

Report to Children and Young People Select Committee

5 November 2020

Impact of Covid-19 on Schools and the Educational Outcomes of Children and Young People in West Sussex

Report by the Director of Education and Skills

Electoral division(s): All

Summary

Since March 2020 the county has faced a significant and unique situation affecting the education and wellbeing of children and young people, a situation that is unprecedented in the lifetime of educators and leaders. The report aims to provide an overview of how the situation has been managed in schools and the early years sector, and how this has been supported by the local authority. The report is a retrospective review of events and support whilst also outlining key issues and challenges to inform the next 6 months. The report reviews learning that has taken place and areas for consideration in the future.

Overall, the response from schools, academies and their leaders and governors throughout the Covid pandemic has been outstanding. From a state of significant uncertainty in March 2020 with national policy unclear and a lack of confidence in making the right decisions in a changing situation, West Sussex schools and school leaders have stoically dealt with significant challenges on many fronts to maintain a calm and confidence among the school community. This has led to a high level of public confidence in West Sussex schools, high levels of attendance, and a concerted effort to ensure that the most vulnerable and disadvantaged have been supported. The success has been down to a strong partnership across all schools and strategic partners, regular and constructive communication, and appropriate support to ensure that schools had the advice, the tools and support they needed to implement their own risk assessments and local responses appropriate to their schools and circumstances.

The high levels of attendance in schools, particularly that of the most vulnerable, has been recognised externally by the DfE. The continued provision of support services and partnership working across the range of education and broader children's services has ensured that the most vulnerable have been appropriately provided for over the pandemic. This too is recognised externally.

Significant work has taken place to strengthen partnerships across schools and with the local authority's Multi Academy Trust partners for the benefit of all children in West Sussex. The resulting work to strengthen partnerships has provided a significant opportunity for ensuring better working relationships and a greater consensus on key

issues that directly impact on the way the County Council respond to the needs of West Sussex children.

Whilst much has been achieved that has been positive, there have been challenges and continue to be so as the county plans ahead for the next 6 months and beyond. Such challenges include:

- .1 The significant and ongoing pressure on schools and staffing in schools and Early Years providers to remain open and operational in a period of rising Covid cases;
- .2 The relentless activity amongst school staff and officers to both pre-empt and react to a dynamic situation over the last 7 months has been physically and emotionally draining with no end in sight as the number of positive cases again begin to surge;
- .3 Closing the gaps in learning among children which have increased due to the summer partial closure and missed learning;
- .4 Re-establishing relationships and maintaining the emotional wellbeing of children and reducing anxiety;
- .5 Managing the expectations of parents and families where emerging cases may lead to children having to spend increased time in home-based learning.

Many forms of guidance and support have been drawn together, distributed and supported over the last seven months with insufficient time and space for all of these to have been fully implemented and embedded. Additionally, the mechanism for providing support and professional development for teachers and leaders has had to alter significantly as the opportunities for larger face to face events and training sessions have fallen away. Most of the local authority's training and professional development to support schools is having to be re-written and repurposed into online and virtual support. Whilst this approach has some advantages, it also has challenges in how training can successfully engage group discussion and activity. Further investment in improving the reach and effectiveness of new approaches to training and support is required.

In responding to Covid-related issues, and supporting through the next six months and beyond, there has been the need to repurpose priorities within the education strategic plan due to the need to reallocate resource. The Annual Report on Education and Skills 2020, a report based on priorities set at the end of 2019, was published in July this year and identified key areas of priority and focus for 2020 and beyond. However, the time and resource required to achieve success across all identified priorities may need to be reallocated. Responding to the Covid needs of schools, and ensuring that broader improvement and quality in schools is maintained, whilst also meeting the local authority's strategic and statutory responsibilities, will be challenging. Capacity is finite and decisions on which priorities to pursue will need careful consideration to enable the County Council to continue the broader improvement journey.

We ask the Scrutiny Committee to consider the following key points within the report.

- (1) To acknowledge the significant work undertaken by the local authority and schools to manage education continuity through the pandemic;
- (2) To recognise the issues arising from the pandemic and lessons learned;

- (3) To acknowledge that the established priorities across the local authority's education strategy and forward plan, as set out in the Annual Report 2020, may need resetting in response to current developments.

Focus for Scrutiny

The way in which the local authority responded to the Covid-19 pandemic in schools and supported schools to ensure that children and young people were both safe and supported over the time

Proposal

1 Background and context

- 1.1 Following the first diagnosis of Covid-19 in January 2020, during early March, the number of positive cases rose at an alarming rate, from 271 on 8 March to 3,269 on 16 March and 8,077 a week later. Due to the rapid increases and spread of the virus, the Government took strategic action to reduce the pressure of the National Health Service and to also reduce the risk of the virus spreading further. A key decision was taken nationally to reduce school attendance from 23 March by keeping schools open only for children of critical workers, those who were vulnerable with a social worker, and children with an EHCP. For all other pupils, learning was to be home based. Due to the rapid pace of decision making, implication of policy on a number of practical issues including school meals, PPE availability, and both staffing and HR implications, it was left to local authorities to interpret messages and guidance, establish agreements, and provide clarity for schools.
- 1.2 From the start, the Education and Skills team within the Children, Young People and Learning Department set a clear strategy and course of action to support schools through the following:
- Ensuring schools were safe and staffed to be able to meet the Government's guidelines to provide for key workers and the vulnerable;
 - Establishing a cohesive approach across the County's maintained schools and academies;
 - Effective communication with schools to clarify and contextualise the significant range of guidance, with local procedures for school meals, organisation and HR issues;
 - Responding to school issues and concerns rapidly;
 - Maintaining the confidence of schools and staff in continuing to provide for the core groups of pupils;
 - Ensuring Government guidelines were appropriately interpreted and implemented by schools; and
 - Ensuring the most vulnerable and disadvantaged were supported.

