

SCRUTINY REPORT



MEETING: Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

DATE: 7th September 2021

SUBJECT: Report on the opening of schools in September 2021

REPORT FROM: Councillor Tariq , Cabinet member for Children and Education Services

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1.0 BACKGROUND

1.1 This report gives an overview of the support provided to schools in preparation for the return of all pupils at the start of the new academic year 2021/22. This is in line with the government's COVID-19 operational guidance which was last updated on 27 August 2021.

1.2 As part of Greater Manchester, Bury had been under additional restrictions and measures during the 2020/21 academic year.

1.3 The relaxation of measures nationally, in line with the Step 4 of the government's road map took place on 19 July 2021 i.e., close to the end of the summer term. Many schools chose to keep their arrangements in place for the final few days of the term.

1.4 Throughout the pandemic a key role for the local authority has been in working with education leaders to provide guidance, tools and support on the latest measures to reduce the spread of infection in schools and colleges. This has been achieved through regular communication and close partnership working with colleagues from the Infection Prevention and Control Team and from Public Health.

1.5 Schools have been regularly informed of the latest picture of COVID-19 cases in Bury and our position both locally and nationally.

1.6 Schools have received template letters and risk assessments alongside summarised guidance. The risk assessments have been submitted to the Health and Safety section for scrutiny.

1.7 In addition to information being circulated through regular e-briefings for head teachers and Chairs of Governing Boards, the LA has facilitated opportunities for headteachers to meet via Microsoft Teams, to listen to updates from health colleagues and to ask them questions. These sessions have also enabled schools to share practice.

1.8 Schools have valued the support given by the LA as evidenced by the high levels of attendance at the Teams meetings. Officers have attended these meetings to cover areas raised by school leaders including free school meals vouchers, catering arrangements, finance and human resources.

1.9 Outside of the formally arranged meetings, school leaders have also valued the regular contact with, and accessibility, of officers in answering, either directly or by research, questions as they have arisen.

1.10 Throughout the focus has been on the school's own risk assessment and the context of the school. Decision making has, by necessity been at individual school level however, advice and support has been readily available and school leaders have felt supported in their local decision making.

1.11 Bury schools continue to have a key role in communicating the latest advice to their parents and carers. Sample letters, and briefing information have supported schools in this role.

1.12 The disruption to pupils' learning has been disproportionately affected for Bury schools compared to other areas in the country. It has also been different from school to school and from class to class within the same school. Whilst some pupils have thrived working from home, supported by remote education, others will not have had a positive experience. Towards the end of the summer term Bury saw an increase in bubbles being sent home to self-isolate. Individual schools know the impact of this on their school population particularly since the full re-opening of schools to all pupils, initially in September 2020, and then again in March 2021.

1.13 By mid-September 2020, with all schools having re-opened, approximately 85% of pupils were in attendance, meaning that at any one time, over 4,500 children and young people were absent, either because of shielding, testing positive for Covid, or being a close contact of a positive case. Attendance levels for children and young people with an Education, Health & Care Plan, or known to a social worker, were typically around 75%, meaning that our most vulnerable pupils were further disadvantaged. However, with further lockdown measures, emphasis was placed on ensuring that vulnerable pupils were then prioritised for attendance, as was the case during the initial lockdown from March to July 2020.

1.14 The pattern of attendance fluctuated significantly over the course of the year as schools experienced the impact of high case rates, and local and national lockdown arrangements. The following table gives a snapshot of attendance levels at points in the year:

Date		All pupils	EHCP pupils	Pupils with social worker	Free School Meal pupils
12 th January 2021	Bury	18.9%	31.5%	37.7%	13.3%
	Greater Manchester	17.5%	36.5%	45.3%	14.6%
	England	13.8%	35.1%	40.7%	13%
9 th March 2021	Bury	72.1%	74%	71.3%	71.7%
	Greater Manchester	76.5%	80.3%	76.7%	77.3%
	England	76.5%	78.5%	75.9%	74.8%
8 th June 2021	Bury	85.3%	78.7%	79.4%	85.6%
	Greater	83.9%	80.5%	75.8%	85.3%

	Manchester				
	England	84.1%	84%	80.4%	85.7%

1.15 On several occasions, individual schools had to close to all pupils, primarily because of the level of staff absence.

1.16 For pupils transitioning to high school this September, the impact of COVID on their learning was an indicator alongside the collection of teacher assessment information and formed part of the dialogue between feeder primary schools and receiving high schools.

1.17 In the autumn term 2020, Ofsted undertook a series of interim visits, across a broad range of schools, to investigate how England's education system was managing the return to full education for pupils, following an extended break in formal schooling due to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic. Information from visits fed into Ofsted's national reporting so that the insights could be shared with the government and the education sector. These visits were not inspections and schools did not receive any graded judgements. Six Bury primary schools received such a visit.

1.18 In the spring term 2021, Ofsted inspection activity was in the form of additional remote monitoring visits to schools with current grades of less than good. Three primary schools and Spring Lane School experienced these remote inspections. In all cases the judgement made was that *"leaders and those responsible for governance are taking effective action to provide education in the current circumstances."*

1.19 In the summer term 2021, three schools received a face-to-face monitoring inspection. Two of these schools had been judged to require improvement at the last two full inspections and had also been subject to an additional remote monitoring visit in the spring term. One school received the judgement that 'leaders and those responsible for governance are taking effective action in order for the school to become a good school' whilst the other school the judgement was that 'leaders and those responsible for governance are not taking effective action in order for the school to become a good school'. The third school had a judgement of good and the outcome of the monitoring inspection was that the school remained good however, 'inspectors have some concerns that one or more areas may be declining'.

