

Meeting date: 9th June 2020

Report to: Children's Services, Education & Skills
Scrutiny Board

Subject/report title: Council support for educational settings and pupils during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Wards affected:

☒ All Wards | ☐ Bickenhill | ☐ Blythe | ☐ Castle Bromwich | ☐ Chelmsley Wood |
☐ Dorridge/Hockley Heath | ☐ Elmdon | ☐ Kingshurst/Fordbridge | ☐ Knowle |
☐ Lyndon | ☐ Meriden | ☐ Olton | ☐ Shirley East | ☐ Shirley South |
☐ Shirley West | ☐ Silhill | ☐ Smith's Wood | ☐ St Alphege

Public/private report: Public

Exempt by virtue of paragraph: N/A

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To outline the council's approach and support for schools/early years and pupils since the closure of educational settings to most pupils and the more recent announcement for the wider opening to more pupils

2. Decision(s) recommended

- 2.1 To note the report and the challenges and successes of the council's response in providing support to educational settings and pupils.

3. Background

- 3.1 On Wednesday 18th March 2020, the Government announced that all educational settings would close from Friday 20th March, but from Monday 23rd March they should be open for keyworker and vulnerable children only.
- 3.2 The council's emergency planning team had been on high alert for some time; the Coventry, Solihull & Warwickshire (CWS) Resilience Team were constantly monitoring the COVID-19 situation throughout February and on 5th March 20, the Head of CWS Resilience declared a critical incident, which in turn saw the council retaliating against the virus by activating the council's formal critical incident arrangements.

SMBC put arrangements in place locally to manage the emergency response to Covid-19. One of the main ways this was done was through establishing a range of Tactical Cells, each with a specific focus.

4. How did we respond to the crisis?

4.1 The pace of change at the beginning of the closure of schools was breath-taking and our response developed at pace. Initially the School Improvement Team were the first point of contact for schools with questions and queries. But it quickly became apparent that this was unsustainable as enquiries surged and a more dynamic and agile approach needed to be established - which could be sustainable into the medium and longer term.

4.2 During the week beginning 16th March emergency meetings were called with officers from across the council, and the Schools Cell was established. We engaged immediately with schools and had an emergency meeting with the Solihull Schools Strategic Accountability Board (SSSAB). It was clear from outset that schools were determined to stay open for their pupils and families and the idea of a hub model (where one school in an area would remain open and accept pupils from other schools) was quickly shelved. The approach which followed was school led and the determination of their leaders meant that they remained open for vulnerable pupils and children of keyworkers – supporting and driving the national response to COVID-19 locally. Numbers of children attending, however, in that first week commencing 23 March were low as discussed below in paragraph 4.7, with further detail over time in the table at 4.8.

4.3 The developing emergency was further compounded by the significant numbers of council staff beginning to work from home and by 20th March all Council House Education staff were homeworking. This posed considerable challenges and uncertainty with not only continuing with business as usual and school support work, but more importantly, responding to the unprecedented enforced closure of schools to most pupils for an unknown, but significant amount of time. But what did this mean for our most vulnerable children in the borough?

4.4 Officers worked tirelessly, despite an air of uncertainty always present, with schools, early years and the wider Solihull community over the weeks that followed. The lack of national guidance saw the School Cell grappling diligently with a number of immediate issues:

- The extent to which schools/early years should be open? Will 'Hubs' be needed?
- How to keep everyone safe
- What should the curriculum be?
- How are meals to be provided? School voucher scheme?
- Expectations over Easter
- Staffing issues loomed large – expectations of staff, translating the furlough scheme
- Ensuring sufficiency of school and early years places
- How to address the financial disincentives for early years settings to remain open
- Monitoring provision

- Bolstering the confidence of settings, pupils and their families
- Establishing clear and consistent routes of communication – a single channel for schools to feed in issues, a single outlet in Head Lines
- Developing approaches to pay contractors / schools / early years providers

- 4.5 The Schools Cell ensured it was feeding into other Cells set up across the council to deal with cross-cutting issues, such as vulnerable families and the dreaded personal protective equipment (PPE) issues, which was later to become the most hotly contested concern over the weeks and months to come.
- 4.6 The multi-disciplinary nature of the Group worked to rapidly understand emerging issues and adopted a solution focused approach. A pattern emerged of an issue being identified, derived consensus of sensible possible solutions, engagement with schools and a pragmatic solution adopted. Almost without exception, the ensuing guidance from government supported the position adopted by the council in every quarter.
- 4.7 An attendance system was immediately put in place, so we were able to track pupils' attendance; less than 600 children attended school in week one of the lockdown and just 75 vulnerable children. By week three, the total number had fallen to 380 and 69 respectively, with 82% of those at school being children of keyworkers. Over time our data collection arrangements were replaced by the DfE with a similar national system.

