

REPORT FROM THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND ADULT SERVICES IN RESPECT OF YOUNG PEOPLE

School closure and wider reopening

1. On 23 March, the government closed schools to all but the most vulnerable children and the children of key workers. Vulnerable children have been defined by the government as “those who have a social worker and those children and young people up to the age of 25 with education, health and care (EHC) plans.”
2. Following the period of partial closures since 23 March, schools/settings have been advised by the Government that Early Years settings and primary schools can reopen to pupils (Nursery, Reception, Year 1 and Year 6) from 1 June with Secondary Schools offering some face to face provision to Year 10 and 12 from 15 June as part of gradual measures to release the ‘lockdown’ period.
3. Schools, educational settings and early years childcare providers have been carrying out risk assessments and putting in place a range of protective measures to ensure they can safely re-open to more children and staff. It is expected that schools will reopen to different year groups at different stages in June. These re-openings will be purposely slow and considered, only building to a wider opening when schools are confident to do so and it is safe and right for children and families. Parents are being notified by schools when they intend to re-open and the steps they have put in place to ensure social distancing guidance and safety measures can be followed.
4. All schools in Darlington have remained open throughout the Covid-19 pandemic for children who are vulnerable and children of key workers who cannot be safely cared for at home. These children are able to carry on attending their school even if they don't fall into one of the priority year groups mentioned above.
5. During this period The Head of Education and Inclusion has met daily with the Regional Schools Commissioner and has issued daily updates to schools. The updates include the latest attendance information, any new guidance or developments from DfE and any questions that have been raised with the DfE. In addition, the Education Strategy Group has been meeting weekly throughout the COVID-19 crisis.
6. The Education Partnerships team has continued throughout this period to maintain statutory work and ongoing workstreams as well as respond the changing situation. In many cases additional network meetings have been convened virtually to ensure that colleagues are kept informed about the latest guidance and developments and are able to share good practice (eg SENCO Network, Exams Officers, School Leadership Group, Mental Health Leads Network, Early Years Leads Network, NQTs, PVI Network).
7. Briefing sessions with the Director of Public Health and Public Health Principal have been offered to all schools, colleges and early years settings. These sessions have been very well received and providers tell us that they have found them very

useful. The Educational Psychology Service has developed and provided resources for education colleagues on mental health issues, the recovery curriculum and critical incident management.

8. Ensuring smooth transitions will be particularly challenging this year. Partnership work to support transition for children in Early Years to Reception, Year 6 to Year 7 and Year 11 to post-16 is ongoing.

Attendance of Vulnerable Pupils

9. Since the partial school closure on 23rd March, all schools in Darlington have remained open for the children of critical workers and vulnerable children. In doing so, our schools have recognised the importance of continuity of care and accessibility. (In contrast to some other local authority areas where a 'hub' model has been adopted.) Pupil numbers stabilised towards the middle of the first week of closure at around 300 (representing less than 2% of the overall cohort), with higher numbers in primary schools than secondary schools. Attendance has increased significantly since the Easter holidays for these groups and pupil numbers for these groups are now around 950 a day.
10. The Education and Inclusion Service has worked collaboratively with the Education Strategy Group to develop a protocol for alternative school arrangements should they be needed during the COVID-19 temporary school closure. This contains Darlington wide guidance on the procedure to follow where it has been identified that pupils may need to attend another setting during the Covid-19 period.

Children with a social worker (including looked after children) attendance

11. Children with a social worker (including looked after children) can continue to attend school during the COVID-19 restrictions. All of Darlington's schools have made arrangements that enable children with a social worker to continue to attend, and they are encouraged to do so. Schools have shared their daily attendance logs with the local authority so that attendance can be monitored. Current attendance rates are as follows:

Statutory school age LAC: (26%)

Statutory school age CIN: (19%)

Statutory school age CP: (34%)

Children with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP)

12. Attendance at education settings of children with EHCPs. From an initial 10% attending school at the start of the partial school closure this decreased to an average of 3% daily attendance at education settings. This was in-line with Government guidance that stated, 'Many children and young people with EHC plans can safely remain at home'. It was expected that only the most vulnerable children and young people are being encouraged to attend settings and most importantly those who have a social worker.
13. Government guidance that additionally states 'Special schools, colleges and local authorities are advised to make case by case basis assessments of the health and safeguarding considerations of pupils and students on an education, health and

care (EHC) plan. For some, they will be safer in an education provision. For others, they will be safer at home.'

14. Some children and young people have significant underlying health needs, such as significant conditions for whom the virus presents a life-threatening risk. Others may not be able to adopt the self-care hygiene strategies as defined by Public Health England. Other pupils may need physical contact to access provision or remain safe. Some require intimate personal care. These factors are being taken into consideration when liaising with education settings and parents/carers regarding children and young people.
15. Attendance for children with an EHCP has increased during the Covid-19 period and is now at an average of 19%.

Requests to Assess / Issuing of EHC plans / EHCP decision making

16. Normal decision-making processes for SEND have continued through this period. The Multi-Agency Panel (MAP) continues to meet fortnightly via Microsoft Teams with well attended panels taking place since the current circumstance began.

