

Children, Young People and Education Scrutiny Panel Briefing

Date of meeting	10th December 2020
To	Children, Young People and Education Scrutiny Panel
Title	COVID and the re-opening of schools
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Purpose of briefing	This briefing provides an overview of the full re-opening of schools since September 2020.

Background

Since March 2019, schools have been impacted by COVID and the government response to this. Schools have been open throughout the period since March but in the first phase this was limited to children from key worker families and those defined as vulnerable attending school. This meant that most children were educated at home through remote learning although this inevitably did take some time to set up as this was introducing a new way of working. Vulnerable pupils with attached social workers were strongly encouraged to attend school but this was a challenge due to the fear of the pandemic – about 20% of vulnerable children were attending school in this first phase. Special schools were open, but attendance again varied considerably between schools.

In June, schools were asked to admit pupils from targeted year groups (year 10 & 12 in secondary schools & in primary year R,1 & year 6 as well as nursery). Schools in Enfield did try to comply with this guidance, but for many schools this was not possible as they also had to comply with health and safety guidance regarding COVID. There was also a reluctance amongst the parent body to send their children back to school – this varied considerably from school to school.

During this first period, many schools were also open during the holiday periods providing childcare for key worker families. For example, Wilbury Primary School had a close relationship with the North Middlesex Hospital in order to support key worker staff. This meant that many staff worked through Easter and the Whitsun half-term without a break.

Senior local authority education staff met regularly with headteacher representatives to discuss COVID related issues and the guidance provided by the DfE. Meetings also took place with the relevant education trade unions. Extensive risk assessment guidance was provided to schools and community schools assessments were reviewed by the borough's health & safety team – this service was also offered to all Enfield schools including academies.

COVID and Schools from September 2020

i) Schools were expected to open to all pupils from September, but most schools took a staggered approach to the return of pupils over 2 weeks. This was because many children had been off school for a considerable period of time and also because of the new health and safety rules that were in place. Staff and pupils had to have time to understand the new arrangements and also to get back into the rhythm of school life. Additional training time was allocated for staff to understand the guidance and risk assessments which applied to every aspect of school life. Feedback from headteachers indicated that most children were delighted to be back in school with their friends even if there were new arrangements in place such as “bubbles”, new seating arrangements, corridor rules and break-time rules, etc.

ii) Considerable advice and guidance has been provided from the government on the opening of schools to all children from September. Senior education staff have been in at least weekly dialogue with the DfE concerning the guidance and feedback from schools. This has included very specific advice for example on the size of bubbles, minimizing social contact, staggered start times for schools and other examples of school practice. Meetings have been taking place on a weekly basis with headteachers representatives and monthly online briefings have taken place with all headteachers – a point to note here is the impact of online meetings as the attendance levels have been very high with nearly all schools attending.

iii) One of the consequences of schools opening to all pupils, has been the growing number of COVID cases affecting both staff and pupils. The guidance from public health and the DfE insists that if there is a COVID positive case within a bubble, the whole group needs to self-isolate for 14 days either from the date of the test or the date of the onset of symptoms. Initially there were few cases and schools followed a process informing the LCRC (Local Coronavirus response cell) but as the term progressed, the LCRC got overwhelmed with the number of cases being reported by schools and advice transferred to the DfE. Support to schools has also been provided by a small team within the local authority from education, human resources and public health – this support has provided in evenings and at weekends due the need for timely and speedy advice.

iv) At the time of writing this report in late November, most schools in Enfield have had at least one case of COVID with many having multiple cases. A number of schools have had to close completely for short periods, and this has been mainly because of a lack of staff to manage the school safely or to teach classes. Many pupils have had their in-school education disrupted and have reverted to a home or remote learning system. Although remote learning does work for some pupils, it is apparent that there is a real concern about digital poverty impacting on a large number of pupils who can't access online learning on a regular basis. In their visits to schools around the country Ofsted have commented on the “lost learning” that is taking place creating an even greater potential achievement divide between disadvantaged pupils and their peers.

v) A further issue to note is the impact of COVID on the workload of senior staff and particularly headteachers. If there is a case of COVID in a school, there is a considerable administrative and logistical process that needs to take place with pupils, parents, staff, governors and other agencies – and a school can be informed on any day or any time of case that occurs. For teaching staff too, working with Google classrooms or another online system has presented its own challenges with most preferring to be back in school.

vi) Recognising the potential impact of COVID on mental health, the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) has led an initiative entitled “Enfield Thrives Together” bringing together agencies involved in supporting mental health in schools in order to better provide support to schools, The EPS also offered individual support to headteachers, teaching and support staff and also to parents/carers which started in the summer term and has continued on into the autumn.

vii) Ofsted carried out a local area SEND visit in October to look at how the local authority and local area had responded to COVID and the impact of COVID on children and families with special needs. The feedback provided was that the staff had worked well and flexibly to meet the need of children and families – the feedback was in fact very positive indeed about local authority services. The report though

noted the isolation and loneliness felt by families and furthermore, the growing incidence of mental health concerns. In addition, Ofsted highlighted how digital poverty impacted on education and also other aspects of family life.

Next Steps

i) Schools will continue to have COVID cases and will continue to be supported by local authority officers as well as the LCRC and the DfE. It is expected that this will need to continue over the Christmas holiday period as well as over the spring term until Easter at the earliest.

ii) Meetings with headteacher representatives will continue on a weekly or fortnightly basis as needed and there will also be regular meetings with trade unions. Monthly briefings for headteachers and chairs of governors will be held on a monthly basis with the next briefing being held on 27th November. The briefings are attended by public health who will update schools on a range of COVID related issues.

iii) The Director of Education has been writing to schools once or twice a week since March with regular COVID updates as well as other matters and this will continue. In addition, human resources have been holding regular employment related COVID briefings and there have several similar events with public health. These will also continue as needed. The Hub, a central web-based repository for communication with schools managed by Enfield Traded Services, will continue to hold all advice and guidance on COVID. Updates are provided to school twice a week and this will continue.

Appendix: 1. Sample risk assessment guidance for primary schools (Enfield):**2.**Excel data information on weekly COVID cases in schools
