

**CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**  
**SCHOOL REOPENING UPDATE AND COVID RESTRICTIONS**  
**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

**1. Purpose of the report**

- 1.1 To update members of the Children, Education and Skills Scrutiny Committee on the progress schools are making and the services available to support schools and academies.

**2. Background**

- 2.1 After several months of partial closure schools reopened fully on 2 September 2020. School leaders have developed a set of clear risk assessments to ensure that the reopening of schools is as safe as possible. The Sunderland City Council Health and Safety Team worked closely with all schools providing a risk assessment template and guidance to supplement national guidance. Maintained schools are required to submit plans to the Health and Safety Team for assurance but a similar offer has been made to all academies who required additional support although the statutory assurance of plans for non maintained schools rests with the Trust Boards of each academy.
- 2.2 Schools and settings opened in a staggered start with many schools particularly in the secondary sector choosing to open with a planned staged return. By the second week in September all schools had returned and are now able to operate fully. The LINK School has some children on a blended timetable based on their needs, all children attend school in some form on a daily basis and will be reintroduced fully as soon as they are assessed to be ready.
- 2.3 In preparation for opening, a joint public transport plan was created with TFC, Sunderland City Council and Nexus to identify the capacity and requirements for public transport across the city. A weekly report has been established to understand any issues and to enable feedback from schools to be shared with nexus as appropriate. A communications campaign to encourage cycling and walking to schools has been implemented and additional support to schools to assist travel planning has been offered. Sunderland City Council travel team

are also undertaking site visits to monitor behaviour outside schools to offer advice and liaise with enforcement agencies as appropriate. Public transport capacity has not proved to be a major concern however the behaviour of parents entering and leaving schools has been more of an issue. The transport team will respond to complaints as appropriate and undertake regular school visits to monitor behaviour.

- 2.4 To facilitate the full opening of schools, Together for Children's services working in partnership with Sunderland City Council services have provided a wide range of guidance and support. We are collecting daily attendance figures from schools tracking attendance trends and contacting schools causing concern to understand reasons/themes. We are feeding concerns to partners such as Nexus and reporting data to DfE on a daily call. TfC Early Help attendance teams are already doing work to support specific families and we will continue to support them to ensure children return to school.
- 2.5 TfC school improvement officers are having weekly individual contact meetings with all headteachers to review progress and identify any specific issues. Schools requiring more intensive support have received a daily call. Communications with schools has been vital and as well as a regular call all schools receive a daily briefing which includes new guidance, advice and contact details for school improvement, HR, Health and Safety, Public Health and media support.
- 2.6 TfC school improvement safeguarding team are monitoring increases in electively home education numbers and will liaising with Sunderland City Council officers responsible for this. We will review any increases and identify appropriate responses to support affected schools.
- 2.7 The SEND officers are also tracking issues specifically with children with complex needs including transport issues. This group of children have a comprehensive individual risk assessments which are RAG rated and so a review of risk will be ongoing. SEND caseworkers will liaise directly with parents if children fail to return to school.
- 2.8 If a school is notified of a confirmed case of coronavirus in either staff or pupil or staff or pupils are exhibiting symptoms there is a clear pathway to advice. The DfE and the regional Health Protection Team have telephone advice lines in place. Sunderland Public Health Team have also established an email advice line and a telephone help desk. Schools can access support from any of the services available but feedback from schools has praised the local offer as being far quicker and providing excellent advice. Schools can seek advice seven days a week and into the evening and Sunderland Public Health staff

and TfC Education staff have worked extended hours to ensure the cover is in place.

- 2.9 The process for dealing with confirmed cases is well established. The closing of 'bubbles' within schools is part of the risk assessment procedures and schools liaise closely with Public Health to understand the duration and scope of a partial school closure. The closures due to confirmed cases tend to be age specific. For younger aged children the closure tends to be for a whole class or group simply because tracking of close contacts for young children is not possible with any accuracy. For older children it is easier to have much smaller group bubbles and more disciplined social distancing and therefore closures can be kept to smaller groups although this is not always possible in every case. Children in the special school environment also find disciplined social distancing difficult and the required physical contact and support by staff also makes this environment challenging and has resulted in frequent closures. Schools have remained focused on safety whilst accessing appropriate public health advice and we have seen well established partnerships working to meet the challenge in all settings.
- 2.10 Vulnerable children including cared for children and those with EHCP's are monitored closely. If a child is forced to self-isolate for a period then a risk assessment is designed to support the child. In partnership with schools the children's social work teams and virtual school team monitor the child's progress against a RAG rating and ensure support is provided as appropriate.
- 2.11 Children isolating in receipt of means tested free school meals are entitled to their meal if they remain at home and it is the school's responsibility to ensure they are provided. Schools with contracts with Sunderland City Council catering services are provided with a weekly meal box for each eligible child which is delivered to the home. Schools and academies with alternative catering providers are offering a range of support including food parcels and vouchers.
- 2.12 HR support has also been vital in supporting schools manage staffing issues throughout. The HR team have designed additional advice and risk assessments to support schools in assisting vulnerable and pregnant staff. One challenge schools have had to face is the conduct of staff outside schools and their adherence to social distancing rules particularly in social environments. Several cases in schools have been traced back to staff attending group social functions. The HR team have updated the advice around codes of conduct with specific advice to support headteachers and governing bodies manage the situation.

- 2.13 There is a weekly Joint Consultative Forum with education trade unions which ensures good communication. This has helped prevent issues across the city but also assists staff to deal with individual school based issues.
- 2.14 There is a daily call with DfE and a bi-monthly regional call with the DfE and the Regional School's Commissioner. This enables local issues and challenges to be shared and support requested as appropriate.

### **3. Recommendation**

- 3.1 The Committee is asked to note the information set out in this report.