Annual Reviews

17. There is an expectation that the requirement to undertake annual reviews should continue where it is reasonable to do so. There are however challenges in carrying out any review meetings given the circumstances. Depending upon the availability of families and the various professionals, it may be possible for annual reviews to go ahead using online meeting technology or via the phone.
18. At this time, we have asked that education settings consider the following to support annual EHCP reviews:
 - (a) Whether parents/carers and young people agree for a digital or phone review to take place
 - (b) The most appropriate mechanisms available to gather the relevant information and ensure participation
 - (c) Giving sufficient opportunity for active professionals to contribute by giving early notification of the annual review date.
19. Where a review has taken or does take place the service asking that settings submit the annual review paperwork in the usual way and we will continue to offer support through the SEND Officer team. The service remains in contact with the DfE through the regional SEND adviser to ensure we are receiving the most up to date advice and guidance and continue to ensure that the authority is making all reasonable endeavours to keep EHCP processes moving in these challenging circumstances

EHCP Risk Assessments

20. There is a clear direction regarding the risk assessment of children and young people with an EHC plan in current guidance from Government. Guidance states that *'Those with an EHC plan should be risk-assessed by their school or college in consultation with the local authority (LA) and parents, to decide whether they need to continue to be offered a school or college place in order to meet their needs, or*

whether they can safely have their needs met at home. For vulnerable children and young people who have an education health and care (EHC) plan, attendance is expected where it is determined, following [risk assessment](#), that their needs can be as safely or more safely met in the educational environment.

21. A risk assessment has been completed for all 799 children and young people in receipt of an Educational Health and Care Plan in Darlington.

Children with a social worker (including looked after children) risk assessment

22. Children's social workers or Early Help practitioners have risk-assessed each individual child's circumstances and made recommendations about school attendance based on the child's best interests. This has been applied to children who are subject to Child Protection, who are Looked After, are Child in Need or accessing Early Help services.
23. The Risk Assessment includes:-
 - (a) Whether the child is attending school provision as part of the government offer for vulnerable children.
 - (b) If the child is not attending, consideration as to whether this increases the risk to the child.
 - (c) Whether the Social Worker / Early Help Practitioner has spoken to the school to discuss attendance / details of this conversation
 - (d) How visits should be conducted and frequency
 - (e) A Risk Management Plan
24. Following completion of the Risk Assessments they were RAG rated Red / Amber to prioritise the children based on the agreed visiting frequency within the assessment.
25. An agreed schedule of welfare checks and revised safeguarding protocols is in place to ensure that any children with a social worker who are not continuing to attend school nevertheless remain in frequent contact with the school, and so that school can quickly raise any issues with the relevant social worker. Schools were provided with the following advice for children not attending on 31st March 2020:
 - (a) *If a child is on a Child Protection Plan and is not attending school during this period it is recommended that a welfare call or virtual platform is used to speak to the child at least daily, please liaise with the child's Social Worker.*
 - (b) *For children on Child in Need plans that are not attending school during this period it is recommended at least weekly contact with the family via telephone calls or virtual platforms to speak to the child.*
 - (c) *If you are unable to contact the family and speak to the child liaise with the Schools DSL, the child's Social Worker or the Duty Social Worker for advice.*

Virtual School for Looked After Children

26. The Virtual School has continued to operate "virtually" throughout the COVID-19 period and is undertaking all its usual functions including monitoring attendance, managing PEPs, providing professionals with advice and guidance and promoting the educational achievement of children looked after and those previously looked after. In addition to its statutory responsibilities the Virtual School has increased its

remit to support any child with a social worker, in order to promote attendance at school of this vulnerable group.

27. The Virtual School has arranged alternative education provision for a number of children who have unable to access their normal education provision.
28. The school holidays creative arts project has been reformulated to be delivered remotely. "Cool things to make and do" has been well received by our children and their foster carers with packs being sent by email and delivered by hand during Easter and half term breaks.
29. Darlington library has supported the Virtual School in expanding its book club to more looked after children. The Virtual School has supported 39 children as part of its regular program, but with the support of the library another 114 children looked after have been sent books during the COVID-19 period.

Early Years

30. There have been a significant number of setting closures since the announcement of closure to all but the children of critical workers and vulnerable children. Key reasons cited for closure of settings have been financial, demand being less than anticipated and concerns from childminders, in particular about health risks to their own families of providing childcare in their own homes.
31. However, there are no indications that there is insufficient capacity overall within Darlington to cope with current demand. As with schools Early Years settings have been able to open for wider pupils since June 1st.
32. The local authority has a duty to ensure sufficiency of provision and this situation is being closely monitored by both the Education and Inclusion Department and the Families Information Service.
33. In addition, an Early Years Education Strategy Group has been established. Nursery schools, private providers, childminders, social care and health colleagues are represented, and the group has been instrumental in developing protocols to support settings and the attendance of vulnerable children.

Skills and Employability

34. The Learning and Skills Service Learning and Skills has moved all learning online using Google Classroom and learners are also being given telephone support. The service has been able to attract new learners as well as retain current learners. 16-18-year-old learners are starting to get some face to face support on a one to one basis to ensure they are able to complete their course. There are some challenges around the changes to qualification registration and online assessments, but the service is coping well.
35. Routes to Work (RTW) supports unemployed over 30-year olds who are the hardest to reach and have significant barriers to employment. The aim of the project is to help remove those barriers and ultimately move clients into employment. The team are maintaining regular contact by email and telephone with the clients. The team's role has expanded since lock-down and they are supporting and signposting clients across a wide range of issues.

36. The Youth Employment Initiative (YEI) supports unemployed 16-29 year olds into employment. Work continues with the clients online and over the telephone. Job vacancies, including those advertised as result of COVID-19, are circulated regularly and followed up with suitable clients. As with Routes to Work the teams' role has expanded to providing support and signposting on the wider issues created by COVID-19 and the lock-down.
37. RTW and YEI are working with clients over the telephone and online. The support offered has expanded beyond developing employability skills to wider aspects including signposting to other services, digital support, general welfare checks etc. Some clients have managed to transition into employment during lockdown, but other vulnerable clients have concerns about moving into employment at this point. The number of new referrals has declined significantly whilst Job Centre plus has been focussed on new benefit claimants, however we understand that this will change shortly, and they will soon be starting to refer existing clients on to programmes such as Routes to Work and YEI.