



All Schools in Kent

**Children, Young People and
Education Directorate**

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Dear Colleague

Can I begin by saying thank you to you all, as school leaders, for your response so far to this fast developing pandemic. I realise that schools and early childhood settings have been at the forefront of the national and scientific debate on the right tactics to respond. I know that has put you and your staff under great pressure, and you have responded magnificently thus far – thank you.

Policy on school and Early Childhood Settings and their closure, or not, is being led nationally by the DfE and Public Health England (PHE). We have been told that new guidance for schools will be issued today or tomorrow, including clarifying issues about which staff might be vulnerable and should self-isolate and in what circumstances. We also hope for greater clarity on how schools might organise or group children and activities differently in the event of staff absences. It is clear that, at present, the Government position is that there are greater risks associated with closing schools wholesale than with keeping them open.

I apologise in advance for the length of this missive but wanted to gather as much of the relevant information in one place as possible.

Now the UK has moved from the containment phase to delay phase in line with its national COVID-19 pandemic action plan, I feel it is an appropriate time to clarify and reiterate a number of issues and also to advise of planning all schools should be undertaking in preparation for any possible impact as social distancing measures are introduced.

You will all have seen the letter from myself and Andrew Scott-Clark, the KCC Director of Public Health of 11 February and this was followed by information issued by your Area Education Officer, highlighting the guidance available on line from Public Health England (PHE) and advising on how pupil absences

should be managed and recorded. This information can be found on Kelsi <https://www.kelsi.org.uk/news-and-events/news/primary/coronavirus>.

The advice on the weblinks that we have already provided is still valid as they are updated regularly, but a local update has become necessary. In line with processes already in place, any future updates will be sent to you by email directly and published on Kelsi.

Update on the National Position

One of the more obvious features of the COVID-19 outbreak is the pace at which any written update becomes out-of-date. For that reason, I would refer you to the following sources:

COVID-19: guidance for education settings

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-educational-settings-about-covid-19/guidance-to-educational-settings-about-covid-19>

Government Coronavirus Action Plan

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-action-plan>

Government Information for the Public

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/wuhan-novel-coronavirus-information-for-the-public>

What you need to know about COVID-19

<https://publichealthmatters.blog.gov.uk/2020/01/23/wuhan-novel-coronavirus-what-you-need-to-know/>

PHE website

<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/public-health-england>

World Health Organisation. General information about COVID 19

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/situation-reports/>

Emergency Planning in Kent Schools

The section on Influenza in the 'Emergency Planning for Kent Schools 2020-21' guidance is useful in how to prevent and if necessary, manage a flu outbreak in schools. The COVID-19 virus appears to behave similarly to the flu virus and for this reason, I would advise all schools to consult the Influenza section of the guide and assess what precautionary measures they could introduce to their schools. If you cannot locate a copy of this free guidance please contact your AEO or visit

<https://www.schoolsemergencyplanning.com/>.

Reporting Status to KCC

We are now being asked by the Department for Education to provide regular updates on how COVID-19 is affecting schools in Kent and we have now moved to producing daily situation reports. Therefore, you should contact your Area Education Officer if something has changed as a result of COVID-

19, such as a proposed closure or partial school closure, cancelling of significant school trips or any confirmed COVID-19 cases. You should also keep a record of students and staff who have decided to self-isolate because they or a family member have displayed symptoms as described by the Chief Medical Officer.

If you need any advice, your Area Education Officer should be your point of contact. However, there have been several communications with schools in which KCC has been asked to make a determination or give permission in respect of a school's proposed action.

I feel that I need to point out that all day to day, operational decisions for your school in response to COVID-19, are for the Headteacher to make. This may be in respect of managing an absence to possibly taking the decision for full or partial closure. The guidance we have provided is not a mandate and is simply intended to support your own decision-making.

To clarify further, unless Public Health England inform you that you should close your school, the decision-making power on such matters still resides with the school. Though you need to be mindful that there is the expectation that all schools (including Academies) liaise and/or consult with the Local Authority before making a such decision. This is to ensure there is a consistent approach across the schools estate and all implications have been considered so as not to adversely impact other services or providers. You should ensure that you always act in accordance with prevailing national guidance.

Contacting PHE, 111 or DfE?

If you have a specific concern about a suspected or confirmed case that affects your school, you should contact PHE on 0344 225 3861 (option 1). There is an out of hours number, 0844 967 0085 or you could email KPU-Kent@phe.gov.uk.

If an individual requires advice to discuss their symptoms and best actions, they should call 111. However, calls to 111 should only be in line with latest Government guidance.

The DfE has also set up a helpline for general queries about school management during the crisis. It can also be used by parents or for social care queries. This number is 0800 046 8687.

