

Blackpool Council



**SCHOOL RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC
SCRUTINY REVIEW
FINAL REPORT**

1.0 Background Information

1.1 At its Workplanning Workshop on 2 July 2020 the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee identified the topic of the School Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic as an important area requiring scrutiny. As a result, Committee Members were invited to join a working group to undertake a scrutiny review of the issue.

1.2 A working group was established, consisting of the following Members:

- Councillor Jane Hugo
- Councillor Kim Critchley
- Councillor Andrew Stansfield
- Councillor John Wing
- Mrs Helen Sage, Co-opted Member

1.3 The importance of undertaking the review swiftly was recognised due to the time sensitivity of the issue and the need to determine if schools had done everything required to ensure the safety and wellbeing of staff and pupils during the medical emergency.

1.4 This review relates to the following Council priority:

Communities: Creating stronger communities and increasing resilience

2.0 Methodology

2.1 The working group held a total of two meetings, but reviewed the majority of its evidence during an information session, as detailed below:

Date	Attendees	Purpose
27 July 2020	Councillors Jane Hugo, Andrew Stansfield and John Wing Paul Turner, Head of School Standards, Safeguarding and Inclusion, Blackpool Council Elaine Ireland, Senior Democratic Governance Adviser	To agree a scope and request any additional information required for the review.
August 2020	Councillors Jane Hugo and Andrew Stansfield Attendance at the headteachers' 'Return to School' meeting.	To observe discussions by schools on the measures in place to support a safe return to school.
9 September 2020	Councillors Jane Hugo, Kim Critchley, Andrew Stansfield and John Wing Mrs Helen Sage, Co-opted Member Paul Turner, Head of School Standards Safeguarding and Inclusion, Blackpool Council Elaine Ireland, Senior Democratic Governance Adviser <u>Sources of information:</u> Feedback from Blackpool headteachers on the support provided by the Council. Review of attendance data during the phased reopening of schools. Responses from the JustUz group of young people on their experience of attending school during the pandemic or the support they received for home education. Review of the provision and distribution of technology for disadvantaged families, children and young people across Blackpool.	To review and discuss the data and information gathered.

3.0 Detailed Findings and Recommendations

3.1 Context of the Review

Timeline of Events

18 March 2020 - Secretary of State for Education announced that schools in England would close from 20 March 2020 for an unspecified period of time.

The UK government announced that GCSE and A-Level exams would be cancelled and that grades would be based on a combination of predicted grades and teacher assessment.

19 March 2020 - The Prime Minister announced that schools would still open for children of key workers and vulnerable pupils and additional guidance on eligibility was issued by the Department for Education.

1 June 2020 – Primary schools in England began to open more widely to Nursery classes and children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 6.

8 June 2020 – Lancashire County Council’s Director of Public Health advised Lancashire schools to remain closed to all but the children of key workers and vulnerable pupils. Blackpool Council continued to give the clear message that schools were open for the specified year groups.

9 June 2020 – The government announced that despite previous plans, primary schools would now not reopen more widely to other year groups due to rising concerns of infection rates.

15 June 2020 – Secondary schools in England reopened for pupils in Year 10 and Year 12 only. School attendance was not compulsory for pupils until the start of the new academic year in September 2020.

August 2020 – Schools were issued with guidance to help with the safe reopening for all pupils from September 2020, when attendance would again be compulsory for all eligible pupils.

September 2020 – Schools in England reopened fully to all pupils.

3.2 The working group noted that only 75 per cent of Blackpool pupils expected to be in school attended at least one session in school before the summer holidays. The Head of School Standards, Safeguarding and Inclusion agreed that this figure could have been better and offered a number of explanations which had impacted on attendance levels, namely the Public Health message urging people to 'Stay at home,' coupled with parental logistical difficulties in getting children to school. A further factor identified was that of the differing messages being received from Lancashire and Blackpool, with Lancashire County Council taking the decision not to reopen its schools more widely. Members agreed that this may have caused confusion to Blackpool parents and could have negatively impacted on pupil attendance figures.

3.3 Key Learning

3.3.1 Examples of best practice from across Blackpool were sought, with St John Vianney's Catholic Primary School reporting pleasing pupil numbers. Contributing factors were identified as being the communication of a very clear message from the school that the Blackpool Public Health message was the only relevant guidance for parents, along with a proactive pastoral team who contacted any reluctant parents to provide reassurance and the opportunity to visit the school prior to sending their children back.