- 1.3 Despite a national ambition for all primary aged pupils to return to face to face schooling by the end of the summer term 2020, this was altered in May and a phased return was planned for particular year groups in primary and secondary schools in addition to those core groups already qualifying. Schools were supported in preparing for the phased return and then subsequently for the full return from September 2020. In addition to the work undertaken to support school leaders and governors in relation to guidance around maintaining safeguarding, risk assessments and planning for curriculum continuity, work also continued in areas which remained statutory responsibilities for the local authority during this time including SEND, transport, Children Looked After (CLA), and school admissions.
- 1.4 The entire Covid period has required a different way of working with schools and with individual children. It has also led to resetting some of the Department's key priorities for the coming year. The period between March to October 2020 has had its challenges, with some of these challenges continuing as we head into the winter months. However, it has also provided some opportunities for the local authority to reset its ways of working and has also led to some strengthening of relationships, particularly with the local authority's Multi Academy Trust (MAT) partners, the Department for Education (DfE), and strategic partners, including Public Health.
- 1.5 During the period March to July 2020, almost all schools and academies in West Sussex remained open for pupils and schools, academies and early years settings ensured provision remained available for those in need through the Easter and May holidays. Disadvantaged pupils were able to access free school meals through the holiday periods, and the County Council worked to ensure that its most vulnerable children were supported in attending school where this was felt the most beneficial option for them. The West Sussex Virtual School worked with schools and carers throughout the pandemic to ensure that school attendance was prioritised where this was the most appropriate for Children Looked After (CLA) and to ensure that where children were working from home, they had appropriate access to technology. Against a mixed national picture, most West Sussex maintained schools remained open. Attendance in school, particularly over the period of phased return in June and July, was consistently above average for all pupils, and also for particular groups including children looked after, those with a social worker, and also those with an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP). Since September, again all schools and academies re-opened and school attendance has remained strong and above the national average through to the end of the first half term despite an increase in the number of positive Covid cases, and therefore the need for some children to self-isolate.

2 Communications

- 2.1 The Education and Skills team recognised that the pace of national directives and guidance, along with developing uncertainty in March, risked undermining the confidence of school leaders and governors. Guidance was produced nationally that remained too open to interpretation and did not necessarily reflect some of the detailed situations and concerns being expressed in the context of individual institutions. From the outset a clear communications strategy was implemented to maintain a direct and daily connection with school leaders, governors and strategic partners. A local email contact, E&SWelfareGroup@westsussex.gov.uk, was established to manage and respond to questions and queries, as well as to swiftly escalate concerns. The

Directorate quickly worked to establish regular communications with representative Executive Headteachers, Multi Academy Trusts, Diocesan authorities and unions. The Directorate worked to engage partners towards a consensus approach in key areas, ensuring guidance was agreed and being interpreted consistently by all parties. It also worked to ensure that issues of concern could be raised and resolved collectively to avoid confusion and parents being unsettled by differences in the way policy and guidance was being implemented.

2.2 A regular newsletter was produced for headteachers, governors and stakeholders. These began as daily communication and moved to being twice weekly from June. The first newsletter was sent on 11 March 2020 and in total, 87 were issued (up to 6 October 2020). This channel has been used to communicate a vast amount of key information including: the latest Government guidance and contact details for schools and other settings; how to report cases and outbreaks; support from the Local Authority; answers to headteachers' questions; letters for parents/carers; and a large number of guidance attachments produced by the Council's E&S and Safeguarding teams. The newsletters have regularly reached 1,625 subscribers (as of 08/10/2020), made up of:

- All maintained primary, secondary & special schools in West Sussex
- All academies, free schools and faith schools
- All INMISS schools
- Independent schools
- Head teachers and governors
- Further Education Colleges
- Education and Skills staff and wider WSCC staff
- WSCC Members
- The school staff unions

2.3 The E&SWelfareGroup@westsussex.gov.uk email and the contact centre managed over 3,100 direct contacts from schools, staff and parents relating to Covid issues and requests for information between March – August 2020. The top themes that were core to these contacts from schools included:

- **Free school meals** –This was the most popular topic in the early weeks and guidance on the provision in place to ensure access to food for those in school and those at home were communicated to schools. The challenges posed by the national voucher scheme increased traffic in this area as the local authority worked to support local solutions until the national issue was resolved.
- **HR matters** - Addressing the mass of questions from schools for situations including who should and shouldn't be required to attend work through to pay arrangements for agency and supply teaching staff. These were addressed through the Director's daily communications and a dedicated FAQ page on West Sussex Services for Schools (WSSfS).
- **PPE** - A lot of enquiries were received about access to this resource and significant anxieties about the disease and their risk of infection. Information on Health & Safety and how to access supplies of cleaning and sanitising solutions has been provided along with when to utilise PPE. Over 8,000 pieces of PPE were provided by the local authority

to schools for use should a child or staff member present with Covid-19 symptoms whilst on school premises, along with information about how to use the PPE effectively.

- **Safeguarding** – The areas particularly raised were linked to looking after the most vulnerable children and protecting pupils working predominantly with online technology and continuing to keep them safe in school or at home. Teams provided guidance to support schools in fulfilling their duties in these unusual circumstances including 'keeping in touch' guidance to assist schools in contacting their vulnerable children in particular, those for whom the school had concerns but were not allocated a Social Worker. Close work with colleagues in safeguarding in education and social care has been imperative and continues.