Pupil Attendance Matters

PHE and Government advice on self-isolation has now changed. The latest advice is that anyone who displays symptoms linked to COVID-19 or resides with someone else who displays those symptoms should not attend school for the periods set out in the prevailing stay at home guidance.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-households-with-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection>

If you or your staff receive such a notification from pupils or staff members, you should not insist that they attend the school, but you should assure yourself that they have taken appropriate actions to protect themselves and others.

The advice sent out to schools earlier this month offered some clarity on how to code attendance during this situation. However, in light of the latest Government guidance, this has been updated and posted onto the KELSI Coronavirus page. If you cannot access this advice, please contact your AEO.

In addition to some Special Schools, many mainstream schools have students who have chronic health conditions that have been mentioned by the Chief Medical Officer as putting them in a position of greater risk from COVID-19. Schools should carefully consider the needs of these children and ensure that they do everything they can to protect them.

Staff Attendance Matters

The following guidance has been issued to KCC officers. It would be reasonable for schools to adopt the same position.

If staff have to be isolated/quarantined, then they do not need to take annual leave to cover this period – it will be special leave. If staff are self-isolating, then for those that have the appropriate technology available and their jobs enable working from home, managers can reasonably expect them to work from home (assuming they are well enough) rather than be on leave. However, for those who do not have that flexibility, managers will be able to approve the absence as special leave. However, if they are unwell and not able to work then this should be recorded as sickness absence.

The latest Government advice focuses on high risk groups and forewarns that over the coming days greater measures may be employed to protect these individuals by recommending extended isolation periods of around 12 weeks.

Should the Government move to this approach and you have any staff members who may fall into this category or are carers for individuals who may be classed as high risk, you should seek advice from PHE and if necessary HR, to ensure these colleagues are properly safeguarded. The DfE are looking to issue guidance covering HR issues in respect of high-risk members of staff. We expect this guidance to be issued very shortly.

Please make sure your staff know your Business Continuity arrangements and know how to get in touch with each other should you need to.

I would also remind you that under the circumstances, it will likely be more challenging to arrange agency or supply cover. You may have to consider moving away from conventional teaching or considering temporary larger class sizes. However, this could only be done in certain circumstances where rooms were of an adequate size and health and safety is not compromised.

The UK Government is considering relaxing certain legislative requirements to support schools in maintaining business continuity such as relaxation of infant class size requirements. Though at this time, we are still awaiting definitive guidance on this. We will update you as soon as further information is received.

School Trips and Visits

The situation is changing rapidly, and every trip will be different. You should make a risk assessment now, and then review it every time a change occurs that could impact on your trip.

Current Government advice is that overseas trips should not be undertaken. Whilst there are no specific restrictions placed on trips planned for within the UK, the Government's recommendation is to halt any non-essential travel and avoid venues where people congregate. Therefore, it is for school leaders to assess risks and take decisions as to whether or not trips within the UK continue.

Examinations

We are still awaiting definitive guidance in respect of how examinations should be managed in the event that there is widespread disruption to schools and education settings.

However, if schools are in operation and need to introduce social distancing measures, this may significantly impact a school's ability to host exam sittings in one specific space in the school due to the floor area that would be required to ensure pupils are seated a two metre distance apart. Schools should start to plan for such a situation now.

A similar consideration should be made when considering day to day school activities such as assemblies and other whole school events.

Free School Meals

If pupils are forced to self-isolate or a school closes, it may be that parents enquire how this will affect a pupils' entitlement to a free school meal. The current position from the DfE is to remind schools that FSMs are not a cash entitlement and therefore a school is only required to provide a meal if a pupil is attending the school setting. Should this position change in response to the unique circumstances that may arise due to COVID-19, the DfE will ensure an update is provided via GOV.UK.

Essential Supplies

Kent County Supplies (KCS) have advised that they believe there are sufficient stocks for essential hygiene materials, including toilet rolls and cleaning equipment.

Ofsted

Ofsted have updated their guidance on the criteria for deferral given the current Coronavirus pandemic, please see the link here - [Deferring Ofsted inspections](#).

Deferral requests would usually be raised through the 90 minute conversation, when schools would be advised to raise the details of current cases /self-isolation in the school as well as the impact of this on provision.

School Closures

The current advice from Government is that, notwithstanding taking additional precautions, schools should strive for maintaining business as usual.

Closing schools has a massive impact on business continuity and the maintenance of essential services and the impacts on the local community can be wide ranging. It is understood that some parents and carers of children may be working in other public service sectors (including emergency services, schools, hospitals and other essential roles). If a school is closed, the parent or carer will be forced to remain away from work to look after their child. This will further deplete the workforce of the essential services. Therefore, Kent County Council policy is that wherever possible, schools should remain open, even if you have to revert to only acting as a provider of care, should staff shortages mean you are unable to offer the full curriculum. We have worked closely with the DfE in producing this guidance and KCC's policy is in line with the department's expectations.