3.3.2 Clear communication from schools and a robust stance on an unequivocal message to parents was identified as being key to schools' successful reopening, with a number of channels of communication being utilised:

- Direct communication to schools from the Council which schools then distributed to parents, with this continuing over the summer holidays to reiterate the message to parents that schools were reopening as normal in September;
- A package which was coordinated by the Council's Communications Team, which included radio messages, leaflet drops, social media updates and notices in local and national newspapers;
- Weekly countdown reminders to the start of school over summer and the continuation of the messages throughout September in order to target any parents who had not sent their children back.

3.4 Elective Home Education

3.4.1 Concerns were raised as to the potential increase in families opting for Elective Home Education (EHE) following the lockdown as a result of several months of compulsory home schooling. A number of measures were identified which would mitigate this risk:

- No additional support was offered to families who opted to home school once the restrictions were lifted and all virtual learning ended in September in order to encourage all families to send their children back to school;
- Any children identified as being considered 'at risk' of not returning to school were proactively contacted by the attendance team to deter any applications for EHE and the team had been supplemented with extra staff to assist with this process;
- The Council sent a letter to all Blackpool-educated families informing them that no school places would be held and there was no guarantee that a place would still be available in the same school in the future once an application for EHE had been completed;

- Feedback suggested that families had actually been deterred from home schooling after experiencing the reality first hand.

3.5 Health and Safety

- 3.5.1 The Council's Health and Safety Team undertook the role of reviewing and giving feedback on all of the educational establishments, excluding Further Education and Higher Education, in Blackpool. This included Local Authority schools, Academies with a Council Service Level Agreement and any school in the area requiring help, advice and guidance. All school risk assessments sent to Children's Services were shared with the Health and Safety Team who then reviewed and provided feedback on the risk assessment directly to the school and to Children's Services.
- 3.5.2 After feedback and amendments had been implemented, the Health and Safety Team visited all Local Authority schools to carry out a monitoring exercise to ensure that all elements incorporated into the risk assessments were actually reflected in the procedures in place. All monitoring visits proved this to be the case. Further school visits also took place in September once pupils had returned.
- 3.5.3 Feedback from the Health and Safety team indicated that the vast majority of Headteachers and School Business Managers fully understood and embraced the guidance and all appeared to have worked hard to ensure their schools were Covid Secure in line with Health and Safety law and current government guidance. The Health and Safety Team offered continued support to schools as well as providing guidance and advice with any queries and concerns which schools raised.

3.6 Provision of Technology for Disadvantaged Families, Children and Young People

- 3.6.1 On 19 April 2020 the Department for Education announced funding for laptops and Wi-Fi devices for vulnerable children and young people as part of the response to Covid-19. Laptops were promised for any disadvantaged families, children and young people who did not currently have access to them. Government eligibility criteria outlined that devices should be provided to care leavers, children and young people aged 0 to 19 with a social worker and to disadvantaged Year 10 pupils. In addition, internet access, through 4G hotspot devices, was also to be made available for care leavers, young people aged 11 to 19 with a social worker and disadvantaged Year 10 pupils.
- 3.6.2 Allocation and distribution of devices for disadvantaged Year 10 pupils was the responsibility of the Local Authority for maintained schools or the appropriate Academy Trust. As a result, Blackpool Council was only responsible for the provision to disadvantaged Year 10 pupils within the Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). The Department for Education (DfE) allocated 20 devices to the PRU. For disadvantaged Year 10 pupils across Blackpool who attended an Academy, schools received their own allocations and ordered these directly from the DfE.
- 3.6.3 Allocation and distribution of devices for children with a social worker and for care leavers was the responsibility of the Local Authority. 906 devices were allocated based on the DfE eligibility formula.

3.6.4 The Council worked with the PRU and the social work teams to identify children and young people who were in need of a laptop and/or internet access. Devices arrived in late June and the majority were delivered to school settings in early July. Around half of the devices were delivered via schools thereby enabling the schools to add the devices to their own systems and networks. Schools then made arrangements to handover the device directly to the child or young person. The remainder of the devices were delivered directly through social workers or an allocated worker.

3.6.5 Some of the comments the working group received from young people on their experiences of home schooling included the following:

'My teachers have been really supportive, they have rung me and my carers every week to see how I am.'

'I have been completing my school work on-line every day.'

'I didn't feel very well supported at the start but then the last four weeks when we had set lessons to do then I did feel more supported. I am not that worried about going back to school after the summer as I am pretty much up to date with all my work and I did learn things from my lessons.'

