



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

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 pupil 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

A large, bold, black 'PD' monogram is centered within a dashed rectangular box, representing the signature of Matt Dunkley.

Matt Dunkley CBE
Corporate Director
Children, Young People and Education