

Meeting: Education Advisory Board

Subject: Response to Covid-19

Date: 18th February 2022

Report from: Mike Stoneman, Deputy Director, Education

Report by: Alison Critchley, Head of Sufficiency and Resources

1. Requested by Mike Stoneman, Deputy Director, Education

2. Purpose of report

- 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 reports that were presented on 14th October 2020, 8th February 2021, 14th July 2021 and 1st November 2021. Section 11 of the report provides the latest update.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 **It is recommended that members of the Education Advisory Board note the actions that have been taken over the past two years 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:
- 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

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

understanding of the situation of different children with that of council services. A Children's Hub was also established as part of the HIVE to provide support and help to families in need, identified by the Link Coordinators and by schools directly.

- 4.7 **LA Link Officers** were deployed to LA maintained schools in order to provide support and sign off health and safety checks, risk assessments and plans for re-opening schools to specific year groups as required by government.

5. Preparing for 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.
- 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 2020

- 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 2020 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.
- 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 8th March 2021. Children of key

workers and vulnerable children continued 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 around one third of pupils with SEND were able to attend school on any one day. Early Years settings were required to remain fully open to all children throughout but faced extreme pressures in meeting this demand due to staffing capacity issues.

- 7.2 The council 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 provided a range of other support which are set out below in paragraphs 7.3 to 7.7.
- 7.3 With the majority of pupils learning from home the focus on remote education was more important than ever. TSAT's dedicated support remained 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 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** varied between 80 to 95% in January and early February, but started to drop off somewhat once the return to school date of 8 March was confirmed, affecting disproportionately our most vulnerable learners.
- 7.5 **Access to devices** remained an issue. In addition to the DfE allocations and the local scheme for primary schools that was launched in the autumn term, we were also able to provide a small number of second-hand devices to schools through the Shaping Portsmouth partnership.
- 7.6 The council's corporate communications team 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 The council provided significant support in terms of **covid-19 testing and prioritising vaccinations** of staff and **food vouchers for FSM children**, a more detailed and up to date summary of which is given in Section 7

8. Support for the reopening of schools to all pupils from 8th March 2021

- 8.1 Schools reopened to all pupils on 8th March 2021. There had been concerns that worries about coronavirus may have resulted in a reluctance on the part of some children and/or families to return to school, but on the whole attendance after schools reopened was high, with some schools reporting 100% attendance. In some schools attendance was

adversely affected by pupils shielding, or families having travelled abroad and being unable to return.

- 8.2 To support the tracking and monitoring of school attendance and to understand better how Covid was affecting schools and in particular vulnerable learners, the council entered into an agreement with **Studybugs** which allowed the council to have access to 'live' attendance data and provide a helpful summary dashboards for each school. Schools were also given the opportunity to try out a range of add-ons to support school attendance. All schools participated in this with the exception of St Edmund's Catholic School. The pilot will be reviewed in the summer term with a view to agreeing a two year commitment for 2021/22 and 2022/23.
- 8.3 A key focus during the Spring Term was on **testing and vaccination**. Regular lateral flow testing was introduced for all staff and secondary aged pupils starting from January 2021, but with a significant increase in the numbers of tests from the return of all pupils on 8th March. During the Spring Term three secondary schools also piloted **weekly saliva testing** as part of a programme across the sub region and led by the University of Southampton.
- 8.4 The council also prioritised the introduction of **lateral flow testing for early years staff** ahead of the community testing programme.
- 8.5 In terms of **vaccinations**, Portsmouth followed the JCVI guidelines and included approximately 600 education based staff who work closely with clinically vulnerable children amongst our high priority staff. As a result the majority of our special school staff, 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 were offered a first dose of the vaccine by mid-February 2021, ensuring these staff had some protection before the wider return of pupils on 8th March.
- 8.6 The council was then able to include school-based staff in the local **zero waste policy**, meaning that teachers aged 50+ in schools started to be invited to vaccine appointments in March 2021. The council was able to offer all staff in schools the opportunity to receive a vaccine through the zero waste policy by April 2021.
- 8.7 Other infection control measures in schools have worked broadly as they did in the Autumn Term 2021, with the additional mitigations of lateral flow testing and face coverings
- 8.8 **Food vouchers for FSM pupils** were provided during February Half Term, the Easter Holidays, and May Half Term using the Covid Grant Fund. Vouchers were made available to children of statutory school age and also children whose families would have been eligible for benefits-related school meals in early years settings and FE colleges.

- 8.9 During the school Easter holidays we also launched the **Holiday Activities and Food programme**, working with 14 providers to make available 3,371 days of activities for children eligible for free school meals at venues across the City, with provision focused in areas with higher numbers of children eligible for free school meals.
- 8.10 Through our progression career advisors the council has been focussing our work to reduce 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
- 8.11 As part of our **Black Lives Matter and Anti-Racism** priority, schools across the city participated in UN Anti-Racism Day as part of their ongoing work to challenge and prevent racism. In line with other areas, concerns have been raised about an increase in prejudice-based incidents, in schools and in the community. We have relaunched our [Prejudicial Language and Behaviour Toolkit](#). Schools are now completing monthly returns so that we can start to identify patterns and trends and provide support where it is needed. A training package and guidance on **preventing and responding to racism** is being co-produced, and will be available in the Autumn Term.
- 8.12 The third **Mental Health Support Team** has now been recruited and training is underway. This means that all schools in the city are now able to access support from the MHSTs. Work is underway to map the current offer of support for **Social Emotional and Mental Health** needs and any remaining gaps in the offer. Guidance for professionals and parents will be piloted during the Autumn Term to help children, young people and families get the right support and the right time.
- 8.13 Support to ensure schools could continue to provide a good **remote access to education offer** continued, but attention turned to the next phase of work supported by a survey to schools and the development of a digital learning strategy, details of which will be outlined and showcased at the PEP Summer Conference on 2nd July.