2.4 School Effectiveness staff restructured the way they worked with dedicated Covid Link Advisers assigned to maintain regular update calls with their schools to check in with headteachers and offer support and guide them to resources as appropriate. Issues raised were able to be escalated rapidly and where this required policy decisions or clarification, this was able to be finalised and provided for schools. Some of the regular communications provided an opportunity for the sharing of good practice between schools. The 'Services to Schools' website was updated to provide Covid support with key documents and FAQs for schools developed and revised in response to questions from schools and a changing environment.

2.5 During the school summer holidays, the communications team worked to support parents and families in answering questions about the safe return to school in September through a dedicated '[Return to School](#)' webpage. By the end of August, the webpage had exceeded 13,500 visits. A video produced by schools and featuring pupils who had returned to school during the summer term and aimed at reducing anxiety on the return was viewed over 2,000 times.

2.6 The breadth of communication employed by the County Council to support school leaders and governors in their decision making, and in ensuring that they had the correct information upon which they could make decisions, was instrumental in helping build the confidence of leaders and governors, and providing the clarity that schools needed to support their decision making.

3 Direct Support and Intervention

3.1 In addition to communicating with schools and partners, the Education team developed additional resources and guidance to support schools through the Covid pandemic. These resources and guides involved cross County Council activity including input from the Public Health team, the Health and Safety team as well as broader expertise from across Children's Social Care. To support schools in their planning, and in supporting pupils both in school, as well as those working from home, the School Effectiveness Service co-developed and provided the following range of documents and guidance booklets which were distributed to schools and with many being supported with additional support and training:

- A shared Memorandum of Understanding for all schools on clustering arrangements should schools need to close and pupils accommodated in other schools;

- The Safeguarding for Education (E4S) toolkit for self-evaluating and creating a safeguarding curriculum for pupils;
- Guidance for parents, school leaders and governors on providing on-line learning during Covid;
- A Framework for schools in planning and risk assessing their Phased Re-opening in June along with a Risk Assessment Tool for school governors and senior leaders;
- Guidance for schools in supporting the transition process from primary to secondary schools during Covid;
- Relationship, Sex and Health Education Curriculum update and support;
- Guidance for School Leaders on the phased return of Year 10 and Year 12;
- The Principles of Flexible Learning – guidance for school leaders;
- Framework for the full re-opening of schools along with a revised Risk Assessment Tool for the full return from September 2020;
- Guidance and support for promoting everyone’s emotional wellbeing on return;
- Formative Assessment Guidance for School Leaders;
- Guidance for schools on Re-setting and Re-starting the curriculum for September and support for disadvantaged pupils;
- Inclusion Framework and self-evaluation tools to help schools consider their planning for the return; and
- Safeguarding Self-Reflective Toolkit.

3.2 The Government provided a scheme for the allocation of 223 laptops and devices to support disadvantaged pupils in Years 10 and 12 in West Sussex secondary schools. They also provided an opportunity for online devices to be allocated for circa 900 West Sussex children with social workers. Due to the way the team managed the national laptop scheme, we were able to also provide up to an additional 900 devices to primary and secondary schools particularly to support disadvantaged pupils who were working from home and unable to access online learning.

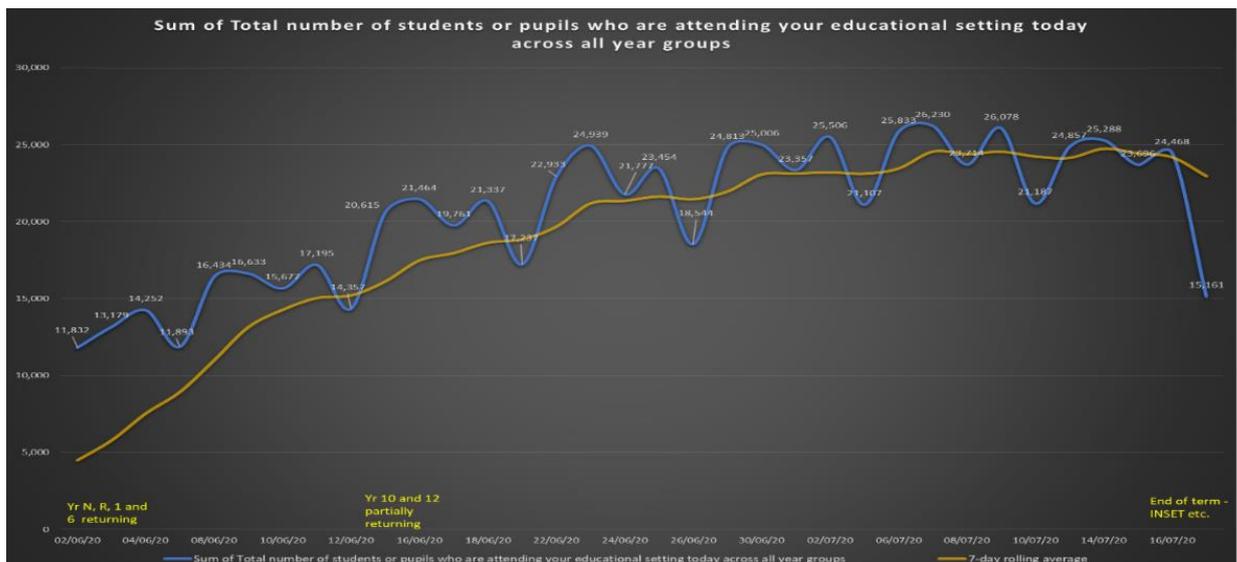
3.3 By reallocating internal resource and redeploying staff within the Directorate, the Education and Skills team worked closely with schools, Children’s Social Care team and the Virtual School to RAG rate the most vulnerable children and to triangulate activity with schools to promote school attendance. This had a positive impact on reducing risks to the most vulnerable children whilst also ensuring that appropriate arrangements for education and care were in place. CLA remained a key priority and regular contact with schools, carers and children ensured that the Virtual School was able to respond to support needs and continue to ensure that CLA had a Personal Education Plan (PEP) to meet their needs over this period. By the end of the summer term, the completion of PEPs had reached 91.3%, the highest in more than 3 years. These had ensured that appropriate education provision for the County’s children in care was clear and supported by all parties.