1.20 The LA was aware of the issues within each of these schools, and had put in place appropriate support prior to inspection. The positive impact of the LA support was recognised.

2.0 PREPARATION FOR THE START OF THE AUTUMN TERM 2021

2.1 Prior to schools closing for the summer break, the government had announced that secondary age pupils, and college students, would be offered two on site tests, 3 – 5 days apart at the start of the school term. Schools and colleges could open up to three days early in order to start the testing and the return for pupils and students could be staggered to facilitate the testing during the first week. Following this announcement, a Microsoft Teams meeting was arranged, in partnership with Public Health, to gather and share approaches, challenges and support needs. It should be noted this approach of two onsite tests could not be supported in the same way as the previous onsite testing which was carried out over a period of time and enabled public Health to train a group of agency staff to support the process alongside support from the Army, which had been available during earlier lockdowns.

2.2 During the school holidays, secondary school and college leaders received updates on onsite testing from Public Health. A drop-in Teams meeting was held on

24 August which enabled staff to share their finalised plans and ask any further questions of health colleagues. The meeting was also attended by colleagues from Infection Prevention and Control.

2.3 On Tuesday 31 August, headteachers, principals and Chairs of Governing Boards received a special edition 'Back to School' e-briefing which focused on the latest COVID-19 information and Guidance, and Returning to School Information from Transport for Greater Manchester.

2.4 The latest government guidance for [schools](#), published on 27 August, explains the actions school leaders should take to reduce the risk of transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19) in their school. The e-briefing also referenced the separate guidance available to [early years and childcare settings](#), [further education colleges and providers](#) and Additional operational guidance is also available for [special schools](#), [special post-16 providers and alternative provision](#).

2.5 The briefing included the government's contingency framework and re-issued of a risk assessment template. The contingency framework (August 2021) describes the principles of managing local outbreaks of Coronavirus (COVID-19) (including responding to variants of concern) in education and childcare settings. The framework covers the types of measures that settings should be prepared for, who can recommend these measures and where, when measures should be lifted and how decisions are made.

2.6 The guidance references the need to keep contingency plans up to date. The e-briefing also contained a joint letter from the Executive Director of Children and Young People and the Director of Public Health for Bury, copies of DfE 'Return to School' toolkits and leaflets and public information briefing slides to support schools in communicating messages. A series of frequently asked questions, with responses, was also attached.

3.0 GOVERNMENT GUIDANCE

3.1 The guidance references the imperative to reduce the disruption to children and young people's education as we learn to live with the COVID-19 virus. This is in the context of direct clinical risks to children being extremely low, and that every adult has been offered a first vaccine with the opportunity for 2 doses by mid-September.

3.2 The government's priority is for schools to deliver face-to-face, high-quality education to all pupils. The evidence is clear that being out of education causes significant harm to educational attainment, life chances, mental and physical health. As a local authority we share the imperative of children and young people receiving the best education in our vision for them to be safe, happy, healthy, successful and independent learners and citizens.

3.3 The key changes to the previous guidance are:

- An update to make clear who is no longer required to isolate if identified as a close contact, including clarifying that this includes young people up to the age of 18 years and 6 months (it previously said 18 years and 4 months)
- added additional detail on what close contacts should do whilst awaiting their PCR test results
- updated information on contingency planning in schools, with link to update 'contingency framework'

- updated information on boarding school pupils attending from abroad, as quarantine rules have changed

3.4 The government no longer recommends that it is necessary to keep children in consistent groups ('bubbles'). This means that bubbles will not need to be used for any summer provision (for example, summer schools) or in schools from the autumn term.

3.5 Close contacts will now be identified via NHS Test and Trace and education settings will no longer be expected to undertake contact tracing.

3.6 Face coverings are no longer advised for pupils, staff and visitors either in classrooms or in communal areas. The government has removed the requirement to wear face coverings in law but expects and recommends that they are worn in enclosed and crowded spaces where you may come into contact with people you don't normally meet. This includes public transport and dedicated transport to school or college.

3.7 Education settings should maintain the following four control measures:

1. Ensure good hygiene for everyone
2. Maintain appropriate cleaning regimes
3. Keep occupied spaces well ventilated
4. Follow public health advice on testing, self-isolation and managing confirmed cases of COVID-19

3.8 School attendance is mandatory for all pupils of compulsory school age and it is a priority to ensure that as many children as possible regularly attend school. This is a key priority for Bury local authority including for all pupils including those returning from abroad.

3.9 The government has published the Coronavirus Act 2020 Provision of Remote Education (England) Temporary Continuity (No.2) Direction. This second directive extends the requirement on schools to provide remote education for state-funded pupils when they cannot attend school due to COVID-19. This Direction applies from the start of the academic year 2021/22.

3.0 NEXT STEPS

3.1 The overarching priority is for all our children and young people to return to school safely at the start of the autumn term. There is a focus on attendance and those pupils who are not in school.

3.2 We remain committed to ensuring that our schools and colleges are kept informed of the latest developments and are supported in their work to minimise the spread of infection and the associated disruption to learning. The strength of the partnership working the colleagues in health will continue and we thank them for everything they have done to date in working with settings, schools and colleges.

3.3 A focus on recovery of learning through the revised self-improving school-led system so maximising the impact of collaborative working on shared priorities to improve outcomes for children and young people. This will include the sharing of practice in the best use of the catch-up and recovery premiums.

3.4 Continued, brokered and/or commissioned support to schools currently judged less than good.

3.5 A universal entitlement for a Quality Education Assurance visit for all schools in the autumn term 2021 focusing on safeguarding and recovery of learning.

3.6 Committee members are asked to consider and comment on the information in this report and the planned next steps.

List of Background Papers:-

Contact Details:-

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Executive Director sign off Date:

JET Meeting Date: