

Children's Services Covid Task Force

FOR CONSIDERATION BY Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 10 January 2022

WARD None Specific;

LEAD OFFICER Director, Children's Services - Helen Watson

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

The Children's Services Task Force assists in providing support and guidance to the community supporting pupils in relation to Covid-19 Pandemic response.

RECOMMENDATION

For Information.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

Outline of Childrens' Services Covid- 19 Task Force

The taskforce has been established as a response to the second wave of Covid-19 (Coronavirus); its purpose is to provide support to education and children's social care settings across Wokingham, and those outside of the Borough either commissioned by WBC for Wokingham children or other formal settings that are used by Wokingham children for educational or social care purposes.

The taskforce provides support by:

- Being the frontline for advice and queries sent by schools, settings and providers and to respond to these promptly.
- Managing and coordinating a response and communications from schools and settings where there are positive cases of coronavirus
- Daily communication to schools and settings regarding positive cases and updates in local and national guidance
- Government guidance will be understood, summarised and examined for changes from the relevant government agencies
- Proactively contacting providers, schools and settings
- Gathering, receiving and analysing data and information regarding positive cases, outbreaks and to understand attendance and teaching capacity to identify early schools at risk of becoming vulnerable due to their staff to pupil ratio
- Providing support to schools and settings to develop the bubbles approach
- Developing a relationship/arrangement with independent and non-maintained schools, in the borough and just outside of the borough, similar to that kept with maintained, academy and free schools currently.
- Understanding learnings taken from schools and settings
- Utilising existing experience and networks within the Local Authority to carry out the operational activity within the taskforce

The Membership of the Children's Taskforce is comprised of Wokingham Borough Council staff:

- Assistant Director of Children's Services for Learning, Achievement and Partnerships
Taskforce Sponsor

- Head of School Improvement
Taskforce Lead

- School Improvement Team
Taskforce support and Schools response

- Early Years Consultant and Team
Taskforce support and Early Years and Childcare response

- Children's Services Strategic Project Officer
Taskforce support and Project Officer

- Commissioning Team
Taskforce support and Provider response

- Call Handling

The group also calls on support from Schools HR and WBC Corporate Health and Safety Team. It is advised on all public health matters by WBC Public Health Consultant.

Gathering Data

One activity that the task force undertakes is to track positive cases in schools and settings. Positive case notifications are received from an education setting, usually via the dedicated taskforce mailbox. These notifications are then processed for onward action as relevant. Summary information is shared with school settings in a daily update sent direct to headteachers. School leaders have welcomed and appreciated the transparency of data sharing in this manner across the system. The data enables the Task Force to understand where additional support and guidance is required and where the energies of the Task Force support need to be directed.

Data is then provided as appropriate to GOLD on a weekly basis.

Action to support schools

Much of the work is guided by frequently changing government guidance for schools and settings: [Actions for early years and childcare providers during the COVID-19 pandemic \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/771247/actions-for-early-years-and-childcare-providers-during-the-covid-19-pandemic.pdf)

The work of the task force can be seen as distinct areas:

1. Signposting and dissemination of information
2. Providing support and guidance on interpretation of guidance into action at a wider local level or in a specific setting
3. Working with partners in other agencies including co-ordination of additional resources
4. Managing support for schools with outbreaks

1. Signposting and dissemination of information

Everyday since the start of the pandemic the task forces has sent a daily update email direct to all headteachers in the borough. This has served to keep everyone apprised of cases locally and to collate all government and local guidance into one central communication. Summaries of new guidance have been provided as handy guides to enable school leaders keep abreast of constantly changing requirements.

Early Years team colleagues have also provided regular manager newsletters to suit the needs of the Early Years Sector.

The task force has worked closely with colleagues in the WBC Communications and Engagement Team to enable messaging to the wider community to be undertaken. This has included production of fliers for parents to help them understand how to socialise safely over the half term break, what to do if you are worried that a family member may have Covid- 19, explaining the different testing processes, and making clear local approaches to infection control in schools and settings. These messages have been linked with the wider corporate community messaging on social media and other channels to ensure a coherent and consistent message in the community.

Schools and settings have also been linked into communication and information on local PCR and LFT testing sites so that this information is readily available to families including promotion of [Covid-19 testing \(Lateral Flow Testing\) - Wokingham Borough Council](#)

The task force has also acted as a two-way conduit for information, taking information and feedback from schools and settings on the impact of the pandemic on their operations and feeding this into wider local and national agencies. This has included working closely with the WBC Public Health Consultant and Director of Public Health to identify where infection control measures have needed adjustment. Regular meetings with regional DfE colleagues have also been influenced by feedback from schools and settings to indicate where further guidance and support would be welcomed. A recent example would be the chasing of non-delivery of DfE C02 monitors to schools.

