and public health emergency. Public Health advice has been sought to ensure guidance complies with Public Health guidelines and enables schools to provide safe environments for pupils and staff.

## **6.10 Climate Change Implications**

6.10.1 The increase in people being educated and working from home, and the reduced travel, has had a positive impact on climate change. The current government guidance is to avoid public transport, so we are encouraging families to walk or cycle to school where possible.

## **7 Ward Members Affected**

7.1 All members.

## **8 Consultation & Engagement**

- 8.1 We continue to consult with the Parent Carer Forum, schools, the Diocese, and trade unions. Feedback from schools on our support during COVID-19 has been very positive.

## **9 Access to Information**

- 9.1 None.

## **10 Contact Information**

- 10.1 Any questions relating to this report should be directed to the following officer:

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