

Flintshire County Council 20 February 2024 – Agenda Item No. 2

Public Question

Question to the Administration

Can the Administration explain why it decided to close all schools on Thursday, 8th February when every other neighbouring Local Authority, with the same Amber weather warning that includes Wrexham, Conway, Denbighshire, Cheshire West and Shropshire left the decision to close a school with the Headteacher and Governing body of that school?

Many thanks

Matt Brown

Response

On Tuesday 6th February, a Yellow weather warning for snow and ice in Flintshire was issued, starting at 06:00 hrs on Thursday 08th February and continuing until 06:00hrs on Friday 09th February. At that point schools were advised that they would be expected to make their own decision regarding any school closure based on local conditions, in line with the adverse weather guidance.

However, when the weather warning was upgraded to Amber on Wednesday 7th February, outlining potentially more severe snow conditions in Flintshire from 08.00hrs to 15.00hrs on Thursday, this triggered a meeting of the Council's Emergency Management Response Team. The purpose of the meeting was:

to consider the risk to the delivery of Council services for the following 24 hours in light of the yellow and amber weather warnings for snow and ice

- to agree any changes necessary to maintain essential service continuity and
- to ensure there were effective arrangements in place to protect the public, particularly those who are vulnerable.

An Amber warning means that **essential only travel is advised, and only if safe to do so**. EMRT based the decision to close schools on the anticipated impacts under the Amber weather alert which included;

- a good chance that some rural communities could be temporarily cut off
- travel delays on roads are likely, stranding some vehicles and passengers
- power cuts are possible and other services, such as mobile phone coverage, may be affected
- some delays and cancellations to rail travel are likely

There was a risk that the school transport network would be significantly disrupted, resulting in pupils not being able to safely travel to and from school, particularly as the Amber warning was due to come into effect at 8am when the road networks are at their busiest.

There was a particular risk for children with complex needs attending the County's Specialist schools, many of whom require escorts and whose health and wellbeing could be compromised if they were stuck in minibuses in adverse weather.

There was also a risk that as Mold was in the target area due to be adversely affected by heavy snow, this could impact on the delivery of a school meal service to those schools across the county whose meals are produced and delivered from the NEWydd Central Production Kitchen operating out of County Hall.

A further challenge for schools in adverse weather is that many staff travel considerable distances to their place of work, from within and beyond county borders. The potential reduction in the number of staff being present at their school in the event of adverse weather and travel conditions could have made it unsafe for schools to operate.

Because of the timing of the Amber Warning, a proactive response was taken rather than allowing a situation to develop that, based on the information would have most likely seen children stranded at bus stops or stranded in vehicles. Since the pandemic, schools have well developed IT platforms to delivery online learning. It was decided that it was more sensible to give parents time to make alternative childcare arrangements if needed and time for teachers to plan for online learning by making the decision to recommend school closure in light of the detailed weather forecast rather than leave it until the Thursday morning and be faced with a chaotic situation.

Whilst we understand some parents and carers may have felt frustrated by the decision to close schools, others welcomed the proactive approach taken by the Council as it gave them sufficient time to plan suitable childcare arrangements and they welcomed the fact that the Council was actively considering the safety of their children. Headteachers across Flintshire have been unanimous in their support of the Council's decision as there is no more difficult situation for a Head to be anticipating significant snowfall and wondering whether they will be able to open their school safely, or not or even more challenging, open in the morning and then have to close during the day and get children home safely.

Each Local Authority will have undertaken its own risk assessment and we're not in a position to comment on what were the reasons behind the decisions made in other authorities.

Although, on the day, the snowfall was not as significant in many parts of the county as the forecast had predicted, the decision to close schools was taken in the best interests for the communities we serve with the information we had at the time.