Close liaison with the WBC Health and Safety team has also enabled effective messaging on risk assessment processes as well as information sharing such as on effective use of C02 monitors.

The Task Force also have established regular information sharing with independent providers located within the borough and whilst these settings are not obliged to share information with the us- they have been increasingly doing so and have also benefitted from support and guidance. Not only has this brought about increased public health protection within the locality it has also strengthened relationships between WBC and the independent sector.

Our dedicated call handler has been making calls to providers who educate or look after our children for whom we are the corporate parents. These calls have checked in on provision and been a means of signposting any further guidance. In addition, during the autumn term all childminders and wrap around care providers have been contacted with a courtesy check in regarding business continuity, infection control measures and to signpost key information produced by the Task Force.

2. Providing support and guidance on interpretation of guidance into action at a wider local level or in a specific setting

A regular weekly online drop in was set up with headteachers at the start of the pandemic in March 2020 and this has continued every week since, attendance levels remain high (c50+ attendees per week in December 2021). This is a highly effective support mechanism for school leaders, giving opportunity for discussion and sense making in relation to guidance as well as group problem solving and practice sharing. Heads report that it has been an extremely valuable support as one headteacher recently took the time to email in

'Please know that the Tuesday briefings are a great support for us all'.

The Children's Services Covid-19 inbox has also been used as a point of contact for schools and settings enabling them to seek specific help on interpretation of guidance or next steps in action. Queries are responded to by officers supporting the task force work – attached School Improvement Officers or Early Years colleagues follow up with their schools and settings building on established relationships and using their local knowledge of the context to help guide leaders. This local knowledge has been crucial in planning effective contextualised responses.

As a result of the intelligence held by the Task Force, it has been possible to liaise with other actor agencies in the field to influence local action. In October the Director of Public Health advised additional measures for schools and settings in the borough to adopt in order to protect education offers and minimise infection transmission. The strengthened advice in relation to household contacts and engaging in remote learning whilst awaiting a PCR outcome certainly prevented significant onward transmission and consequential loss of days of education.

An early small-scale review of the data in two settings demonstrated that outbreak was reduced from 4 weeks to 1 week and the number of positive cases halved.

Following an emergency meeting of the Berkshire West Health Protection Board measures were then regularised across the Berkshire West area and put in place to run to the end of the autumn term.

The Task Force has also fielded public enquiries regarding measures adopted in schools and settings. These have ranged from those seeking to understand why further action cannot be taken to mitigate onward transmission to those who disagree with the measures being taken as too restrictive.

In early October 2021 a Covid-19 vaccination programme for 12–15-year-olds was announced. This was to be delivered on school sites by the Community Immunisation Nursing teams. The Task Force provided support to schools in managing operational aspects of this delivery with Covid Marshalls deployed to support marshalling and also to provide security against anti-vaccination demonstrations. Some locations were targeted with anti-vaccination propaganda and a demonstration was held in the borough. Materials from anti-vaccination campaigns sent direct to schools were collated and forwarded to the DfE for their legal review. Marshalls were able to provide security for

schools on vaccination days enabling the business of vaccination and most importantly – education to continue uninterrupted.

3.Additional action for schools with outbreaks

During the autumn term 2021 much of the work of the Task Force has centred on the support for schools and settings when they trigger the Contingency Framework Threshold as set out in DfE guidance [Contingency framework: education and childcare settings - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/contingency-framework-education-and-childcare-settings). This relates to the point at which schools and settings should consider additional measures and these thresholds are whichever is reached first:

- 5 children, pupils, students or staff, who are likely to have mixed closely, test positive for COVID-19 within a 10-day period
- 10% of children, pupils, students or staff who are likely to have mixed closely test positive for COVID-19 within a 10-day period

For special schools, residential settings, and settings that operate with 20 or fewer children, pupils, students and staff at any one time:

- 2 children, pupils, students and staff, who are likely to have mixed closely, test positive for COVID-19 within a 10-day period

Identifying a group that is likely to have mixed closely will be different for each setting.

The data held by the Task Force is used to help schools and settings identify if they have reached threshold.

During the second half of the 2021 autumn term, significant increase was seen in the numbers of schools and settings that met the above Contingency Framework Thresholds. In early December the Task Force was managing a group of schools representing c50% of the entire number in the borough.

