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Title of meeting:	Education Advisory Board
Subject:	Response to Covid-19
Date of meeting:	8th February 2021
Report by:	Mike Stoneman, Deputy Director, Education
Wards affected:	All

1. Requested by

- 1.1 Alison Jeffery, Director of Children, Families and Education

2. Purpose

- 2.1 This report sets out details of the work and ongoing work that has, and is continuing to be undertaken, by the council and partners to support education settings in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. It builds on the report that was presented on 14th October 2020 and provides the latest update and the education response to the 3rd national lockdown and the closure of schools to the majority of pupils with the exception of key worker children and vulnerable learners.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 It is recommended that members of the Education Advisory Board note the actions that have been taken over the past nine months by the council and partners to respond to the pandemic and the ongoing work that is in place in order to continue to support education settings.**

4. The initial response to the pandemic

- 4.1 Following the decision by the government to close education settings from 23rd March 2020 the council worked closely with partners to agree and quickly put into place a response that would support education settings and protect and safeguard vulnerable learners. The initial response is set out below in paragraphs 4.2 to 4.7:

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- 4.2 A Covid-19 working group was established and chaired by the Deputy Director. This included a broad range of education leaders from schools, colleges, Multi Academy Trusts and early years settings as well as council officers and a representative from the Regional Schools Commissioner office. This group provided an important vehicle to consult on what was needed, agree priorities to focus on and to have oversight of the workstreams that followed and the actions that were being taken by each workstream. This was summarised in an overarching plan which was continually updated.
- 4.3 Six workstreams were quickly established, brief details of which are given below:
- **Infection control and health & safety** - chaired by the Director of Public Health. Weekly updates and guidance on infection control were provided to education settings and basic packages of PPE were delivered to all schools.
 - **Digital learning and home learning** - chaired by the seconded Ofsted HMI. The work supported the delivery of remote access to education and the preparations of a more comprehensive offer for the Autumn term exploiting the advantages of digital technology. A baseline survey was completed during the summer term to support this.
 - **Emotional health and wellbeing** - chaired by the PEP and Inclusion Manager. A range of resources were developed to support schools both in terms of the emotional health of pupils and staff.
 - **Safeguarding and vulnerable learners** - chaired by the Head of Service for Inclusion. Work included the deployment of the LA Link Co-ordinators details of which are given in paragraph 3.6
 - **Transitions pre-school through to key stage 2** - chaired by the Early Years Advisory Teacher.
 - **Transitions key stage 2 through to key stage 5** - chaired by the Post-16 Commissioning Manager. Work included the development of the Flying Start website and resources which supported the transition of Year 11 learners to post-16.
- 4.4 To ensure there were good **communications** between the council and headteachers, weekly virtual meetings were held with headteachers consisting of 3x primary heads (central, north and south), secondary heads and special school heads. Bi-weekly meetings were also held with CEOs of multi academy trusts and also with heads of LA maintained schools. These were chaired by the Director, Children, Families and Education. In addition to meetings a daily email from the Director went out to all school leaders and partners providing key information and resources with links to dedicated pages on the PEP website.

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- 4.5 In addition to the workstreams and above communications, a weekly **'recovery and reset' reference group for early years settings** was established and business sustainability service (Hempsalls) was commissioned to support the market.
- 4.6 An early decision was also made to deploy **LA Link Co-ordinators to every school in the city to support the tracking and monitoring of vulnerable children and young people**, particularly those that were not accessing school, to ensure they and their families were getting the right support. Schools welcomed the opportunity to triangulate their
- 4.7 **LA Link Officers** were deployed to LA maintained schools in order to provide support and sign off health & safety checks, risk assessments and plans for re-opening schools to specific year groups as required by government.

5. Preparing the opening of schools to all year groups

- 5.1 During the summer, the council and partners worked hard to support schools to re-open to all year groups from September. A summary of the response is set out below in paragraphs 5.2 to 5.9.
- 5.2 Whilst the Covid-19 Working Group was stepped down a number of the **workstreams were retained** including: digital learning; infection control; emotional health & wellbeing; and safeguarding & vulnerable learners. These have now been merged into the PEP structures which are shown on page 4 of the new education strategy 2020 - 2023.
- 5.3 The **infection control and health & safety group** stepped up their work to pull together a package of support that included guidance, resources, flowcharts and template letters that schools could send out to parents to cover a range of scenarios where there was a positive case, outbreak, local lockdown, etc.
- 5.4 A **Welcome Back to School campaign** was launched over the summer in order to reassure parents and carers about their children returning to schools and to demonstrate that schools were doing everything that was necessary to make schools safe. The previous school attendance campaign 'Miss School Miss Out' is currently on hold.
- 5.5 Alongside the Welcome Back to School campaign, a **Welcome Back toolkit and resources** for schools was produced and distributed. Similar versions were done for front line practitioners working with families and also a version for partner organisations.

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- 5.6 The arrangements for **tracking and monitoring vulnerable children and young people** were continued but due to the fact services were being stood up again and those redeployed as LA Link Co-ordinators were having to return to their roles, a decision was made to recruit 3 full time Co-ordinators.
- 5.7 To further support vulnerable children and in particular those that might struggle to return to school, a template for **Welcome Back Plans** were distributed which many schools have used during the first few weeks of the Autumn term.
- 5.8 Also distributed ahead of the first week of term was a **Welcome Back to School wellbeing support package for schools** based on a similar package that was developed in Medway.
- 5.9 The arrangements that were in place during the summer term to support **communications** continued into the Autumn term but on a less frequent basis. Briefings for headteachers were held bi-weekly rather than every week and the daily communications were reduced to a weekly message on a Friday. Bi-weekly meetings with MATs continued and briefings for LA maintained schools returned to half termly.

