

EDUCATION, YOUTH & CULTURE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting	Thursday, 28 th January 2021
Report Subject	Schools Covid Lessons Learned & Risk Assessments
Cabinet Member	Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Education
Report Author	Chief Officer (Education & Youth)
Type of Report	Operational

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since March 2020, teachers in Flintshire, like the rest of the United Kingdom have had to adapt quickly to a variety of changes in education; from the closure of schools and the delivery of remote learning, to teaching while following strict health and safety guidelines to minimise the spread of Covid-19.

At all times, schools in Flintshire have worked within the Covid-19 guidance provided by the Welsh Government. The core of this guidance stresses the importance of a robust risk assessment process and an appropriate hierarchy of Covid-19 controls to manage and mitigate the risk of infection.

Schools have regularly reviewed their risk assessments since education restarted in September to respond to the ever changing situation and to any revised guidance. The Corporate Health and Safety Team within the Council have provided expert support and reviewed every school's risk assessment twice, providing clear feedback and recommendations for improvement where necessary. The Council's approach to school based risk assessments has also been independently reviewed by inspectors of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) who provided very positive feedback.

Following the review of school risk assessments at the end of the autumn term, the Health and Safety Team have produced a report which summarises the key lessons learned. This has been shared with all schools to ensure continuous improvement of the risk assessment process. There has also been input into this report from the Test, Trace and Protect Team (TTP) who undertake the detailed follow up when a positive case is identified and input from the Environmental Health Team who provide the expert advice to schools on the management of communicable diseases.

The overall outcome of this report is that schools are managing the health and safety of their schools very well and that risk assessment processes and Covid-19

controls are robust and effective. This is reassuring for the Council, for parents and for pupils. The current arrangements also remain the best approach to managing the new variant of coronavirus which is prevalent in Flintshire.

However, there are still concerns, that despite regular messaging from schools, the Council and the national governments, some individuals are still not complying with the requirements set out by the Welsh Government and Public Health Wales to minimise the spread of the virus.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1	That members receive the report and welcome the assurance provided that schools have robust risk assessments in place and effective control measures to maintain safe school environments.
2	That members acknowledge the work of the Corporate Health and Safety Team in supporting schools in the pandemic and note the lessons learned to date.

REPORT DETAILS

1.00	EXPLAINING THE COVID-19 LESSONS LEARNED AND RISK ASSESSMENTS IN SCHOOLS
1.01	From the beginning of the lockdown period in March 2020 and the subsequent reopening of schools for the provision of education, schools have been involved in developing robust risk assessments based on national guidance to ensure the safety of pupils, staff and the wider school community in light of the coronavirus pandemic.
1.02	Working in partnership with the regional school improvement service GwE, officers of the Education Portfolio and the Corporate Health and Safety Team, contributed to the development of a comprehensive risk assessment model and toolkit which was shared with all schools across the North Wales region. This was well received by Headteachers and successfully adopted by all Flintshire schools.
1.03	<p>The detailed risk assessment covered every aspect of school life, identifying the areas of risk in terms of the physical school environment, daily school operations, delivering teaching and learning, managing pupils, parents and other visitors to the site, transport, catering, cleaning etc.</p> <p>On the basis of the risks identified, appropriate controls were established in line with Welsh Government and Public Health Wales guidance e.g. one way systems, learners grouped in bubbles, increased resources for handwashing and sanitizing, dedicated rooms/outdoor areas for particular groups, enhanced cleaning regimes, use of face coverings (where advised), enforcement of social distancing etc.</p>