For each setting that reaches the above thresholds the Task Force convenes a local Management meeting, this is usually a multi-disciplinary meeting (IMT) with the Task Force lead, project officer, school leaders and Public Health and for large scenarios potentially also UKHSA colleagues. The IMT reviews the situation in the context and looks at risk factors and the potential epidemiological curve. No two scenarios have been the same. This is because sites and groupings vary. We have also reviewed risk assessments for residential visits planned to go ahead with a group identified as having an outbreak for example and looked at how schools might continue to be able to run key events in the weeks leading up to Christmas. Following each IMT the school or setting is allocated an officer who acts as a conduit and support between Task Force, health and school leaders. The officer acting as the school or settings attached 'Covid Buddy' makes contact with the setting daily reviewing impact of action and providing support and guidance. This contact continues until outbreak measures are ceased in that organisation. Schools and settings have found this level of support invaluable.

'Just a quick email to say a huge thank you to you for supporting us through our COVID outbreak. It was so helpful to have your advice and knowledge to get to grips with the guidance and how to manage the situation. Thank goodness we are out the other side now and fingers

crossed we may not experience it again in January. Thanks also for our COVID Buddy , who supported me to keep a tight track on each year group.'

4.Working with partners in other agencies including co-ordination of additional resources

Sometimes supporting an organisation experiencing a complex or wide-ranging outbreak requires liaison with external agencies for support. We have successfully worked with partner agencies to source Mobile PCR Testing Units (MTU) to be deployed onsite at affected schools enabling the community to access immediate testing to screen out those affected and enable school to get back to normal as fast as possible. This work has also included the use of Covid Marshalls and the WBC testing support team.

'I cannot express our gratitude enough for those who have helped put the MTU in place yesterday.

You all do an amazing job and behind the scenes possibly don't get the recognition you all deserve but THANK YOU. It is very much appreciated. Your professionalism, service, compassion and understanding are a credit to the service and we are very lucky to have people like you working to help us all through these challenging times.'

To support continued public health protection and in response to clusters of outbreaks across a wider community area, the Task Force has liaised with the WBC testing team to arrange dedicated pop-up Lateral Flow Test sites. This enables communities to access this additional support for screening before socialising or attending community events. St. Sebastian's Primary School hosted an onsite pop-up during December and colleagues provided specifically translated materials to support that community in accessing testing. Additionally dedicated pop- up clinics at the start/end of the school day were facilitated at Finchampstead Baptist Centre and Woodley Library where adjacent schools were able to signpost parents.

During the summer of 2021 the Task Force supported the local Surge Testing requirements. Drafting in additional resource, the group identified and then made telephone contact with parents of key vulnerable children offering them support and guidance. Personal delivery and collection of the surge testing kits by Childrens Services officers was arranged to these households in order to relieve pressure on these families. This was a well-received service by residents who appreciated the care and attention afforded them by the council.

Impact of the work of the Task Force and next steps

It is clear that the work of the Task Force is well received by the schools and settings across the borough.

From feedback received from the system impact can be described as:

- Sustained provision across the schools and settings in the borough
- Supported and sustained school leadership
- Swift action undertaken to disrupt onward viral transmission
- Actions designed to minimise educational disruption thus enabling pupils continued learning
- Sense making for school/setting leaders of changing government guidance and how that can be transacted at local level
- Strong sense of a Wokingham community of schools and settings working in partnership

- Strong appreciation of the supportive approach taken by the council
- Strong links with Public Health colleagues enabling a consistent approach at a local level
- An open dialogue enabled for leaders bringing about increasing consistency of practice
- Clear borough wide communications for schools and settings meaning parents have clarity

Next steps:

Before the arrival of Omicron, the Task Force were already examining how its work could be scaled into Business-as-Usual operations going forward. The arrival of the Omicron variant challenges that planning. In the last week of the autumn term the Task Force support to schools looked at business continuity planning for the sector. This will be crucial for the return to school in January 2022. Already by late December 2021 business continuity was a present issue with several schools experiencing provision disruption due to staff illness leading to the transfer of some provision to remote learning.

Background

Analysis of Issues

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	N/A		
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	N/A		
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	N/A		

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

N/A

Cross-Council Implications

N/A

Public Sector Equality Duty

Please confirm that due regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty has been taken and if an equalities assessment has been completed or explain why an equalities assessment is not required.

Climate Emergency – ***This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030***

Please state clearly what the impact of the decision being made would be on the Council's carbon neutral objective.

List of Background Papers

N/A

Contact Gillian Cole

Service Learning Achievement and Partnerships

Telephone No Tel: 07909998224

Email gillian.cole@wokingham.gov.uk