3.7 Second Wave Preparation

3.7.1 Reassurance was sought as to the preparations in place for a potential second wave of the virus. The working group was informed that as provisions for remote learning had now been implemented, these would be easier to reactivate as required. Communication channels with schools and parents had now also been set up as a result of the initial wave and so messages could efficiently and easily be sent immediately following any change in government restrictions. It was felt that valuable lessons had been learnt during the first lockdown and Members were assured that provisions were adequately in place to effectively manage any future restrictions.

3.8 Conclusion

3.8.1 Following a full review of the data and after consideration of responses from headteachers, pupils and key Council officers, the working group was satisfied that adequate provisions had been made for the safe return to school for children and staff.

3.8.2 Concerns remained regarding the, as yet unknown, longer term mental health implications arising from the pandemic and Members raised this as an area requiring close monitoring and consideration in the months ahead. The potential impact on academic performance was also considered, with agreement reached that the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee should continue to monitor schools' results data over the long term.

3.8.3 Members wished to commend the efforts of the schools and the supporting Council officers in the implementation of virtual school provisions and a safe return to the classroom for Blackpool's children and young people.

3.9 Recommendations

- R1 That further consideration be given by Council officers to the implementation of measures to monitor and address the potential impact on mental health to both pupils and school staff as a result of the pandemic.
- R2 That the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee should continue to monitor academic performance and the impact of the pandemic on affected cohorts.
- R3 Council officers should continue to review practices in preparation for a second wave.
- R4 A best practice summary guide should be produced and distributed to schools by the Head of School Standards, Safeguarding and Inclusion which outlines the key success criteria as identified during the initial closure and reopening.
- R5 A letter of thanks should be extended from the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee to Headteachers and schools for their commitment and efforts in the continued safeguarding of pupils' learning and wellbeing in exceptional circumstances.

4.0 Financial and Legal Considerations

4.1 Financial

4.1.1 **There are no foreseen financial implications as a direct consequence of the recommendations**, however schools have incurred some costs due to the Covid Secure arrangements they have had to put in place such as the provision of hand sanitiser/hand wash stations and face coverings. In addition, during lockdown schools would have lost income due to the closure of children centres and after school clubs.

4.2 Legal

4.2.1 **There are no foreseen legal implications as a direct consequence of the recommendations**, however there could be significant financial/legal risk if a civil claim was brought against a school for Covid-19 (if a member of staff or pupil were to get the virus). Covid-19 is an uninsurable risk and therefore the school/Council would be liable for any claim if negligence could be proved. As long as the Covid Secure risk assessments continue to be updated and monitored to ensure that they are working in practice and that the schools continue to follow the national guidance about opening then this will protect them should a claim be received. The health and safety team have continued involvement with the schools to offer advice and guidance as required to mitigate this risk.

School Response to Covid-19 Pandemic Scrutiny Review Action Plan

Recommendation		Cabinet Member's Comments	Rec Accepted by Executive?	Target Date for Action	Lead Officer	Committee Update
R1	That further consideration be given by Council officers to the implementation of measures to monitor and address the potential impact on mental health to both pupils and school staff as a result of the pandemic.	The mental health of our school community is a regular consideration at meetings in our governance structure, to include Blackpool Education Board, Renewing Education group (Covid return to school) and our weekly public health Q&A session. Relevant themes and issues are shared across the wider partnership to influence intervention support.		April 2021	Paul Turner	
R2	That the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee should continue to monitor academic performance and the impact of the pandemic on affected cohorts.	The every day business of monitoring achievement will continue.		April 2021	Paul Turner	

Recommendation		Cabinet Member's Comments	Rec Accepted by Executive?	Target Date for Action	Lead Officer	Committee Update
R3	Council officers should continue to review practices in preparation for a second wave.	This work is ongoing and will continue to be responsive to government guidance through our Renewing Education group.		February 2021	Paul Turner	
R4	A best practice summary guide should be produced and distributed to schools by the Head of School Standards, Safeguarding and Inclusion which outlines the key success criteria as identified during the initial closure and reopening.	Best practice is shared through our governance arrangements, specifically through our Renewing Education group and public health question and answer sessions. Learning is already communicated through our governance structures and to every school establishment. A summary guide would therefore be a duplication.		N/A	Paul Turner	
R5	A letter of thanks should be extended from the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee to Headteachers and schools for their commitment and efforts in the continued safeguarding of pupils' learning and wellbeing in exceptional circumstances.	This would be welcomed.		January 2021	Paul Turner	