3.4 Where schools struggled to maintain provision along with their improvement work, the local authority was able to intervene with additional brokered support from other schools and also from National Leaders in Education (NLE) through the Regional School’s Commissioner. Where schools were not following national guidance in ensuring a safe return for pupils in June whilst also giving priority for the key groups identified by the DfE, the Directorate

intervened, supporting schools in moving to the position required through Government guidance.

4 Impact of action on school attendance and school operation

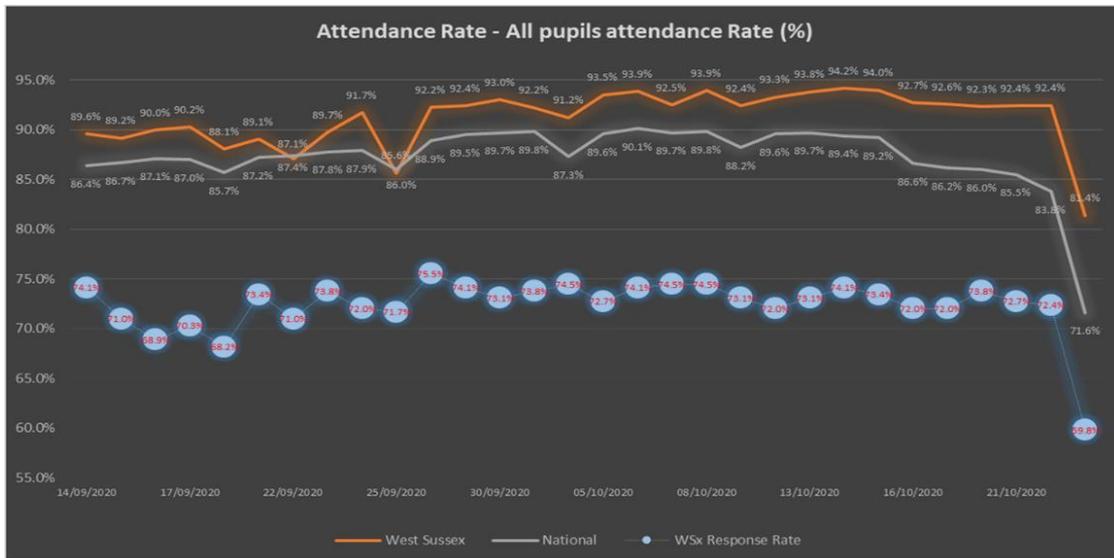
- 4.1 Despite uncertainty and the unprecedented situation facing school leaders and governors, a combination of communication, practical support and intervention, along with work in reducing potential tensions between different interest groups and stakeholders, has maintained the confidence and tenacity of schools throughout the period. It has ensured that schools have remained open and children safe. Whilst recognising that this has been an extremely pressured time for those working in schools, success has been seen through the goodwill exhibited by staff in schools; through the leadership of headteachers and governors; and through the positive relationships maintained between all parties.
- 4.2 Almost all West Sussex Schools and Academies remained open throughout the summer term. A number of schools remained open for the children of critical workers through the Easter and Spring Bank holidays and this also extended to public holidays. A range of childcare provision was scoped out with the Early Help team and communicated across districts for cover during the summer holiday for those parents needing this.
- 4.3 On the initial announcement of the restricted opening of schools in March, school attendance dipped at the outset of the pandemic to circa 1.7% - 2.0% of the County's total number of pupils on roll. By mid-April, this had increased to between 2.5% - 3% of the total school population, and to over 4% in May. However, the proportion of children in vulnerable groups continued to grow through this period. Where the percentage of CLA children attending school at the beginning of the Covid lockdown was 13%, through working with schools, children and carers, this had increased to 67% of CLA attending school on a regular basis by July. As schools embarked on the phased return from June, attendance across all categories in West Sussex exceeded the national average, with a rolling average through June and July increasing steadily until the summer holiday period.



