


REPORT TO

CHILDREN'S SERVICES AND EDUCATION
SCRUTINY BOARD

22 June 2020

Subject:	Phased return of pupils to Sandwell schools
Cabinet Portfolio:	Cabinet Member for Best Start In Life
Director:	Lesley Hagger, Executive Director of Children's Services Chris Ward, Director of Education
Contribution towards Vision 2030:	
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DECISION RECOMMENDATIONS

That :

1. That the Scrutiny Board notes and makes comment on the actions taken to date regarding the phased return of pupils to Sandwell schools;
2. That the Scrutiny Board receives further reports as relevant at future meetings.

1 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 Schools have been 'closed' since 20th March 2020, albeit open to the children of key workers and vulnerable children. On Sunday 10th May, the Prime Minister announced that there would be a phased return of

pupils to schools from 1 June 2020. This report seeks to ensure that Scrutiny :

- a) has up to date information about the current position in Sandwell following the government announcement that there will be a phased return of pupils to schools from 1 June 2020;
- b) is provided with further information at its meeting on 22 June 2020, as the position at the time of writing this paper is subject to daily amendments and clarifications from government;
- c) is appraised of the engagement between the Council and Sandwell's schools, both maintained and academy, and local teaching union representatives;
- d) is appraised of the engagement between the Council and the Department for Education and can compare its actions with the national and regional position;
- e) is provided with information about engagement with and communication to parents;
- f) is assured that schools attendance by vulnerable children and children of key workers will continue to be the priority.

2 **IMPLICATIONS FOR VISION 2030**

- 2.1 From 20 March 2020 schools have been closed to all pupils except for vulnerable children and the children of critical/key workers. The Secretary of State, Gavin Williamson, wrote to Council Leaders on 22 March 2020, setting out a clear role for the local authority to manage local arrangements across all education providers:

"I am looking to you to work with all schools, both LA maintained and academies, to ensure that there is sufficiency of places for children of key workers and vulnerable children. I am also keenly aware of your crucial responsibilities in maintaining effective safeguarding and child protection services in this challenging time."

- 2.2 The letter from the Secretary of State also confirmed that the DfE would be expecting to meet regularly with Council officers. These meetings have taken place two to three times weekly since 23rd March and have involved reporting on local arrangements, interpretation and implementation of technical advice, providing data on the uptake of placements, providing information on the support provided to vulnerable children and families, and various other matters including DfE guidance

(where more than 150 different sets of guidance plus updates have been issued over the past 12 weeks).

- 2.3 Almost all of Sandwell's schools have remained open, including during the Easter period. Just over 1.8% of the total pupil population has attended, which is similar to neighbouring Councils, and this has been increasing over past weeks in line with national data. Attendance data is collected daily and schools alert the Council to any children that they may be concerned about. The Council established a 'vulnerable children's group' where partners have brought together all information about vulnerable children to ensure that they receive safe and well checks, and any additional support that may be needed. The attendance of vulnerable children has been in line with national reports at around 15%.
- 2.4 The Council has sent a briefing note/communication pack to head teachers of all schools every morning and schools have appreciated this support. The communication has covered areas such as PPE, Free School Meals, transport, non-attendance arrangements, attendance procedures, adapting the curriculum and teaching practice for remote education, supplies and distribution of additional digital devices for pupils, supporting pupils' wellbeing and keeping them motivated and engaged, arrangements for assessment and examination grading, funding, arrangements for admissions appeals, and many other areas. During this time, the Council has also kept in regular contact with Sandwell College and providers of education through Alternative Provision.
- 2.5 Regular meetings between the Council and head teachers have also continued through the Joint Executive Group (JEG), and this has been the place where agreements about local arrangements have been made. Whilst the Council can provide advice and guidance, it is for schools to make their own final decisions about their own individual arrangements. Those arrangements have been discussed regularly at the daily meeting with Trades Unions and the Director of Education has attended these meetings to discuss local measures.

