School closures

The following summarises the headline implications of universal school closure. They all apply to an extent in the event of partial closure or in cases where schools remain open but large numbers of students or staff are not attending due to isolation. Our current understanding of the impact of universal closure is as follows:

- Almost 9 million pupils could not be guaranteed to receive an education for the time their school is closed. Any education they do receive would typically be limited. Our evidence points to school attendance making a difference for all children and being particularly beneficial for disadvantaged children.

- c.1.3 million of the very poorest children would not receive a free school meal. For many this is their only proper meal of the day. This may also become a widespread issue across more children and families.

- Remote learning would not work for all – schools' ability to provide it is hugely variable and many children do not have access to the relevant kit, many do not live in adequate home environments and some do not have wifi.

- Exams could not go ahead if all schools closed and remained closed during the exam period (which runs between 11 May and 24 June). This means students would not sit their GCSEs (c.600,000 students) or their A-levels or equivalents (c.330,000 students). This also affects students in FE colleges. We would also not have KS2 assessment data for those leaving primary school. Performance tables would need to be suspended for a year and we would be left without a key measure for measuring progress for the 2024 GCSE cohort – but the much more critical impact would be on GCSE and A-level students, unless appropriate mitigations identified and deployed.

- Delivery of teacher training will be interrupted as trainee teachers and those undergoing induction have to complete a required amount of teaching time before passing their teacher training or being awarded QTS. The passing of induction and the awarding of QTS would be delayed. This affects about 60,000 trainee and newly qualified teachers.

- The most vulnerable children are much safer in school than out of school. Around 400,000 children are "Children in Need" (they have a social worker) and school is a protective factor for these children. There is a risk of a rise in youth crime and children being at greater risk of the effects of inadequate parenting / witnessing domestic violence, particularly if families also facing the pressure of imposed isolation.

- Parents and siblings of children with special needs or disabilities will face a higher burden of care, as school offers valuable care and respite. Around 355,000 children have Education, Health and Care Plans, which means they have complex needs. They require specialised and intensive support which they usually get through school. Additional pressure will be put on already under-pressure families and pupils would lose access to the pastoral support often offered by schools, including counselling services, at a time that will already be stressful.

- Parents would be much less likely to be able to go to work. Current estimates is that this would impact upon about 20% of the workforce. This would include parents who work in critical healthcare professions, so there would be knock-on

consequences. Many parents will turn to their own parents to support childcare, which then increases the risk to the elderly. There will also be parents who are on zero hours contracts and have no alternative care arrangement for their children.

- There would be significant economic impact. Our modelling continues but closure for three months (the decision to close schools is easier than the decision to re-open them so we should assume that closures will be long-term, once they have started). Closing all schools for a full quarter could reduce UK GDP, a year after the outbreak, by an additional 1.7% on top of other economic costs that are a consequence of severe outbreak.

If schools closed against Government advice or because they could no longer be kept open safely (i.e. the Head could not guarantee the safety of pupils because of reduced staffing), then the implications would be the same as above but would impact on fewer students and families. Whilst the negative impact would be much less extensive overall, we would need to tolerate significant inequities in terms of many pupils benefiting from education (including at the critical period in the run-up to exams), whilst many of their peers so not.

Other risks of action short of universal closure include teacher and Headteacher burnout (teachers in England already work very long hours by international standards) and the risk that school closures become chaotic and unmanaged, with parents and school unable to plan ahead and public sentiment being increasingly at odds with the Government position. We can take steps to manage this through clear guidance (which reduces workload as more answers will be readily available and schools will be better placed to plan ahead) and reducing burdens on schools (including the burdens of inspection and accountability).

Action that the Department for Education would have to take if the school system degraded as a consequence of the pandemic.

The Department for Education will continue to issue clear guidance, which aligns with wider public health guidance. We are developing clear and frequently updated FAQ, which we will make widely available and we will work with sector organisations to ensure awareness and compliance.

We also need to be clear which solutions are best developed locally and which are best developed nationally. In-school problems (such as exams and the delivery of teacher training) lend themselves best to national solutions, where we can mobilise a clear delivery chain. In these cases, we are finalising our solutions to the challenges above and will then move to trigger the delivery chain as soon as it is needed.

However, other solutions will need to be mainly local. We do not have a uniform national school system, or a clear delivery chain. Almost 1 in 4 schools have fewer than 200 pupils (predominantly primary schools) and have very limited staffing and infrastructure. Schools sit within over 2000 academy trusts and 151 local authorities; with very varied capacity. Rural schools will encounter very different challenges to urban schools. We can expect that some parts of the country could mobilise more quickly than others to arrange alternative childcare, food supply or support for vulnerable groups. In the absence of an existing national delivery chain for many of these solutions, many of them will need to be heavily localised, though backed by clear direction and support from the Department for Education.