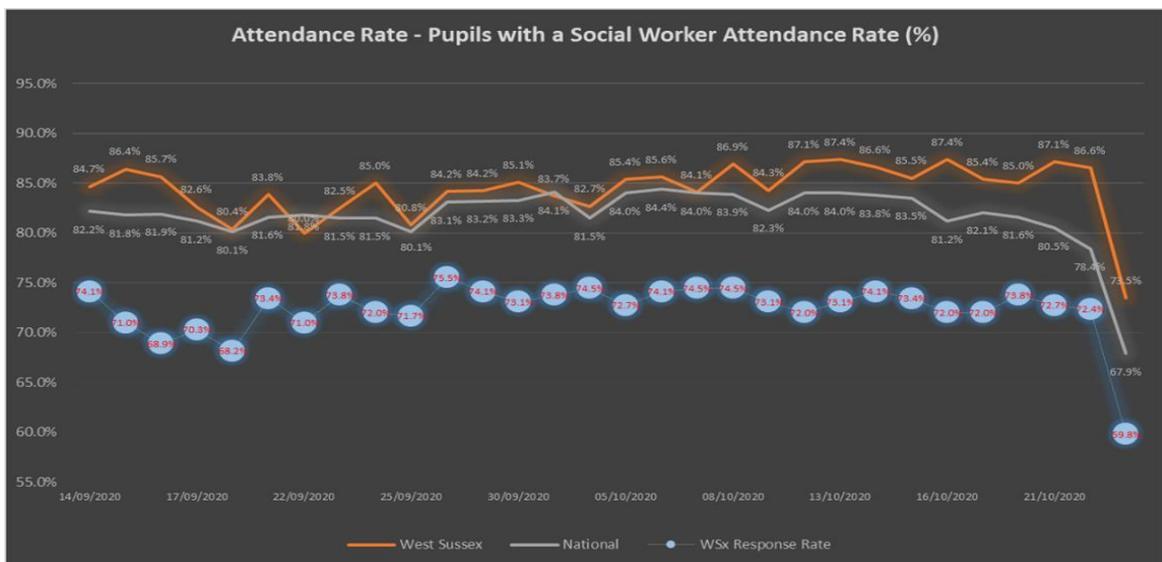
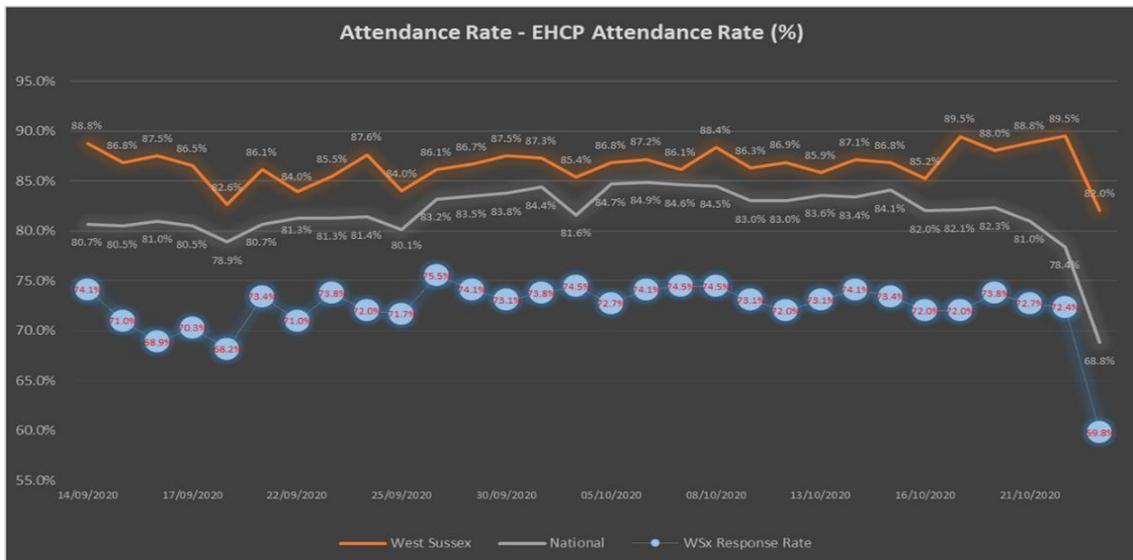
By 6 July 2020 21% of West Sussex pupils were in school with the following

Nursery	34.6%
Reception	46.2%
Year 1	40.6%
Year 6	51.9%
Year 10	17%
Year 12	12.6%
Other Year Groups	11.2%

4.4 From September 2020, school attendance has been consistently higher than national comparisons. Despite an increase in the number of confirmed Covid cases, attendance remains high among children with social workers and also among those with EHCPs. By the 22 October, attendance was consistently around 93% against a national declining trend in school attendance.



4.5 The attendance of pupils with an EHCP similarly has remained high at 89.5% compared with a decline nationally to 76.4%. Over the same period, attendance of children with a social worker remained high with 86.6% of pupils with a social worker attended school compared with 78.4% attending nationally by 22 October.



- 4.6 Although there has been a rise in individual Covid cases among children and adults working in schools, this has not led to a local surge in cases through poor control systems and schools being the source of infection. Where schools have had individuals identified, swift actions have been taken to isolate learning bubbles where required. Schools' own risk assessments have been thorough, moderated and challenged by the school's Link Adviser, and measures have been in place to manage infection risk. To date therefore, only one school has had to close in full, this being a specialist academy for pupils with special educational needs. Schools have become increasingly confident in managing risks in school through hygiene routines and social distancing.
- 4.7 The confidence and rigour of school risk assessments, the clarity of Covid safety procedures in schools, along with the continued diligence of school leaders and governors, reflects an ambition to maintain continuity of provision underpinned by a well-informed approach. Whilst there are many facets helping to achieve this confidence and rigour, communication, clarity, support, and partnership working have been central. They have contributed to reducing isolation and ensuring a mechanism for strengthening professional knowledge and confidence.