3 BACKGROUND AND MAIN CONSIDERATIONS

- 3.1 On Sunday 10th May, the Prime Minister announced that there would be a phased return of pupils to schools, beginning with Nursery, Reception, Year 1 and Year 6, and also that secondary pupils facing exams next year would 'get some time with their teachers before the summer holidays'. There was also a request that more early learning and childcare settings open from 1st June (some of which are on school sites or run by schools).
- 3.2 On 11th May the Council received high level information about the government's expectations, and later that evening some further details including confirmation that vulnerable children, and children of critical/key

workers would continue to be a priority, protective measures that would need to be put in place, and guidance for parents.

- 3.3 On 12th May this was supplemented with guidance about travel arrangements and safe working practices for staff, and on 15th May the DfE published a planning guide for primary schools, and updated guidance on safe working practices.
- 3.4 Following the Prime Minister's announcement many Trades Unions wrote to the government and directly to all schools with questions about the provision of PPE, risk assessment procedures and the scientific evidence supporting the return of more pupils to schools.
- 3.5 In Sandwell, as soon as the announcement was made, the Council and head teachers began to discuss options for implementing a phased return of pupils. It was felt that Sandwell could not adopt all of the DfE guidance because of space restrictions in schools and the need for social distancing. Proposals were pulled together by the Council and presented to the JEG meeting on 14th May, where they were unanimously agreed as set out below:
- Schools will continue to remain open to vulnerable children and key worker children;
 - The priority for additional children returning to primary school is:
 - Vulnerable children
 - Key Worker Children
 - Reception Class
 - Year 1
 - Year 6
 - Nursery (non-statutory group and so social distancing harder to enforce);
 - Children in the additional year groups will not attend full time during a week but instead attend on a part time basis for set days each week (whole days not half days);
 - A maximum of 6 – 10 pupils work in each classroom area depending on the size of the room. Schools will define their own total capacity based on internal teaching space;
 - Schools will adhere to social distancing as far as possible in classrooms and school environments including at break times and lunchtimes;
 - Schools will minimise the number of pupils that each staff member comes into contact with each day and PPE is available if a child becomes unwell or the needs of the child dictate the use of PPE;

- Appropriate daily cleaning schedules are put in place for the learning environments and at the end of the school day;
- There is a different start and finish time for each year group to reduce the parental traffic and to encourage social distancing ;
- Attendance at school is not mandatory for any child but is encouraged, particularly for vulnerable groups;
- Public Health England advice is followed for all staff who are shielding, vulnerable or living with someone who is shielding or extremely vulnerable.

3.6 The proposed arrangements set out above were shared with local Trades Unions accepted that, although national Trade Unions were in ongoing dialogue with the DfE and the outcomes of this were not yet known, the Council and schools did need to prepare for a potential phased reopening. Trades Unions have also shared risk assessment and planning documents with schools to assist with this process

3.7 On 15th May, the Council provided the following documents to schools, which are appended:

- Sandwell guidance for the phased restart of schools – this includes the overall plan, a frequently asked questions section and an initial planning framework document (checklist) to assist individual school planning.
- A letter for parents to circulate with schools' own communications
- A model risk assessment document
- A PPE request form (The Council will support schools that have not got access to PPE by providing starter packs to assist you in the short term).

4 THE CURRENT POSITION

4.1 Primary schools have been delivering the wider offer for 3 weeks and secondary schools for one week. Uptake of places will be outlined in the powerpoint presentation.

5 CONSULTATION (CUSTOMERS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS)

5.1 Primary schools asked parents to confirm if they wish to send their child/ren back to school at this time to help complete their planning. Initial indications suggest that 20-25% of families replied to say they would like to take up the offer. Schools developed their wider offers depending on

the response from parents. However, if more vulnerable children come back to school and more key workers request places for their children the wider offer will have to be reduced according to the space available in the schools.