4.8 *Table 1 – Pupil Attendance*

		Week 1 (23/03/20)	Week 2 (30/03/20)	Week 3 (06/04/20)	Week 4 (13/04/20)	Week 5 (20/04/20)	Week 6 (27/04/20)	Week 7 (04/05/20)	Week 8 (11/05/20)
Phase	Total Roll	Number of Pupils Attending							
Primary	21,104	465	390	332	336	562	621	688	696
Secondary	17,879	76	52	35	35	77	90	104	110
Special	666	23	23	13	15	36	40	38	45
PRU/AP	100	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Overall	39,749	564	465	380	386	675	751	830	851

Key Worker	489	405	311	309	546	572	611	618
Vulnerable	75	60	69	77	129	179	219	233

Easter Holidays

4.9 Table 2 – School Closures

		Week 1 (23/03/20)	Week 2 (30/03/20)	Week 3 (06/04/20)	Week 4 (13/04/20)	Week 5 (20/04/20)	Week 6 (27/04/20)	Week 7 (04/05/20)	Week 8 (11/05/20)
Phase	Total No. of schools	No. closed/nil pupils							
Primary	59	6	2	2	1	1	0	1	1
Secondary	15	1	4	3	4	1	1	1	1
Special	5	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
PRU/AP	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3
Overall	82	10	10	9	8	5	4	5	5

Easter Holidays

4.10 Table 3 – Early Years Settings

	Week 1 (23/03/20)	Week 2 (30/03/20)	Week 3 (06/04/20)	Week 4 (13/04/20)	Week 5 (20/04/20)	Week 5 (27/04/20)	Week 7 (04/05/20)	Week 8 (11/05/20)
Number of settings	No data collection		326	282	332	325	330	332
Number of settings open			162	116	162	166	174	177
Number of settings closed			137	150	144	144	140	139
Numer of pupils attending			365	476	594	594	666	665

Easter Holidays

- 4.11 Schools quickly responded to the need to track and monitoring their vulnerable pupils. Systems were established with the LA to ensure that no vulnerable pupils were without regular welfare checks and were supported by the relevant agency. Whilst uncomfortable at times, there was a rapid response from the local authority and schools seamlessly settled into a new way of working.
- 4.12 The drive to support vulnerable children was successful, and numbers attending school also surged upwards. By week 8 we saw 233 vulnerable pupils returning to school; more than treble of the levels seen in week 1 and just 5 schools closed - a 50% reduction.
- 4.13 We continued to support education settings, pupils and parents in any and all ways possible. As settings began to close with staffing shortages, we worked to support pupils being accommodated at other providers/sites. We established a helpline for parents to contact us if their child's setting closed and supported parents finding an alternative place for their child. These calls decreased overtime and schools/early years providers went above and beyond to help their local communities – with providers also opening over the Easter holidays and 17 schools over the bank holidays so keyworkers could to continue to support the Solihull community by protecting vital services.
- 4.14 It is however fair to say that fatigue began impact both schools and local authority staff – with the greatest challenge being the pace of change, with new or amended DfE guidance dropping upon us, late at night or over a weekend. We had fallen into a routine by now of digesting and making sense of the information, to allow for accompanying local guidance to be written and distributed the following day.

- 4.15 From 27th April the School Cell shifted focus to concentrate effort on the issues arising from schools and early years settings beginning a phase reopening; membership was extended to include experts in a range of wider areas, including communications and Health and Safety. This work culminated in the development of the Solihull position statement, principles and risk-based approach to school reopening – which quickly became of intense national interest, with the support we have provided to schools being described as ‘leading-edge’.
- 4.16 Throughout all the weeks of lockdown, and continuing now, we have had phone calls at least once a week (three times a week in the early stages) with the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC), who has been very positive and complimentary about the Solihull approach. As well as the council feeding in information and data for upward reporting to the DfE and Ministers, the calls have allowed us and other councils to raise concerns and queries, which have on occasion led to a change in the government’s position. The most recent examples of this have been a move away from an insistence that part time attendance should not be a feature of wider reopening and a reversal of the original national decision that food vouchers (under the Edenred scheme) would not be provided during Whitsun half term. Longer term, the relationship these calls have allowed us to develop with the RSC, will hopefully be a positive for the future.

5. What Happened Next?

- 5.1 On Sunday the 10th May, and in subsequent guidance documents, the government announced a roadmap towards recovery, including plans for the extended opening of schools for more pupils. Although anticipated, this was always going to be fraught with logistical difficulties, uncertainty and created a high level of concern and anxiety. A lack of national clarity over arrangements left school and early years leaders looking to the Local Authority to help them to interpret what little guidance there was initially into a pragmatic response and decide how the wider opening of schools was going to be achieved in Solihull.
- 5.2 Health and safety was absolutely the driving consideration for the local authority and schools alike. Although scientific and medical advice indicated that children who do become infected with COVID tend to have a mild version of the illness, there still remained a low risk, however small, that there could be an outbreak, or worse still, a fatality linked to one of our schools.
- 5.3 Our focus turned immediately to the possibility of a potential outbreak and we developed our response. Appropriate containment measures would be put in place, including contact tracing, testing and self-isolation based on advice from the national Contact Tracing Service/ Public Health England to minimise the risk of further spread
- 5.4 That said, our response in Solihull has always been clear from the outset – the safety of our schools for pupils, their families and the workforce must be our number one priority. Only when we were convinced that schools were ready would the council support wider opening for more pupils.
- 5.5 We were also clear that school leaders are best placed to make these decisions by undertaking a robust risk assessment, including an understanding of staff able to work. All protective measures were to be implemented in schools and, only then,

would they open their doors to more pupils.

5.6 The priority order was to be:

- Vulnerable pupils identified by school and children on key workers.
- Nursery and reception
- Reception
- Year 1
- Year 6

5.7 As the initial reaction to the announcement subsided, schools readied themselves for the next phase and worked hard with parents to establish demand for places – encouraging those parents who were not taking up the offer to do so - but recognising it was ultimately parents' decision. Our collective concern for vulnerable children continued to be at the forefront of everyone's thinking.

5.8 Officers worked to create a pathway towards a new norm – whatever that was to look like. In partnership with schools, council services and trade unions, a Solihull Local Authority position statement and principles emerged. We listened to our school leaders; the Solihull approach was to be led by individual schools risk assessments based on their own circumstances (Appendix 1 and 1a).

6. What about the children?

6.1 Most children and young people have fared remarkably well during lockdown. But for others it is a different story. Anxiety and social isolation came first; eating and sleeping issues followed for some. We know that here in Solihull and across the country, those in poverty or otherwise vulnerable are being hardest hit; the loss of routine for children with autism, particularly devastating. Standing down of therapy services and the impact of reduced face to face contact will become apparent over time, as will the diminished ability of families to work together as a unit. The absence of short-breaks and loss of traditional support networks has been hard on families. It remains to be seen what the longer term impact of the pandemic in the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers will be, but the picture is unlikely to be positive.

6.2 But what do children and young people say? In the words of one young person in Solihull with an autistic spectrum condition:

The situation which the UK is in currently cannot be ignored and it is what it is. However, the way which society responds to it is vital and will make all the difference, in the long-term. It is during such times where it is more important than ever that we look out for each other and be kinder and more considerate towards one another. In my opinion, the only way this country is going to get through the next few months is if we all work together, (remotely – social distancing remember!), and follow the advice of the government, the news and others who are trying to help us. We are very lucky to have the NHS available in the UK and the least we can do is abide by the government guidelines to release pressure off the services, enabling them to deal with those who truly need the medical attention.

Over this time, you will constantly hear about COVID19 and the updates on the news channels, internet articles, newspapers and Social Media; this can become very

overwhelming at times – I know I have had enough of hearing constantly about it! Be careful about what you read on Social Media and websites as there is no guarantee that the information is 100% accurate, so try not to become paranoid about everything you read/hear. I have observed that through the media they are primarily focussing on the negative statistics regarding COVID19, by all means which should not be ignoring lightly, but remember there are just as many positive outcomes; such as the number of people who have recovered from symptoms or the virus. It is vital that we remember this information too because it will enable society to keep a balanced approach/opinion about this pandemic, as well as providing a light at the end of the tunnel, which at times may seem a long way off.