1.04	No school in Flintshire was permitted to open in September until their risk assessment had been quality assured by the Health and Safety Team and where necessary, any recommendations to strengthen controls were made.
1.05	<p>Head teachers / Governing Bodies are responsible for monitoring the advice and guidance available, ensuring risk assessments and safe working practices are updated where applicable and cascaded through to employees. They have to ensure that compliance is monitored and any emerging issues addressed appropriately.</p> <p>Regular updates have been issued to schools where risk assessments could be affected by changes to current national guidance or corporate policies and procedures. All schools have been instructed to ensure that employees receive site specific information on the controls implemented within their workplaces.</p> <p>Risk assessments were developed in conjunction with staff and union representatives and this joint ownership encourages their effective implementation by all.</p>
1.06	Once schools had been operational for the first half term, a second review of risk assessments and controls was undertaken by the Health and Safety Team to provide ongoing reassurance that the assessments and controls were still robust.
1.07	<p>The outcome of that review, completed by the end of the autumn term, was that there continued to be effective management of risk assessments and the hierarchy of controls within schools and that they had responded well to new guidance that had emerged over the term e.g. ventilation.</p> <p>All schools received written feedback on their documentation and no school in Flintshire required any major intervention to address any potential weaknesses in their approach.</p>
1.08	In addition to the scrutiny from the corporate team, the national Health and Safety Executive (HSE) also undertook a review of Covid-19 risk assessments and safe working practices in each local authority in Wales. This involved meetings with key officers, reviews of documentation and a small number of visits to school sites. Feedback from the HSE inspector was positive in relation to the approach taken in Flintshire and no significant health and safety concerns were raised.
1.09	<p>Despite schools' best efforts, there were significant numbers of cases of Covid-19 identified in the pupil population and in the schools workforce in the autumn term that resulted in the school having to take appropriate action to isolate bubbles and implement their infection control protocols.</p> <p>Cases of 'within school' transmission of the virus remained relatively low because of schools' safe working practices. The effective tracing of each case by the Test, Trace and Protect Team (TTP) and review by Environment Health Officers (EHO), confirmed that most of the cases identified had been contracted within families or within the community.</p>

	<p>Where clusters of cases were identified in particular schools, the Corporate Health and Safety Team conducted several joint visits to schools with members from the Council's Environmental Health Team to review the school's arrangements. No significant safety concerns were raised as a result of these visits.</p> <p>In addition, Corporate Health and Safety colleagues accompanied Inspectors from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) on visits to a number of Flintshire schools and, again, no significant health and safety concerns were identified. Schools' arrangements were confirmed to be robust.</p>
1.10	<p>Through the Test, Trace and Protect process information is gathered from people who have tested positive for coronavirus about their movements, their attendance at work, college or school and who they have had contact with.</p> <p>With the increasing trend of positive cases in Flintshire through December and early January and information gathered by TTP, it became apparent that despite very high levels of public messaging, there appeared to be concerning trends of public behaviour and misconceptions about the current health protection guidance e.g. not staying in self-isolation when confirmed as a positive test or waiting for a test result; children mixing outside of school time e.g. sleep overs, parties, playdates etc.; informal childcare outside of the permitted bubble arrangements; and car shares.</p> <p>As a result the Council has reinforced the health guidance messages and schools have received specific communications to use in their regular newsletters to parents to remind them of the regulations.</p>
1.11	<p>As part of the risk assessment review process, the Corporate Health and Safety Team also captured comments from schools about their experiences of managing their risk assessments and if there were important lessons they had learned that they felt would be of value to share with others. These are included in the report attached at Appendix 1.</p>

2.00	RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS
2.01	<p>There are no revenue or capital implications as a result of this report.</p> <p>The main resource implication was the amount of time spent by a small team of officers to support the development and implementation of a robust risk assessment and control management process. However, the report outlines that this was time well spent as it secured positive outcomes. This investment of time and expertise was highly valued by schools.</p>

3.00	IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT
3.01	The ability of schools to open and operate safely is referenced in the Risk Register for the Education and Youth Portfolio (EY33) and is regularly reviewed and reported to this committee.
4.00	CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED/CARRIED OUT
4.01	N/A
5.00	APPENDICES
5.01	Appendix 1 – Lessons Learned in schools during Covid-19
6.00	LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS
6.01	WG Schools Operating Guidance for the Autumn Term https://gov.wales/operational-guidance-schools-and-settings-autumn-term-covid-19
7.00	CONTACT OFFICER DETAILS
7.01	Contact Officer: Anthony Smith Corporate Health and Safety Advisor Telephone: 01352 702782 E-mail: anthony.smith@flintshire.gov.uk
8.00	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
8.01	GwE – Regional School Improvement Service TTP – Test, Trace and Protect : Welsh Government strategy for collecting and managing personal individual data in relation to the management of the Covid-19 virus HSE – Health and Safety Executive : the UK national regulator for workplace health and safety EHO - Environmental Health Officer – employed by the council to administer and enforce measures to protect public health including the prevention of the spread of disease Hierarchy of Control – a system to eliminate or reduce exposure to risk in the workplace and schools