5. The Early Years Sector

5.1 The priority from the start of lockdown in March was to ensure sufficient childcare places for Vulnerable Children and children of Critical Workers, as per the Government's definitions. During the partial closure of Early Years and Childcare Settings (from the start of lockdown until 1 June 2020), 45% of group based early years settings were open, and 75% of childminders. Settings reported that around 1,300 children were attending during this time. Following the Government announcement that providers could begin to re-open to all children from 1 June, 94% of group settings and 89% of childminders opened and offered places, in the first instance to those in priority groups, followed by those starting school in September 2020, and then everyone else. Numbers of children in attendance were over 8,000. As of September 2020, 99% of early years providers were open, as well as 95% of childminders. Despite a cohort of children leaving to attend school, there are still currently around 8,000 children attending early years provision.

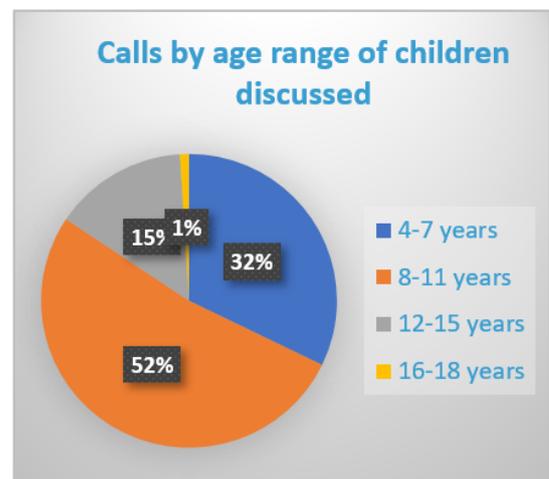
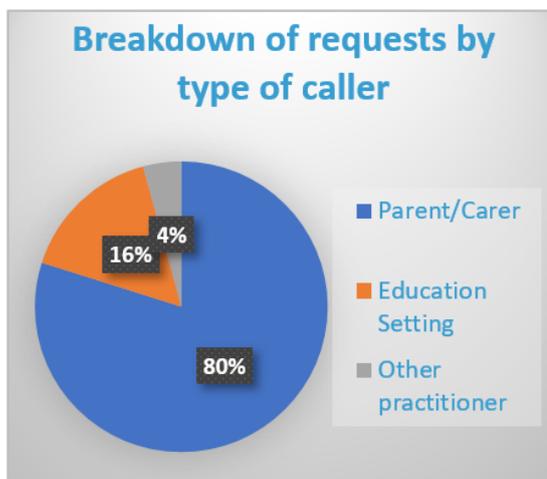
5.2 Since the beginning of the Covid-19 response, the Early Years team modified the support to early years and childcare providers to ensure they received the information and support they needed as quickly as possible. The following key strategies were implemented:

- Monitored the open/closed settings each day;
- Carried out weekly surveys with providers, to understand the numbers of children in provision, broken down into priority groups;
- Sent out broadcast emails with communications initially daily similar to schools, but then which decreased to 3 times per week. Since September, these are now sent twice weekly to provide updates and guidance to settings, including sharing all the Government guidance;
- Frequently Asked Questions were provided through the broadcast and on the website;
- The training programme has been revised to include on-line training and webinars for providers to support in key identified subjects such as business recovery and safeguarding;
- Early Years and Childcare Advisors (EYCA's) held regular conversations with providers, supporting them with their planning and risk assessments, providing challenge as appropriate, particularly with those settings who remained closed;
- A brokerage service was provided for parents wanting to find childcare;
- Information was collated and shared on practitioners who were available to work in different settings as their usual place of work was closed. Some 61 practitioners volunteered to support in an open setting.

5.3 The vulnerable children in early years were identified using the information stored by the local authority and, by triangulating information with social workers and providers, the Early Years team contacted settings at least every two weeks for those children who were of concern. The contacts checked on attendance, well-being and to identify any risks. Where vulnerable children were not currently attending, the setting notified the child's social worker and find ways to keep in touch with the family on a regular basis to monitor their wellbeing, as well as providing them with home learning support. This was also monitored every two weeks.

6. Special Educational Needs and Support

- 6.1 During the early days of the national lockdown, the law was altered with regard to timeframes for the completion of Education, Health and Care Needs Assessments (EHCNAs) and EHCPs. This was to reflect the additional challenges being faced in completing, assessments whilst children may not have been in school and face to face assessments challenging. However, the Directorate redeployed members of staff to ensure that children with EHCPs were being appropriately supported whilst also continuing to work to maintain the priority of completing assessments, particularly for those who would be transferring to new schools at the end of the summer term. The Specialist Teaching Team have provided continued support to schools and the Education Psychology and Portage teams have continued to provide support to schools and parents over the period of Covid.
- 6.2 A community call back service was introduced by the Educational Psychology team for parents, school settings and any other professionals working with West Sussex children and their families. This was to support where there was a question or concern about learning, behaviour or emotional wellbeing. The service ran throughout the Summer term (April-July) 2020 and offered morning, afternoon or evening slots. Some 213 people contacted the team and requested a call back. A full 100% of requests were responded to. After three unsuccessful attempts at contacting people, eleven were sent an email explaining that we had attempted to call 3 times. Some 202 consultation calls were undertaken.



- 6.3 Education, Health and Care Needs Assessments (EHCNAs) continued through the summer term. The Education Psychology team responded creatively and resourcefully to ensure detailed assessments which would enable effective decision making regarding the issuing and the content of an Education Health Care Plan. The team worked collaboratively to share electronic resources and assessment that could be used virtually which children and their families. From the last week of March to the end of August 2020 the Educational Psychology service completed 313 Education Health Care Needs Assessment. Of these only 20 needed further direct assessment or observation to ensure appropriate decision making could be made. Completing assessments and EHCPs remained a key priority to ensure that pupils undergoing assessment could have their plans finalised to enable appropriate placements and provision was secured in readiness for the full return to schools. Nationally, under a non-Covid

environment, the average rate of completion of EHCPs within the 20-week deadline rests at circa 60%. West Sussex has consistently been above the national average with a completion rate of 75 per cent. During the summer completion rates continued to increase and by August were at 76.19%.