The expected peak of infection is not anticipated to arrive until May or June. Therefore, it is extremely likely that if schools were to close before it is absolutely necessary, they may well be closed for months rather than weeks, thus having a hugely detrimental impact on young peoples' learning.

However, as we move further into the UK Government's delay phase there is a strong possibility that PHE England may instruct an individual school, schools in a defined area, or even all schools nationally, to close for a period. If you are affected by this, you will have no choice but to follow that instruction. For this reason, it is essential that all schools **update their business continuity arrangements now** to ensure pupils can continue to receive their education even if not physically attending a school setting.

Should your school need to close, leaders should also be mindful of the potential for school maintenance, cleaning or capital works to continue if necessary. Therefore, contingency arrangements should include ensuring a responsible member of staff can be available to allow access to the site.

Schools should also ensure that while a school is closed, statutory compliance checks and processes should still be carried out to ensure a safe return for pupils once an enforced closure ends.

Remote or Home Working

In the event of PHE ordering a school closure, or an individual student or cohort to self-isolate, schools should do everything they can to provide learning activities to their pupils. This becomes especially important for the student cohorts that are preparing for important examinations this year.

All schools should therefore create a contingency plan to move to providing remote learning activities to their pupils should they experience a closure, or have pupils who cannot attend school. Where appropriate, this may include arranging access to online learning resources. Though we understand for many schools, particularly primary schools, this may not always be possible, so learning packs should be developed that can be provided to pupils to enable them to continue to follow the school planned curriculum. Either way, plans should encourage students to follow their usual timetable from home, with a full day's learning activities being provided, if practical. Following the usual school timetable provides a structure to the day, and as much continuity as is possible in the situation.

This will also require a significant change in the way staff interact with pupils and families and therefore your contingency planning should consider how you would create and test appropriate, safe, communication mechanisms.

Where online learning is anticipated, confirming internet access and connection speeds for all pupils may form part of this planning. Internet access need not be at a pupils' home. It could be at a friend or relative's house. Schools should consider what resources they have to support students who cannot access the internet, as it may be the case for many schools that the vast majority of learning activities would be accessible online. Accessing activities and resources could be possible over a smartphone or tablet, as well as laptop or desktop computer. There are many applications that can support remote learning. To discuss any queries or concerns you may have in respect of providing home learning, your initial point of contact should be your School Improvement Adviser.

Another major consideration when reviewing your business continuity plans, is the possible impact on staff, should they be required to change their daily routine and methods of teaching at extremely short notice. This could cause considerable anxiety among colleagues and the school leadership team must be prepared to support staff through what could be seen as a very testing and unusual period. Close liaison with unions may be necessary to ensure appropriate support is readily available.

Arrangements for all support staff will also need to be considered in terms of possibly granting special leave or asking them to undertake other duties remotely where appropriate.

Safeguarding

In the event that a pupil or cohort of pupils are required to remain out of school for a prolonged period, this will present challenges in terms of the school's safeguarding responsibilities. DSLs and pastoral teams in schools will need to ensure contingency plans to consider changes to ways of working, in terms of family liaison to continue to maintain assurance that all pupils are safe and continue to be engaged in school activities.

Should you have any concerns or queries, including related to online safety, advice should be sought from relevant services such as TEP Education

Safeguarding and ICS (Early Help/Children Social Work). Schools should also be mindful of existing E-safety and safeguarding policies when considering the implications of remote learning.

Transport

Schools will need to ensure that transport arrangements to and from school form part of your thinking, particularly prior to any decision to close. Transport arrangements cannot always be changed or cancelled at short notice and closures part-way through the school day should be avoided where possible with as much notice as possible provided to our Public Transport team. Similarly, notice will be required to reinstate services prior to the reopening of schools.

We also ask that we are advised of any instance of a child provided with transport by KCC being confirmed as testing positive for COVID-19. This will enable us to support an appropriate response in conjunction with transport providers.

Communications

As you review your Business Continuity arrangements you should provide reassurance to all parties that the steps you are taking are in preparation **should** the situation change significantly, and it does not mean that school closure is actually planned or imminent. In the meantime, you should continue to run your school as normal.

I hope you receive this letter in the spirit in which it is intended, to ensure we continue to work together and plan effectively through this rapidly evolving situation.

I thank you for your all efforts in maintaining business as usual to date.

Yours sincerely



Matt Dunkley CBE
Corporate Director
Children, Young People and Education