7. Where to from here?

- 7.1 There is more to be done. Educational settings and the council's education services are reshaping themselves for the challenges ahead. The future is uncertain, but the Schools Cell will continue to drive developments at pace and ensure services are responsive to changing patterns of identified need:
- Guidance from the Schools Cell will continue to be added to and evolve as we move forward.
 - Community Educational Psychology Service (CEPS) will maintain contact with families through the dedicated phone line for parent/carers (with 80 families having consultations over the last 5 weeks).
 - Psychologists are in contact with schools and parents to plan for the return of their children.
 - CEPS and the Council's Specialist Intervention Support Service (SISS) are working with SOLAR, Early Years specialists, health colleagues and School Improvement Advisors to develop a Back to School transition guide, with a specific focus upon mental health.
 - SISS has developed training packages for schools as part of their core offer.
 - StART Plan Co-ordinators will maintain contact with families of children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP).
 - The refresh of the council plan will have COVID recovery as a core theme running through all activities.
 - The development of a Joint Strategy for Children & Young People with Additional Needs, including Special Educational Needs will provide a strong framework to improve outcomes for the future and narrow the attainment gap with disadvantaged children.
- 7.2 The council and education providers will remain agile in our approach and ensure it evolves based on the latest scientific evidence and government advice, with the safety of our schools for pupils, their families and staff remaining our top priority.
- 7.3 But in the words of a young person, '*.....whilst some days may seem longer than others and more tiring, the tide is changing*'. A new norm is emerging at pace and we

will continue to work together to support our children, young people and families through whatever the future brings.

8. Implications and Considerations

8.1 How the proposals in this report contribute to the delivery of Council Plan priorities:

Priority:	Contribution:
Securing inclusive economic growth.	Returning pupils to full time education will equip them with the skills necessary to succeed in life and prepare them for the labour market. It will also enable parents to return to their paid employment as the lockdown eases.
Developing our approach to services for adults and children with complex needs.	Children with complex needs will be disproportionately impacted from missing education. Services are adapting to provide support to assist their return and narrow the gap between children with additional needs and their peers.

8.2 Consultation and Scrutiny:

8.2.1 Unions and school leaders have been fully consulted on the approach adopted by SMBC.

8.2.2 Scrutiny is asked to note the response and support provided to educational settings/families and make any recommendations to enhance our response.

8.3 Financial implications:

8.3.1 There are no direct financial implications to the council resulting from the work to support schools. Routine funding, both core and in the Dedicated School Grant is being provided as normal by government. In addition, schools will be able to claim funding from the Department for Education for exceptional expenditure relating to COVID. At present there has been no information from government about whether there will be any further financial support for schools themselves towards any additional costs brought about by reopening. . However, the council is not permitted to subsidise schools expenditure from the General Fund.

8.3.2 In terms of core services, we do know that some, such as Education Psychology and the Music Service may be affected by loss of income from being unable to trade with schools in the usual way and this is being evaluated.

8.4 Legal implications:

- 8.4.1 Although scientific and medical advice published last week indicates that children who do become infected with COVID tend to have a mild version of the illness, there remains a low risk that there could be an outbreak, or worse still, a fatality linked to one of our schools. In the event of a case in school, this will need to be followed up and the appropriate containment measures put in place, including contact tracing, testing and self-isolation based on advice from the national Contact Tracing Service/ Public Health England to minimise the risk of further spread.
- 8.4.2 Risks and liabilities in such a scenario would be managed in the same way a school has to manage any other risk; however risks can be mitigated by taking the approach to reopening developed by officers.

8.5 Risk implications:

- 8.5.1 *Risk 1* – The national guidance is updated and places new obligations on education providers and councils.

Mitigation

The recommended approach allows sufficient flexibility to accommodate the changing national picture and can also be updated as circumstances evolve.

- 8.5.2 *Risk 2* – The unions and school leaders object to the recommended options

Mitigation

Unions and school leaders have been fully consulted and the council will remain in contact with stakeholders to modify its approach should scientific evidence indicate this is necessary.

- 8.5.3 *Risk 3* – Staff and families are highly anxious about a wider re-opening of schools and early years settings

Mitigation

The council is writing to all families with pupils in Solihull schools to outline our approach and provide reassurance. A package of wide-ranging emotional support is being developed to support the wider re-opening of schools based on the positive outcomes to date of the measures already in place.

- 8.5.4 *Risk 4* – Covid outbreak or fatality linked to a Solihull school.

Mitigation

A detailed risk assessment has been developed to ensure settings only open when it is safe to do so. This will also require that significant protective measures are in place in accordance with government guidance and the latest scientific advice.

8.6 Equality implications:

8.6.1 National evidence indicates that disadvantaged pupils and those with additional needs are being disproportionately impacted from missing education. These pupils will benefit from returning safely to education settings as soon as is practicable and safe to do so.

9. **List of appendices referred to**

9.1 Appendix 1 – SMBC Position Statement & Principles

9.2 Appendix 1a – Health and Safety Risk Assessment

10. **Background papers used to compile this report**

10.1 [Click here to enter text.](#)

11. **List of other relevant documents**

11.1 [Click here to enter text.](#)