6. Ongoing support during the Autumn term

- 6.1 During the Autumn term the council, working closely with schools, MATs and our partners, continued to focus on supporting **school attendance and support for our vulnerable children**. Attendance remained relatively high but there was significant disruption due to rising numbers of positive cases in schools which led to many pupils having to self-isolate and access remote education.
- 6.2 The council continued to support schools in the **tracking and monitoring of vulnerable children** and we were able to confirm in November the appointment of 3 full time LA Education Link Co-ordinators.
- 6.3 Significant work was done to support **remote education**. Through our contract with the Thinking Schools Academy Trust (TSAT) we have been able to offer dedicated support to all schools including a range of webinars and resources. A key focus has been on developing interactivity between teachers and pupils. This has included live lessons which many schools are operating and regular feedback and communication between the teacher and pupils. Support was also provided to our primary schools to purchase devices and equipment through funding from the local Elementary Education Trust.

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- 6.4 Support was also given to our school leaders in terms of **emotional health and wellbeing** and included regular sessions being delivered by Joy Squibb and Ian Hunkin, together with an offer of a coach / mentor.
- 6.5 In the absence of any national voucher scheme, and using funds from the Covid-19 Winter Grant scheme, the council established a **food voucher scheme for eligible FSM children**, through a contract with EdenRed. This was successfully delivered.

7. Response to 3rd national lockdown and closure of schools from 4th January 2021

- 7.1 On 4th January 2021 the 3rd national lockdown was announced which included the closure of schools until at least February half-term. Since then the government have announced that schools will not re-open until 8th March 2021 at the earliest, depending on factors including the rate of vaccination amongst priority groups. Children of key workers and vulnerable children will continue to be offered places by schools as far as they are able to and special schools and AP provision are expected to be fully open as all pupils are deemed vulnerable. In the case of the latter and due to staffing capacity issues and health and safety concerns this has not been possible with only a third of pupils currently accessing provision on site. It is hoped that through lateral flow testing and vaccinations for staff the situation will improve. Early Years settings have been required to remain fully open to all children throughout but are facing extreme pressures in meeting this demand due to staffing capacity issues.
- 7.2 The council has continued with many of the arrangements that were put in place last term and which are described in sections 4 and 5 of this report. In addition to this the council has provided a range of other support which are set out below in paragraphs 7.3 to 7.12.
- 7.3 With the majority of pupils now learning from home and the likelihood that this is set to continue for the majority of the Spring term, the focus on remote education has never been more important. TSAT's dedicated support remains in place and all schools were expected to set out for pupils, parents and carers, **information about their remote education provision** on their websites by 25th January 2021. The council has reviewed the plans for all our LA maintained schools, the majority of whom have used the DfE optional template.
- 7.4 **Engagement in remote education** varies between 80 to 95%, but there are now real concerns that engagement will drop as the lockdown continues, affecting disproportionately our most vulnerable learners. The

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council will be monitoring this on weekly basis and schools will be asked to complete a simple weekly update to support this.

- 7.5 **Access to devices** remains an issue and in addition to the DfE allocations and the local scheme for primary schools that was launched last term, the council has been working with Shaping Portsmouth and partners to establish a digital donation scheme which we hope will provide more devices to schools in the forthcoming weeks.
- 7.6 The council's corporate communications team have produced new social media assets as part of the **Protect Portsmouth / Ready to Learn campaign**. The aim is to help parents with 'top tips' for remote learning, details of which can be found at: www.portsmouth.gov.uk/remotelearning.
- 7.7 This term has seen a significant focus on **coronavirus testing** providing support to secondary and special schools in early January in terms of **lateral flow testing**, which was extended to primary schools. Support was brokered for The Harbour School through the University of Portsmouth to help train staff and establish the testing bays.
- 7.8 An important development has been the introduction of **weekly saliva testing** in our schools as part of a programme across the sub region and led by the University of Southampton. 3 secondary schools are participating in the first wave w/c 25th January and a second wave of 4 secondary schools will do so w/c 8th February, with the aim of including all secondary schools and colleges after half term. The saliva testing programme for staff and pupils offers a less intrusive and easier to administer method of testing.
- 7.9 Work is being done to ascertain if **lateral flow testing can be introduced into our early years** settings ahead of the community testing programme which will be established later in February and which will prioritise early years staff.
- 7.10 The council has also supported our schools in terms of **vaccinations** including prioritising staff that work with clinically vulnerable children resulting in the majority of our special school staff getting the vaccination, some staff in mainstream schools, a limited number of PCC Education staff who work directly with CEV children and all of our passenger assistants on home to school transport.
- 7.11 The announcement by the government to provide **food vouchers for FSM pupils** during the lockdown was welcomed but this will not include half term. The council will therefore be covering this through the Covid Winter

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Grant Fund, providing continuity for families who have FSM eligible children.

- 7.12 Through our progression career advisors we have been focussing our work on reducing the proportion of 16-18 year olds who are not in education, training and employment (NEET) including a focus on Year 11s as part of our Youth NEET Prevention Programme work. This has included building on last year's successful Flying Start website which this year will be supported by a range of webinars for parents and carers to support progression to post-16 education.

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Signed by Alison Jeffery, Director of Children, Families & Education

Appendices:

Background list of documents: Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972

The following documents disclose facts or matters, which have been relied upon to a material extent by the author in preparing this report:

Title of document	Location