

SCHOOL CLOSURES DURING INCLEMENT WEATHER

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of the report is to update Members of the Committee on school closures during the recent period of bad weather.

Summary

2. Due to unusually severe weather, many of Darlington's schools were closed for a day or more during the week commencing 30 November 2010. This report gives details of the closures and considerations headteachers have to make before calling an emergency closure.

Recommendations

3. It is recommended that Members receive the report for information.

**Murray Rose
Director of People**

Background Papers

There are no background papers attached to this report

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S17 Crime and Disorder	There are no issues arising directly from this report which affect crime and disorder.
Health and Well Being	The majority of emergency school closures during inclement weather happen because headteachers are concerned about the health and wellbeing of the children for whom they are responsible.
Carbon Impact	There are no direct issues arising from this report.
Diversity	There are no issues arising directly from this report which affect diversity.
Wards Affected	All wards in Darlington suffered the impact of recent inclement weather. Parents and children across the Borough were affected by full or partial school closures.
Groups Affected	Children and young people, parents and teachers.
Budget and Policy Framework	This report carries no direct implications for the Council's budget or Policy framework
Key Decision	No
Urgent Decision	No
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	This report has no direct linkage to the sustainable community strategy
Efficiency	The report has no direct issues for the Council's efficiency agenda.

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

4. The British Isles has been subjected to one of the longest and most extreme periods of inclement weather for fifty years. Reports in the media are making comparisons between the 2010-11 winter with the winters of 1963 and 1947, in respect of its severity. Daytime Darlington temperatures on 3 December 2010 reached a low of -15° Celcius. Transport networks have been severely disrupted. The East Coast mainline operated a reduced timetable in the week of 30 November 2010 and restricted the speed of inter-city trains to 80mph. The motorway network was also disrupted, in some parts of the country motorists were trapped in their cars for long periods. Locally, the A1 was reduced to one lane in either direction and travellers faced delays due to jack-knifed lorries or wrecked vehicles blocking the carriageway.

5. Conditions for pedestrians were very poor. Snow-falls accumulated to depths of more than 30cm. Compacted snow and ice made walking hazardous. Families with push-chairs experienced particular difficulties. Hospitals reported a significant increase in the number of casualties presenting at accident and emergency with breaks and fractures, following slips and trips on the snow and ice. Two local 'bus companies decided that it was too dangerous for their drivers on the roads on 1 December 2010, and did not provide transport services for pupils.

6. Many schools in Darlington closed during the bad weather and the details of the closures are given below:-

SCHOOL CLOSURES IN DARLINGTON

X – closed ✓ - open

NAME OF SCHOOL	29/11	30/11	1/12	2/12	3/12
Abbey Infant (The Federation of Abbey Schools)	X	X	X	X	✓
Abbey Junior (The Federation of Abbey Schools)	X	X	X	X	✓
Alderman Leach	✓	X	X	✓ Closed to Nursery and Reception only the school will be open from 9.30-2.30, children who attend are to bring a packed lunch.	✓ Open to all from 9am-2.30pm
Beaumont Hill Technology College	X	X	X	X	X
Bishopton/Redmarshall CE (part of the federation of Bishopton and Heighington CE Primary Schools)	X	X	X	X	X

NAME OF SCHOOL	29/11	30/11	1/12	2/12	3/12
Borough Road Nursery	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Branksome Science College	X	X	X	X	✓ Open from 10am to years 9,10 & 11 only
Carmel R C College	X	X	X	X	X
Cockerton CE VA	X	X	X	X	X
Corporation Rd Community	✓	✓	✓	X	✓ Open to all from 9am- 2.30pm
Dodmire	X	✓	✓ / X	X	X
Firthmoor	X	X	X	X	X
George Dent Nursery	X	✓	X	X	X
Gurney Pease	X	X	✓	X	X
Harrowgate Hill	X	X	✓	X	X
Haughton Community School & Arts College	X	X	X	✓ OPEN TO YEARS 10 & 11 ONLY	X
Heathfield	X	✓	✓	X	X
Heighington CE (part of the federation of Bishopton and Heighington CE Primary Schools)	X	X	X	X	✓ Open to all from 9am- 2.30pm
High Coniscliffe C E	X	X	✓ / X	X	X
Holy Family RC VA	X	X	✓ / X	X	X
Hummersknott School & Language College	X	X	X	✓ OPEN TO YEARS 10 & 11 ONLY	✓ OPEN TO YEARS 10 & 11 ONLY
Hurworth	X	X	X	X	X
Hurworth School Maths & Computing College	X	X	X	X	X
Longfield School, A Specialist College	X	X	X	X	X

