

EDUCATION, YOUTH & CULTURE OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

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| Date of Meeting | Thursday 16 th September 2021 |
| Report Subject | Covid-19 Schools Operational Update |
| Cabinet Member | Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Education |
| Report Author | Chief Officer Education & Youth |
| Type of Report | Operational |

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On August 7th, Wales moved to alert level zero. The Welsh Government's updated Coronavirus Control Plan outlined that whilst Covid-19 has not gone away and remains a health risk, harm from the virus is now less of a risk than the impact of continuing restrictions in the delivery of education for children and young people. This is in terms of both the academic progress and emotional health and wellbeing of learners.

The Education Minister advised all schools at the end of the summer term that the guiding principle for September is that they should operate as normally as possible including the provision of free breakfast and after school clubs, extra-curricular activities and practical subjects. This resulted in the removal of some key covid controls for the start of the new academic year including the cessation of the use of bubbles or contact groups, the return to the normal school day without staggered start or finish times and the relaxation of the use of face coverings in the classroom.

One of the major changes in response to a positive case is that pupils under the age of eighteen do not need to isolate if they are identified as a close contact. This ensures they can continue their education uninterrupted. Members of the education workforce who are double vaccinated do not need to isolate either if they are a contact of a positive case. Advice will be offered for these individuals to minimise any risks and stay safe.

The Test, Trace and Protect Service (TTP) is the lead organisation for checking contacts of a positive case and the demands for information from schools has been significantly reduced.

The detailed operational guidance for schools has been slimmed down and is being replaced by a Local Covid-19 Infection Decision Framework. The Framework enables interventions to be tailored to the level of local risk and schools are expected to transition to this new Framework by September 20th. Any

decision to escalate covid controls in response to a local outbreak will be taken jointly by local authority officers, public health officials and the school leadership team.

Schools continue to have detailed risk assessments in place to ensure a suitable hierarchy of controls and these are now being amended to align with the new Framework.

All Flintshire schools opened successfully at the start of the new academic year.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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| 1 | That Members note the arrangements for the safe return to schools as outlined in the revised Welsh Government Covid-19 Operational Guidance and Local Covid-19 Infection Decision Framework. |
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REPORT DETAILS

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| 1.00 | EXPLAINING THE COVID-19 SCHOOLS OPERATIONAL UPDATE |
| 1.01 | <p>In July, the First Minister published the updated Coronavirus Control Plan for Wales and on August 7th, Wales moved to alert level zero. The control plan outlined that whilst Covid-19 has not gone away and remains a health risk, harm from the virus is now less of a risk than the impact of continuing restrictions in the delivery of education for children and young people. This is in terms of both the academic progress and emotional health and wellbeing of learners.</p> <p>The context has also shifted significantly since earlier lockdowns, with the high percentage of the population in Wales, and locally in Flintshire, now having been vaccinated. There is also the medical evidence supporting the view that there is a relatively low risk of serious illness from the virus in children and young people.</p> |
| 1.02 | <p>Just before the end of the summer term the Education Minister, Jeremy Miles SM, sent a letter to all schools outlining the main changes for the start of the new academic year. These included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • no longer recommending the routine use of face coverings in classrooms • no longer recommending the use of contact groups/bubbles • resuming normal session times and ceasing the temporary legislation which enabled staggered start and finish times • secondary pupils and education workforce staff were encouraged to undertake lateral flow tests before returning to school <p>During the school holidays it was then confirmed that learners under eighteen years of age do not need to isolate if they are identified as a close contact of a positive case. Adults who have received two doses of</p> |

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| | <p>the vaccine (and 14 days has expired since their second dose) also do not need to self-isolate if they are a close contact.</p> <p>It was also clarified that the Test, Trace and Protect (TTP) service would be the lead organisation for gathering information from positive cases to identify contacts and give the definitive advice to those contacts on whether or not they needed to isolate. The TTP service has access to the NHS vaccination database to be able to check the vaccination status of individuals. Schools will only be asked for further information in relation to a positive case if the TTP team needed it.</p> |
| 1.03 | <p>The guiding principle for the return to school is that they should operate as normally as possible including the provision of free breakfast and after school clubs, extra-curricular activities and practical subjects.</p> |
| 1.04 | <p>The main emphasis is on trying to stop the virus being brought into the school in the first instance. Secondary aged pupils and the education workforce are currently recommended to continue with the twice weekly testing regime that was in place in the summer term to quickly identify cases and isolate them. This approach is under regular review by Welsh government (WG).</p> <p>Parents are encouraged to be vigilant and not send their children to school if they are displaying any of the three main symptoms of Covid-19:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a new continuous cough • fever or high temperature • loss of, or change in, sense of smell or taste <p>The pupil should isolate immediately and it is recommended that they take a PCR test.</p> <p>This equally applies to the education workforce.</p> |
| 1.05 | <p>The use of a 'warn and inform' approach will be the main strategy when a positive case is identified in a school. This approach reinforces key messages about the risk to others from the virus e.g. being vigilant for symptoms, avoiding contact with vulnerable family and friends, avoiding hospital and care home visits for 10 days and seeking a test at the sign of any symptoms, however mild.</p> |
| 1.06 | <p>Schools are now very skilled in developing and monitoring risk assessments and adjusted them for the start of the new academic year. The key controls that still need to be in place are good ventilation, good hand and respiratory hygiene and regular cleaning.</p> <p>Where schools have used other effective control measures, e.g. use of one way systems, wearing of face coverings in communal areas, playground zoning etc. they can choose to continue to use them. This will be determined by each individual school based on their building and their operational model.</p> <p>Whilst face coverings are not recommended in classrooms, if any individual (pupil or staff) wishes to wear them they should not be</p> |

