



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Switchboard 023 8022 3855, DX115710 SOUTHAMPTON 17

www.southampton.gov.uk



Dear Parents and Carers

I have to start with an apology, as I'm afraid this is a long one! I promise to film a Facebook live soon, so that I can record my responses to make this more accessible to you, but will also create a page on our local offer website to present the information in smaller chunks, as information continues to become available.

Further to my update on the Southampton Parent Carer Forum Facebook page last night, I wanted to update on progress we've made in making sense of the governments instructions relating to school closures, whilst making provision in schools available for vulnerable groups. We are still waiting for definite advice and instructions from government, but given the timescales, we have had to push ahead with planning.

I and other senior education leaders met with secondary, primary and special school Head Teachers today to get a sense of their capacity to deliver on these expectations. I think the first thing to say is how positively schools are working together and with us to ensure that they can do everything they can to deliver an offer for these identified groups of children and young people. I was really heartened by their enthusiasm and the plans that they have already made to enable this from next week – it is a real testament to their dedication to support our families and indeed the country to move through this challenging time.

Our teachers and school staff are going to be as crucial to this effort as our NHS workers. Without them, the health service cannot continue to meet this challenge and I know that some of you whose children will continue to have access to provision at your child's school, will rely on this heavily to support you through the coming weeks and potentially months. Please help us to look after them.

What is really clear to us all is that as of tomorrow, Friday 20th March, schools as we know them today, will close. What will replace them is provision that whilst having structure, will more likely, at least in the initial weeks, resemble something much closer to summer schooling. They will be providing shared provision for a mixture of year groups whilst trying to adhere to as much social distancing as possible. If you've ever worked with kids you'll appreciate this challenge!

The coordination task at hand is huge. Schools are managing significant numbers of staff being either in vulnerable categories or having to self-isolate. To maintain safe staffing levels they will need to rotate staff in, likely on a weekly basis, so that if one member of a group faces isolation due to sickness or contamination of the COVID-19 virus, forcing others to isolate, the next group can step in.

Things that apply to all schools:

Absolute priority will be given to children of key workers, and children in need of protection.

Some of you will have already been asked to complete surveys to enable schools to identify which category your child falls into. Please complete these so that schools know the scale of the task and can coordinate their offer accordingly.

If your child does continue to access provision, please notify schools with as much advance notice as possible if you intend to keep your child off due to sickness or isolation reasons.

Due to the daily changes that are occurring with children and staffing in terms of decisions to self-isolate and therefore not attending, with the knock on impact these changes have on school transport arrangements, we have supported schools to start the day at a slightly later time, if they feel that this is necessary. Please see your child's individual school for their timetable arrangements.

We're aware that some parents may be frustrated because some children will be offered a place whilst others are not, but please remember that you do not always know an individual's personal circumstances and they may not want to share that with you. Please be kind to one another and trust in the professional judgement.

All schools reserve the right to send children home, with insistence on appropriate isolation periods, for pupils presenting with symptoms linked to the COVID-19 virus.

Mainstream schools:

We've asked schools to inform us if they will struggle to open due to staffing levels so that we can negotiate moving staff from other schools.

It is our expectation, unless in extenuating circumstances, that all schools at this stage run individual school provision for their pupils. Head teachers agreed with us that to open schools in clusters (so some children attending a school that they don't currently attend) would serve to unsettle children who already have a huge transition to face, with inconsistent staffing and lots of change to their normal routine. Where possible, we want to keep things familiar. As things progress, this may be subject to change but we are committed to limiting the impact on vulnerable children.

You'll see in the Q&A attached that I have been clear that children with EHC Plans do not have to attend sessions offered – just please communicate with your school if you do not wish for your child to attend.

We have asked mainstream schools to use their professional judgement as to which additional groups or children they might be able to provide support for beyond the defined groups. This is however down to the individual school and will be subject to staff availability. Whilst the government have gone some way to defining groups of children, we are asking schools to make decisions on supporting children and families who do not fall into these groups, based on individual circumstances.

Special schools:

Whilst all children in special schools have an EHC Plan, currently it would be physically impossible and unsafe to offer to provide for all of these children. I discussed in detail with special school Head Teachers today, defining these groups as a city but because the schools are all so varied in terms of the needs of the children they support, we agreed that the Head Teachers would determine their vulnerable groups and prioritise offering provision to those, where they have safe levels of staffing to do so. I've given clarity on vulnerable groups in the Q&A that is attached.

For special schools especially, due to the ratios of staff that are required, schools may need to offer a "part-time" provision to manage the number of children falling into the individual schools vulnerable categories. As an LA we support this approach.

Full time offers will be prioritised for children of key workers and children in need of protection.

You can expect to receive letters from individual schools informing you.

I appreciate that parents will have lots more questions so keep sending them Claire's way and I'll keep updating and will get onto Facebook when things have settled. For now, please see my responses to your initial questions, attached.

Stay safe and look after your neighbours.

All best

Tammy

Tammy Marks
Service Manager – Special Educational Needs and
Disability
Southampton City Council