NAME OF SCHOOL	29/11	30/11	1/12	2/12	3/12
Mount Pleasant	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mowden Infant	X	✓	✓	X	X
Mowden Junior	X	✓	✓	X	X
Northwood	X	X	✓ / X	X	X
Red Hall	X	X	X	X	X
Reid Street	X	✓	✓	✓	✓
Skerne Park	X	X	✓ / X	X	X
Springfield	X	X	X	X	X
St Aidan's Church of England Academy	X	X	X	X	X
St Augustine's RC VA	X	X	✓	X	X
St Bede's RC VA	X	X	X	X	X
St George's CE Aided	X	X	X	X	✓ Open from 9.30am
St John's C E Aided	X	X	X	X	X
St Teresa's RC VA	X	X	X	X	X
The Bridge	X	✓	X	X	✓ Open from 10.30am
The Phoenix Centre	X	✓	X	✓ Open from 10am	✓ Open from 10am
The Turnaround School	X	X	X	✓	✓
Whinfield	X	X	✓ / X	X	X

7. Officers from the Children's Services Asset Management Team started to take telephone calls from Headteachers regarding emergency closure at 05.45 on 30 November 2010. Through their efforts, local radio stations and the media were able to cascade information to parents and the public about the developing situation. Up to date information was also posted on the Council's web-site.
8. Emergency closure of a school is a matter determined by the Headteacher. In reaching a decision about closure, the Head will have to give paramount consideration to the health and safety of pupils. S/he will have to consider the physical environment of the school and

the additional risks posed by inclement weather. Consideration will need to be given to the functioning of utilities as the building needs to be warm and safe, and arrangements have to be in place for food at lunch-time. Headteachers also have to consider the staff supervision levels available. These will vary considerably from school to school. In some instances, staff may live locally, in other cases staff may live at a distance from schools.

9. Generally, pupils live within the locale of the schools they attend but some schools in Darlington, particularly in the secondary sector, have many of their pupils 'bussed to school. If weather forecasts are predicting snow falls during the day, with the possibility of further disruption to transport, a judgement has to be taken about the risk of being unable to send children home at the end of the school day.
10. Headteachers have to make an assessment of how likely it is that staff will manage to get into school. Disruption to public transport and icy walking conditions result in staff arriving late (even if they have set out in good time) or having to abandon journeys. While staff are always expected to try to get to work during inclement weather, 'reasonableness' has to be considered; the Council, as employer, has a duty of care to staff just as it has a duty of care to children.
11. Headteachers have to make a judgement about whether they can open the school, be assured of an environment consistent with health and safety, their ability effectively to provide no more than child-care, or whether they can offer a reasonable learning experience for pupils. As can be seen from the table above, some schools restricted opening to certain year groups of pupils, others asked parents to have pupils bring packed lunches in an attempt to provide the best deal possible to children and their families.
12. There has been some conjecture raised on ways schools could have managed the situation differently. It has been suggested that teachers unable to get to their normal school could report to the school nearest to them in an attempt to keep as many establishments open as possible. While this idea appears reasonable, its operation would depend on headteachers knowing how many trained teachers lived near their schools, and were unable to reach their normal places of work. This is untenable. There are also strict procedures in place relating to child protection and unless an adult was known to a particular institution headteachers would have to exercise caution before allowing them substantial unsupervised access to children.
13. It has also been suggested that schools should open to pupils during the summer holiday period to make up for lost days. While this may be worthy of investigation, it would be by no means simple to introduce. For example, contractually, teachers are to make themselves available for 195 days (190 of which are pupil contact days). School holiday dates are set more than a year in advance and it is likely that some teachers and many parents and pupils will have made arrangements for holiday periods.
14. The Council does not operate a policy that treats the school workforce any more favourably than the rest of the population for gritting. Clearance of school sites takes a second priority to making pavements safe and providing snow clearance for the elderly, sick and vulnerable. There are no current plans to vary that policy.