9. Summer holidays 2021

- 9.1 During the school summer holidays **food vouchers for FSM pupils** using a Covid Grant Fund. Vouchers were made available to children of statutory school age (including Year 11 school leavers) and also children whose families would have been eligible for benefits-related school meals in early years settings. Due to the reduction in government funding it was not possible to extend these vouchers to the families of young people in FE colleges.

- 9.2 In the summer holidays we also substantially increased our **HAF Fun Pompey** programme working with 36 providers to make available 13,925 days' worth of provision
- 9.3 We estimate that over 3,000 attended HAF provision, which would be over 37.5% of the free school meals eligible population of around 8,000 pupils. The detailed breakdown below shows 3123, although we know that some children attended places with more than one provider so there will be some overlap

| Breakdown of children and young people attending HAF provision | | |
|---|--------------|----------------|
| | Primary Aged | Secondary Aged |
| FSM eligible, no SEND | 2306 | 487 |
| FSM eligible, with SEND | 195 | 55 |
| Non-FSM eligible (agency referred), no SEND | 53 | 16 |
| Non FSM eligible (agency referred), with SEND | 8 | 3 |
| TOTALS | 2562 | 561 |

10. Autumn term 2021

- 10.1 At the end of July, in line with England moving to "stage 4" of restrictions, the rules around how schools should operate were significantly amended, with these changes coming in from the start of the new school year. Key changes were:
- Schools were advised against using some of the mitigations that were in place during parts of last year, including the principle of keeping groups of pupils in separate 'bubbles'
 - Whilst the definition of a 'close contact' was unchanged, the requirement for close contacts of people with confirmed cases of coronavirus to self-isolate has been removed for all children and young people up to 18 years and 6 months, and for fully vaccinated adults
 - Schools will not be routinely asked to do contact tracing
- 10.2 Following the approach taken throughout the pandemic, schools and MATs worked closely with PCC education and public health colleagues to provide timely support and advice to Portsmouth schools
- 10.3 When schools returned at the start of September Portsmouth's infection rate was the highest in the South-East region, and the tenth highest nationally. The Director of Public Health therefore wrote to all schools giving support and encouragement to schools that wanted to put

additional mitigations in place where coronavirus was present in the school or wider community. We have worked closely with health to put in a stepped process where schools experience outbreaks

- 10.4 The removal of the requirement for whole bubbles to self-isolate where one member of the class tests positive has kept more children in school. However, over recent weeks in Portsmouth and nationally we have seen the infection rate in school age pupils, particularly secondary school age pupils, increase sharply, although there are now some signs that this is levelling off.
- 10.5 Absence amongst staff, including cases of coronavirus in fully vaccinated staff, and staff who are not fully vaccinated needing to self-isolate, is creating considerable pressure across all Portsmouth schools. One school has had to move to remote teaching for some year groups in the week before Half Term. If infection rates remain at their current levels we can expect more schools may need to move to remote learning over the coming weeks.
- 10.6 In mid-September the government confirmed that the go ahead had been given to offer a single dose of the Pfizer vaccine to teenagers aged 12-15, with these doses to be delivered primarily through schools. Again, there has been extremely close working between secondary schools, the school-age immunisation service, and the council to put the practical arrangements in place for vaccinations to be offered at all schools by October half term, and support high take-up of the vaccine from parents that choose for their child to be vaccinated.
- 10.7 Following recent government announcements arrangements are now being put in place to enable parents of children who missed their vaccination at school to book an appointment at St James's. This will benefit children who missed their vaccine at school because they were ill or had tested positive for coronavirus in the previous 28 days, or because they had changed their minds about receiving their vaccine.

11. Spring term 2022

- 11.1 The arrival of the even more transmissible Omicron variant shortly before Christmas has meant that cases increased rapidly again from January 2022, with the increase initially seen amongst primary pupils. Over half of Portsmouth schools have reported a coronavirus outbreak (5 or more cases in a single class or 10% of people in a group testing positive) since the start of January.
- 11.2 As last term, the high levels of coronavirus are continuing to create significant staffing pressures on schools, where fully vaccinated staff (including those who have received the booster) are testing positive, sometimes for the second or even third time. The changed requirements around self-isolation mean that some pupils and staff are able to return

after a shorter self-isolation period, but many staff are still testing positive on day 6 and others are unable to return immediately even when their 10 day self-isolation period ends, as they are not fully fit.

- 11.3 We have continued to have excellent engagement between schools and health so that all Portsmouth schools with secondary age pupils will be hosting vaccination clinics during the Spring Term to offer first and second vaccines for children aged 12-15.

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Signed by Director of Children, Families and 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 |
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