- 6.4 A key concern for the Directorate and schools was to ensure support for children and staff's emotional health and wellbeing in preparing for the return to school. A cross Directorate and Service group created the 'Return to School: Promoting Everybody's wellbeing'. This guidance document provided advice to schools on ways to promote resilience and drew on research of the nationally recognised five key principles of recovery. A graduated response to need was identified so that schools could identify need, provide support and monitor this and where appropriate refer to external services. The resource was shared and promoted by DfE Mental Health Implementation Lead South East.
- 6.5 Training was provided for emotional literacy support assistants (ELSAs) working in schools to feel confident in adapting to their role in supporting vulnerable pupils (directly or virtually) during COVID, as well adapting to a more strategic wellbeing role within schools due to restrictions that 'bubbles' created. Education Psychology supervisors were provided with telephone or email support and guidance documents shared. Guidance on how to maintain remote contact with vulnerable pupils was provided.
- 6.6 A major Education Wellbeing programme has been developed through the summer with a major launch and training for every school scheduled from November 2020. This multi-agency offer is due to commence with the Educational Psychology Service and Mental Health Support Teams in Schools developing and delivering training to key members of school staff and other services. The training aims to equip and enable school staff to recognise, understand and respond confidently and appropriately to needs they see, as well as knowing when and how to refer to appropriate agencies. The training is planned to be complemented with Education Psychology support to help schools plan and embed their learning into their own settings to respond to emerging and additional issues as they arise. The project will lay foundations for future co-ordinated core and traded wellbeing offer to schools.

7. School Meals

- 7.1 As the Government initiated the partial closure of schools in March, it was left to local authorities to make arrangements for ensuring that children who qualified for a Free School Meal (FSM) were able to access food, even if not attending school. For the first two weeks of school closures, before the Easter holidays, the Council provided food parcels to FSM children not in school through the corporate catering contracts. Advice was issued to all schools not in corporate contracts as to their options for providing this FSM food provision at home. Initially the Government did not intend supplying FSM to children not in school during the Easter holidays.
- 7.2 The DfE subsequently developed a centrally funded national voucher scheme to support schools, with the requirement to provide food support to FSM children who were not in school. This funding was additional to existing free school meal budgets. However, following the launch of the Government's Ednred system, it became clear that the system was fraught with problems and vouchers were not always being received by those families in need. The

County Council therefore established a local voucher system as an alternative for schools to use.

- 7.3 During the Easter holiday, FSM children attending a school in a corporate catering contract received packed meals, whilst at non contracted schools the need to supply FSM meals at school continued. During the first half of the summer term, all schools in a corporate catering contract were provided with hot meals for children in school. Whilst the DfE guidance for meals in school only relates to FSM we negotiated for the authority's corporate contracts to supply hot meals to all children in school, thus supporting additional children who may be vulnerable but not eligible for FSM, as well as the children of key workers. This was at no additional cost to the Council. During the phased return in June, hot school meals continued to be provided for children eligible for a FSM in school with vouchers being ordered for those who were eligible but working from home. Hot school meals have been provided fully for those eligible for a FSM since September.
- 7.4 As a local authority, the catering and contracts team have worked closely with the Communities teams and with contractors to ensure continuity of provision of meals in school and also, until the national voucher system was fully operational, to ensure access to food for families who were isolated at home. The work done collectively with contracted suppliers to ensure no disruption to service has been an example of effective partnership and creativity.

8. Practical support for schools

- 8.1 A range of practical actions have taken place to support schools and young people through the period of Covid, and to help schools in reducing pressures to enable them to function and manage their local arrangements safely. These have included the following:
- Initial distribution of emergency packs of PPE to schools and replenishing when used;
 - School transport flexibilities and some additional taxis where required and where feasible, particularly for those pupils attending during holiday periods;
 - Co-ordinated working between the Pupil Entitlement team, Children's Social Care, the Virtual School and schools to identify and prioritise work with those vulnerable children who were not attending school;
 - Deploying the Directorate's Post 16 Careers Support team to support parents and students over the summer holiday through the examination's results process;
 - Securing co-ordinated agreement between all partners on key issues to avoid schools being set against each other;
 - Managing complaints about schools and dealing with individual parents who were challenging school decisions and risk assessments;
 - Providing additional health and safety, and specialist support to schools where this was required;

- Working with Public Health partners to ensure practical agreements on issues that were unclear nationally, e.g. Aerosol Generated Procedures (AGP), the use of PPE, local lockdown and Covid reporting procedures.