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| | prevented. Face coverings are also still required on school transport for secondary learners. |
| 1.07 | Welsh Government have also advised that cleaning regimes need to be proportionate and in line with other communicable diseases. Schools do not need to set aside specific days for deep cleaning and should focus more on regular, quality cleaning and particularly in high touch areas. In the event of a confirmed case in a school then a deep clean of the area is still recommended to reduce transmission. |
| 1.08 | As part of the change to national alert level zero and to streamline the range of operational guidance in relation to COVID-19, WG has introduced a Local Covid-19 Infection Control Decision Framework and will scale back specific schools operational guidance. The Framework enables interventions to be tailored to the level of local risk and schools are expected to transition to this new Framework by September 20 th . |
| 1.09 | <p>The Framework is available under the List of Accessible Background Documents below, and sets out national risk ratings and descriptions of actions to be taken based on a number of key factors. It is designed to allow local decisions to be taken to escalate/de-escalate covid control measures. Schools would not be expected to make the decision to introduce greater controls – it would be a decision taken by local authority officers, public health officials and would be managed through the Council’s Protection and Surveillance Group or an Incident Management Team in conjunction with the school. Head teachers and governing bodies have welcomed this joint approach to decision making in the event of a significant outbreak or cluster of cases.</p> <p>Welsh Government is in the process of refining the trigger points for moving between the control levels to ensure a consistent approach and we expect to receive this document shortly.</p> |
| 1.10 | Our Corporate Health and Safety Team, who have provided excellent advice and guidance to schools throughout the pandemic, have devised a refreshed risk assessment template to reflect the new national framework for schools to use. |
| 1.11 | In the event of a major outbreak of Covid-19 in a school then the Public Health Wales Disease Outbreak Plan will be followed. The TTP service will consider if the cases are linked and this may trigger an Incident Management Team to review the situation and consider invoking more controls as outlined in the Infection Control Framework. There would also be a suitable communication strategy developed for advising the school community. |
| 1.12 | Children and young people are no longer considered to be clinically extremely vulnerable with respect to Covid-19. However, there may be a small number who could be advised by their own specialists to isolate or reduce social contact because of their medical condition or treatment. In this case, the emphasis will always be to follow the advice of their medical practitioner. |

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| | Staff who are considered as clinically extremely vulnerable should follow the guidance and discuss with their school how they will be supported. Expert advice is provided to schools through our Occupational Health Team on how to support these individuals. |
| 1.13 | Members of the education workforce who are 28 weeks pregnant or more should not undertake a public facing role and arrangements for these staff are agreed with Headteachers and advice, where necessary, is provided by our Occupational Health Team. |
| 1.14 | Schools manage visitors to their site in line with their risk assessment and will continue to encourage parents not to remain on the school site any longer than necessary when dropping off/collecting their children. In accordance with a recommendation from the Council's Recovery Committee, a letter was sent to all Head teachers and Chairs of Governors to support them in asking parents/visitors to the school site to continue to wear face coverings. |
| 1.15 | All Flintshire schools opened successfully at the start of the new academic year. |

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| 2.00 | RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS |
| 2.01 | <p>Revenue: there are no implications for the approved revenue budget for this service for either the current financial year or for future financial years.</p> <p>Capital: there are no implications for the approved capital programme for either the current financial year or for future financial years</p> <p>Human Resources: there are no implications for additional capacity or for any change to current workforce structures or roles.</p> |

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| 3.00 | IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT |
| 3.01 | <p>The Education Portfolio maintains a detailed risk register including the impact of Covid-19 on the education workforce and school operations. Schools manage their own individual risk registers.</p> <p>The risk register is reviewed on a monthly basis by the Portfolio's Senior Management Team and is reported on regularly to the Council's Recovery Committee.</p> |

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| 4.00 | CONSULTATIONS REQUIRED/CARRIED OUT |
| 4.01 | N/A |

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| 5.00 | APPENDICES |
| 5.01 | None. |

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| 6.00 | LIST OF ACCESSIBLE BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS |
| 6.01 | Local Covid-19 Infection Control Decision Framework https://gov.wales/local-covid-19-infection-control-decision-framework-schools-autumn-2021-html |

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| 7.00 | CONTACT OFFICER DETAILS |
| 7.01 | Contact Officer: Claire Homard, Chief Officer (Education & Youth) Telephone: 01352 704190 E-mail: claire.homard@flintshire.gov.uk |

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| 8.00 | GLOSSARY OF TERMS |
| 8.01 | Bubbles/contact groups – the organisation of discrete pupil groups that do not mix with other pupils as a control measure to minimise the spread of infection |