Keeping schools open

This note responds to the ask for a package of measures to support schools in staying open for as long as possible. We have set out our thoughts, which seek to respond to what we have heard over recent days from school and trust leaders.

When it comes to putting any of these into action, we will need to, in parallel, consider which measures should also apply to other DfE sectors, including childcare providers (also vital for childcare, are likely to incur extra staffing costs and also subject to inspection) and further education colleges (also conduct exams, also likely to incur extra staffing costs and also subject to inspection). We will provide further advice on this if you are minded to pursue any of the measures below.

It is also important to note that schools may be forced to close anyway, either because parents withdraw their pupils, or simply because the extent of illness means the school is unviable to continue for a period. Early modelling results suggest up to 20% of schools could be shut at peak due to illness as pupil:teacher ratios become too high for the school to continue.

The context for this note is that schools are starting to find it challenging to stay open, as teachers and pupils are increasingly absent. Within that context, we have few hard levers in what is a devolved system but we think we should maximise the levers we have, alongside a call to arms to the education sector – and praising and incentivising community behaviours. For all those reasons, we think we should couple a call to arms, with strong support for the sector to ease pressures.

Within this context, we have identified **six strands** for a programme to keep schools open as long as possible.

A call to arms for schools as community leaders: Teachers and school leaders typically have a strong sense of public service and a strong commitment to securing the best possible outcomes for children. We know that many school leaders have been actively speaking out about the importance of going the extra mile at a time of national crisis and we have had positive discussions with NAHT and ASCL on this issue. We think we can and should build on this and use our public and private messaging to commit to a genuine partnership with education leaders, where we share information as far as possible; publicly and continuously recognise the hard work being put in by teachers and leaders; and work together to achieve the shared goals of keeping children educated and in a safe environment for as long this is the best option in line with scientific advice. Announcing our commitment to ensuring disadvantaged (FSM) children who are self-isolating or in schools that have shut would still be supported with the cost of meals, would help with this - and the two Headteachers' unions have been supportive of our proposed policy solution, which we have discussed with them in confidence.

Reducing the burden of accountability: This is clearly controversial but we think it would make a significant difference for school leaders, who are struggling to keep their heads above water and consistently tell us that accountability drives workload.

On **accountability**, we have provided advice to ministers on options for primary assessment, including not continuing with tests.

The easiest message to communicate to schools is not to proceed with any primary assessments and this may be the only realistic option given widespread closures / absences. However, the consequences of not running either KS1 or KS2 assessments is that it means no primary performance tables this year and no progress measures for KS2 in

2024 and KS4 in 2025.

If a decision is taken to cancel the 2020 primary assessments, we would look to preserve KS1 and KS2 test materials for next year as the trialling period for future years would also be impacted. Phonics and the multiplication tables check could still be offered as optional assessments that support teaching.

You are receiving parallel advice on GCSE and A-level exams but, ahead of that position being confirmed, a commitment to not have performance tables for 2020 would be extremely well received.

On **inspection,** ASCL, NAHT and the Confederation of School Trusts are all calling for the immediate suspension of Ofsted inspections, so this is a cause that goes well beyond the usual suspects. In addition, the emergency Bill contains provisions for suspension, which will raise expectations. Ofsted have already spoken out publicly about deferral but us going further and considering temporary suspension beyond cases where there are serious safeguarding concerns would be an extremely popular move and would make school leaders feel more able to stay open. We are working closely with you on options.

Deregulation: The draft emergency Bill contains a package of measures to potentially suspend regulatory requirements (including around school food standards, staff ratios, class sizes etc.), which should make it easier for schools to remain open. We should explain these measures to sector organisations as soon as we are able to do so, so that they can support us in explaining the implications (in terms of what this means for school leaders) to their members during the passage of the Bill (in terms of direction of travel) and then once the Bill gains Royal Assent.

Meeting additional costs We do not want money being used as the reason why schools need to close. To this end, we could explore a commitment to 'underwrite' any additional costs that result from Covid19, such as additional supply teachers brought in to cover for colleagues absent due to Covid-19. We recommend that we explore [with HMT] the possibility creating a Covid-19 emergency grant for schools. It will be particularly important in the circumstances to deliver any grant in as automated a way as possible, with minimal bureaucracy for schools [and ESFA operations teams]. We could also consider additional capital support, including to cover the cost of IT.

Working with local government: Local authorities still maintain the majority of schools and have a keen interest in the welfare of children in their area. We know that local authorities are already thinking proactively about this issue and we think we should engage formally with ADCS and LGA about issues including reducing any local accountability burdens on schools (and our options in this paper may also reduce some pressure on local authorities – for example around moderation); providing support to small schools; being a route for extra funding; and safeguarding vulnerable children. We are also exploring ways that our regional teams can be fully plugged into local resilience forums, which will aid join-up with local authorities.

Reassuring parents: We need to work with DHSC and No 10 to ensure that we deliver effective messages to parents on *why* schools are remaining open (inc the childcare and learning benefits) and what this means for the health risk to their children.

Remote working: you are receiving advice on this and we expect departmental guidance to be issued soon to support schools to develop curriculum contingency plans. This guidance will set out the suggested components of an effective remote working strategy. It shares a model remote working plan and provides links to edtech and resource supplier organisations

who will are offering assistance to schools. It will be appropriate both to support pupils who are self-isolating, and/or in the event of closure.