9. Issues arising from the Covid First Wave

9.1 Whilst much has been successfully achieved in partnership between staff within the Children, Young People and Learning Department, the broader council, along with schools and academy partners, there are a number of issues that have arisen over the last 6 months which are pertinent in schools and with children. Some of these are issues which need to feed into future strategic plans. Some are learning points to be considered should a similar situation arise in future. These include:

- 9.1.1 **Pressures on school staffing and leadership with the implications on broader practice and support for pupils:** The last seven months have required significant additional work for most school-based staff, particularly school leaders, many of whom have not had a full break since prior to Covid. Due to the organisation of learning bubbles and managing staff who may be vulnerable or shielding, many schools are at their limit with staffing and do not have the flexibility to deploy additional staff where there may be additional challenges. As we move into the winter, there is a further risk of staffing under pressure with schools being unable to flexibly cover absence in the ways they have previously. The Education team is working with governors to ensure staff wellbeing is constantly reviewed. The Employee Assist Programme is available for all staff and the County Council is working with representative headteachers and an external provider to commission a wellbeing support and counselling service specifically for school leaders.
- 9.1.2 **Financial pressures on schools:** Schools are reflecting that Covid related expenses, including employing supply staff due to the more limited flexibility of existing staffing arrangements are adding pressures on already tight budgets. Some claims against Covid related expenditure can be made for reimbursement but these are limited and not expected to be longer term. The Council's Schools Finance team are working with schools to review three-year budgets to gain a better understanding of implications
- 9.1.3 **Home Based Learning:** During the initial lockdown and through the summer, schools were guided by Government advice on the range of online resources available to support children at home. Almost all schools worked towards this guidance as a minimum. Some schools went beyond with online lessons and creative ways of keeping families engaged. As schools have returned to full time provision, expectations have been upgraded through Government guidance on what should be expected as an offer should schools or learning bubbles have to close. The use and access to technology remains an issue for some children. The preparation of online and virtual lessons and content is time consuming for staff in schools who may also be providing face to face tuition throughout the day. Getting the balance right and providing meaningful home based and self-study learning is a challenge, particularly for children with SEND, or younger children who lack independence.
- 9.1.4 **Closing the gaps in learning:** It is widely recognised that children who were unable to access face to face teaching during the summer term may have gaps in knowledge and understanding. It is widely recognised that disadvantaged pupils and those who were unable to maintain a learning routine at home,

have potentially being disproportionately affected. As it is not yet clear how external examinations will take account of this. Some Year 11 and 13 students particularly are already anxious about their courses for the year. For children who are disadvantaged and were already achieving behind their non-disadvantaged peers, further gaps may have arisen and the difference between pupils widened. The School Effectiveness team have launched a Disadvantaged programme working with Durrington Research School to focus on closing this gap. The National Tutor Scheme has been launched to help close the gap, and schools are currently completing their assessments around pupils in order to plan for the remainder of the year.

- 9.1.5 **The increasing number of children electively home educating:** The number of children declared as electively home educated has risen over the Covid period and in October 2020 was 1,243. This represents a 20% increase from the same point in 2019 and an increase of 152% since October 2015. Whilst not possible to determine a direct link between the rise and Covid, the increase is greater this year than in previous years. The Elective Home Education (EHE) team are triaging each case and triangulating information with schools and Children's Social Care so as to prioritise visits and secure confidence on the provision being made. Parents have the right to electively home educate. They are not required to register or seek approval from the local authority to educate their child at home. Local authorities do not have the authority to routinely monitor the quality of education at home.
- 9.1.6 **The ability to maintain provision through Wave 2 and a winter flu pandemic:** Schools are already stretched in relation to staffing and resources. To date, despite a growing number of positive cases, schools have creatively tried to minimise disruption to pupils through having to isolate at home. Significant concerns are being expressed about the capacity of schools to maintain this position if also hit with winter flu virus. The local authority has already negotiated local partnerships between schools where safeguarding and first aid cover is not available due to staff illness. If staffing becomes a greater concern, managing this will be increasingly difficult. To support schools, Public Health have agreed to fund flu vaccination for all front-line school-based staff this season.
- 9.1.7 **Responding or pre-empting the publication of guidance:** A challenge faced several times during the summer 2020 was whether to provide a local authority stance on issues at the request of schools, or to await the publication of national guidance which was sometimes delayed. Guidance on free school meals vouchers and cover during holidays was late and sometimes confused. National guidance on school transport arrangements for the return to school in September was not published until late August. West Sussex worked to rapidly clarify national guidance when it was published and also to provide local clarity on any changes as they occurred. In some cases, schools sought more direction in some from the local authority in key areas that went beyond the national guidance. Examples included transfer arrangements, physical or virtual open evenings at schools, and determining how many children should be accommodated in a classroom. Policy decisions were provided in some areas which led to some practice promoted and supported by West Sussex County Council being different to that in other local authorities. We kept to our strategy that local decisions should take account of local context and schools' own risk assessments. This did create challenges as some parents compared schools and their practices. However, only where practices were deemed to be unsafe or where they went against national guidance, were they challenged.

10. Business as Usual

10.1 Whilst reporting on Covid activity and support to schools, it is important to note that, in addition to the significant work undertaken to support schools and children and young people, the Education Directorate also delivered on non-Covid related activity in the following key areas over the same period:

- Completing the academisation of Blackwell Primary School, Milton Mount Primary School, St Joseph's RC Primary School and Rumboldswyke CE Infant School;
- Completing the consultation on the change of character to co-education for St Andrew's CE High School for Boys in Worthing and The Forest School in Horsham in time for the secondary admissions round for 2021;
- Continued implementation of the SEND and Inclusion Strategy across schools;
- Completion of the 'mini in-year primary admissions round' in June 2020;
- Launch of the Education For Safeguarding (E4S) curriculum tool;
- Development of the SACRE new RE Agreed Syllabus (to be launched in January 2021);
- Publication of guidance on School Federation and a new CPD training programme for schools using technology and online platform delivery;

Paul Wagstaff

Director of Education and Skills

Appendix 1 – Youth Cabinet Response on Covid-19

Background Papers – none