

SERVICE HIGHLIGHT REPORT – COVID-19 AND KEY SERVICE UPDATES

SERVICE AREAS:	Education
REPORT AUTHOR:	Jonathan Lewis
REPORTING PERIOD:	To the 7 th January 2021
LOCAL AUTHORITY:	Cambridgeshire

Part 1 - COVID-19

NEW GUIDANCE AND IMPACT

There has been a significant amount of change in Education since the end of term and the LA has had to respond to these changes as the level and quality of guidance from the government has been at times non-existent.

- Impact of moving to Tier 4 – under these arrangements, education continues to operate normally. However there are some impacts on staffing with critically extremely vulnerable and pregnant staff with underlying conditions or in the third trimester, required to work at home.
- Secondary age pupil testing – the government has provided equipment and training to allow schools to test their staff and pupils. The scheme requires significant labour input to deal with the analysis and record of the self-administered tests. The scheme uses lateral flow tests and is in three elements –
 - Weekly testing for all staff in school
 - Testing children on return to school twice in a 5 day period – as a one off process.
 - Daily testing for pupils and staff over 7 days who have been a close contact of someone with confirmed Covid-19. The guidance allows parents to send their children in as an alternative to being at home. We have concerns around the safety of this option especially in light of the reliability of lateral flow testing.
- Section 44 / section 100 of the Employment Rights Act – during the period prior to opening, the National Education Union and Unison issued guidance to its members on recommending that where staff felt the risk in school was too great, they should instead refuse to attend school in person. This was based upon the heightened Covid-19 risk nationally. The unions believe that schools should close. The relevant legislation protects the members of staff from action until the employer can disprove the claim. The unions did however indicate they would support remote learning and teaching of vulnerable and critical worker children in school. The impact of this process was that a significant number of classes had to close.
- The Closure of Schools on the 6th January – in his speech on the 4th January, the Prime Minister closed all primary and secondary schools apart from for [critical workers and vulnerable pupils](#). Special schools and the early years sector remain open for all pupils. No guidance on how this will work was released until the 7th January, after schools had opened. Briefings were held for schools and early years providers with over 700 people attending the sessions. The LA developed guidance on how best to deliver schools including protecting staff and pupils by limiting the number attending. There is a requirement to deliver remote learning to all those pupils not attending in person. The definition of critical worker has expanded significantly. We have schools where all children in the class are covered by this definition. Clearly where we are trying to reduce transmission we need to limit numbers and we recommended limiting this at 50% of normal numbers. The message also remains to stay at home. Schools will make individual decisions but we ask schools to prioritise children in the social care system, those pupils with EHCP and critical workers who work in health, social care, education and the Police. Beyond this, schools will admit up to their capacity

limit. This was felt fair and appropriate. We wrote to parents to outline the [closure of schools on the 6th January](#).

- National Guidance – this arrived on the afternoon of the 7th January and whilst our guidance matched expectation, the guidance outlined that all critical worker children should be admitted. We are currently considering our response to this guidance. We have to balance safety against the Covid-19 response.
- Laptops – the government has made available a further 100,000 laptops to enable home learning. However, the allocation to Cambridgeshire and Peterborough schools has been low. Further laptops were released to schools on the 4th January and primary schools will receive their allocations on the 16th January. We are intending surveying schools to identify children without laptop or broadband access. Details have been sent to schools on using games consoles to access remote learning. Schools are required to publish their remote learning policy / approach on their websites by the 25th January.
- Free school meals – the government has committed further funding for parents to receive vouchers where schools are unable to deliver food parcels to homes.
- Early Years – despite school closures, early years settings have remained open to all children. The government rationale for this is that transmission is lower in younger children and children’s developmental needs at this time in their education. We have provided further advice on preventative measures including ventilation and the use of face coverings by staff. Numbers accessing have declined and this will place significant financial pressures on the sector. We are working on a financial support package.

NEW CHALLENGES AND ACTIVITY

- Winter Grant Scheme – in the week prior to the Christmas holiday, we issued 64,572 supermarket vouchers to families across Cambridgeshire (20,102 students) and Peterborough (12,184 students). It has been a huge effort from across the team. We received 3,236 individual applications for additional support from families across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. Support requests include food, household energy bills, clothing, blankets, shoes, and white goods. We had 1,742 contacts in the final week before Christmas to our Winter.support@cambridgeshire.gov.uk email address and have provided support to parents using vouchers and claiming free school meals. The process triggered around 400 extra parents to sign up for free school meals which will generate additional funding of around £2.7m. We will be re-running the scheme in February and intend marketing applications for pupil premium funding alongside the voucher.

RECOVERY ACTIVITIES

- The focus has been on ensuring school reopen appropriately. Recovery activities will form part of the LA work for the period up until February half term.

DECISIONS MADE SINCE LAST REPORTING PERIOD

- In light of the very late notification of guidance for schools, we allowed schools to have a planning day on Tuesday 5th January to organise remote / in school learning.

NEW COVID-19 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS SINCE LAST REPORTING PERIOD

- There is an emerging need to provide more capacity in certain service areas (as outlined in the workforce challenges) due to increased demand. We are currently developing business cases for this additional support and hope to have the additional capacity in place in January.

WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

- Despite schools closing, our statutory duties remain the same and our workforce are stretched in delivering business as usual and support schools and education with Covid-19.

COMMUNICATIONS

- Two letters were sent to parents outline the [plans for reopening in January](#) and the [closure of schools on the 6th January](#).
- A significant amount of interviews were undertaken with the BBC and other media around the reopening of schools in January.