5.2 Ongoing conversations have taken place with local Trades Union representatives as described in paragraphs 2.5 and 3.6 above.

5.3 The Executive Director of Children's Services and the Director of Education met (virtually) with the SHAPE forum to discuss education issues, including arrangements for returning to school and prioritisation. The young people's priority groups included vulnerable children and key worker children, Year 6, Year 10 and Year 12, and children who were keen to return. The young people reported that they had been provided with good resources by their schools but missed school life and classroom discussions.

6 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS.

6.1 A range of options have been considered including strict adherence to the government's guidance through to not extending the current opening arrangements. Everyone involved recognises the impact of the loss of education on children and young people and has worked hard to find a way to manage to increase current numbers through a safe and carefully implemented set of plans.

7 STRATEGIC RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

7.1 There has been an intense period of strategic planning over past weeks and the capacity to respond has been put in place within the Council and in schools. Operational activity between 1st June and the end of the academic year will also be strained.

7.2 School budgets and the Council's transport budget will be impacted but at this point in time it is too early to estimate. Early years providers, and their financial arrangements are particularly challenged; this is complicated further by the complex funding arrangements in place for this sector.

8 LEGAL AND GOVERNANCE CONSIDERATIONS

8.1 The local management of schools (LMS) was introduced in 1988 through the Education Reform Act. This part of the Act allowed all schools to be taken out of direct control of local authorities and passed to the head teacher and governors of a school. The Council has worked with Sandwell's schools to develop the approach to extending opening to more

pupils described in this paper, but schools are responsible for making their own, risk-assessed decisions.

9 EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 9.1 Keeping schools closed to tackle the coronavirus pandemic is almost certain to increase educational inequalities between children from the richest and poorest families, according to a study by the Institute of Fiscal Studies which found that by the end of May, children in better-off families will have received a week and half more home learning than children in the poorest households during the closures. Sandwell has high levels of deprivation and vulnerable children and it is likely that the educational attainment gap between these children and their peers from less disadvantaged backgrounds will increase.
- 9.2 The proportion of Covid-19 deaths of people from BAME backgrounds is higher, and so returning to school may increase risks in areas such as Sandwell where the BAME pupil population is higher than national at 41%.

10 DATA PROTECTION IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 10.1 There are no data protection implications arising from this report.

11 CRIME AND DISORDER AND RISK ASSESSMENT

- 11.1 There are no crime and disorder implications arising from this report.

12 SUSTAINABILITY OF PROPOSALS

- 12.1 Based on the current plans, the arrangements will be sustainable until the end of the academic year 2020. It is currently not possible to anticipate plans for the start of the next academic year in September 2020

13 HEALTH AND WELLBEING IMPLICATIONS (INCLUDING SOCIAL VALUE)

- 13.1 Evidence shows that education and health outcomes are closely linked and that pupils with better health and wellbeing are likely to do better academically.
- 11.2 Schools are also a safety net for children and young people; when vulnerable children are not at school their levels of safety are impacted.

14 IMPACT ON ANY COUNCIL MANAGED PROPERTY OR LAND

14.1 There are no implications from this report on any council managed property or land

15 **CONCLUSIONS AND SUMMARY OF REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS**

15.1 There were 15 working days between the Prime Minister's announcement and the expected implementation of plans for more children to attend schools; the 15 days include 5 days for the half-term break meaning that there has been little time to plan. Nevertheless, Sandwell's schools and Council officers worked productively to develop a plan to safely manage the introduction of more children back to school from 1st June.

15.2 At the time of writing this paper, further announcements and guidance is expected from the government with regard to learning catch-up programmes and the expected return to school for all pupils.

16 **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

16.1 None

17 **APPENDICES:**

17.1 Appendix A – Phased restart for schooling guidance
Appendix B – Checklist and risk assessment template
Appendix C - Template letter to parents and Q&A

Director Name

Director Title