

WCC YOUNG PEOPLE AND LEARNING

REPORT BY THE LEAD MEMBER

1 SCHOOLS AND EARLY YEARS SETTINGS: OPENINGS AND ATTENDANCE

- 1.1 In line with government guidance, schools within the borough have remained open for children of key workers, vulnerable children and children who do not have access to a digital device or the internet. There is limited attendance data available for the first full week of school openings (4th January till the 8th of January), with provisional data indicating that 16% primary school students are attending on site. We are expecting to have a clearer picture of attendance from week commencing 18 January.
- 1.2 In line with government requirements, all schools have in place remote and home learning programmes for children and young people. The majority of pupils at primary and secondary schools will learn online until at least February half term. Families with questions about what provision is available for their children are being advised to contact headteachers and check the information on their school's website.
- 1.3 Since January the 5th, when schools closed to all pupils apart from the children of key workers, vulnerable children and children who do not have access to a digital device or the internet, all schools have provided materials for home learning. Westminster City Council has provided schools with a list of suggested resources and websites. Schools have learning platforms that all pupils can securely log into. This enables school staff to monitor access by pupils, check work completed and provide feedback. Parents are advised on the use of online learning. In addition to using a range of home learning materials, many schools have now established the use of on-line learning platforms (including Google Classrooms and Microsoft TEAMS). This facilitates 'real-time' teaching and learning by teachers.
- 1.4 The difference between this lockdown and the first is that our early years settings can continue to remain open. The current SAGE report indicates that the numbers of transmissions in these settings are very low, and on balance it is considered better for children's development that they remain open. The first week attendance data indicates that 33% of children on the existing roll are attending at these settings.
- 1.5 **Pupils with Special Educational Needs**, defined by the DfE as those children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), are considered a priority for school attendance. This means that Special schools and Special post-16 settings continue to remain open. They continue to allow pupils to attend full-time or as per their usual timetable. The short breaks service at The Tresham Centre will also continue to remain open.
- 1.6 Where schools grant a leave of absence i.e. because the parent of a vulnerable child wishes for their child to be absent, they will first speak to parent/carers, or in some cases social workers, to explore the reasons for this and whether any adjustments could be made to support and encourage their attendance. Then if it is determined

that the leave of absence is appropriate, schools continue to ensure appropriate education and support while they are at home. Pupils with EHCPs who ordinarily attend mainstream schools are defined as vulnerable children and are therefore expected to attend full-time with the exception being those who are shielding or symptomatic and self-isolating or in quarantine.

2 FREE SCHOOL MEALS

- 2.1 Free School Meals will continue to be provided, either through weekly food parcels or through voucher schemes. The national voucher scheme re-opened from the week commencing 18 January. Schools are able to continue to provide weekly healthy food parcels via their school catering contractors or to provide food vouchers via a local supermarket voucher scheme or via the national voucher scheme. Schools will receive funding from the DfE to support this.
- 2.2 We are seeking feedback from heads about the FSM options they are currently using and are planning to use moving forward. Based on feedback from schools we expect that the majority will move to a voucher system from w/c 18th January with the introduction of the national voucher scheme and/or continuation of local voucher schemes.
- 2.3 Westminster City Council will continue to support families eligible for free school meals during the February half term, as part of the government's Winter Covid Grant Scheme. Last year, the council announced a comprehensive £750k package to support families and vulnerable people who are in need. This support extends up until March, with free school meal vouchers being provided during February half term, as well as grants to low-income families and vulnerable people. During the Christmas holidays, the Council funded FSM food vouchers for 6706 eligible children and young people. We will support these children again over the February half term by making funding available to schools for the provision of FSM food vouchers. This will ensure thousands of families will get an extra £15 per child to reduce food poverty and support low-income households.

3 SUPPORTING VULNERABLE CHILDREN'S ATTENDANCE AT SCHOOLS: DIGITAL FUTURES PROJECT

- 3.1 The Council and the Young Westminster Foundation are working in partnership to support disadvantaged children attending our schools to have better access to digital devices and stronger broadband connectivity.
- 3.2 During the first lockdown a total of 764 devices were distributed to vulnerable children and their families. Through the Digital Futures programme we have obtained a further 1135 devices that will be distributed throughout January. This is in addition to the 1028 devices allocated by the DfE directly to maintained schools. We have made sure that all children receiving a device have access to the internet in order to learn online.

4 EMOTIONAL WELLBEING AND MENTAL HEALTH OFFER

- 4.1 The Council fully recognises the need to keep promoting our local emotional wellbeing and mental health offer effectively to children and young people, working in partnership with schools. We continue to work closely with our emotional wellbeing and mental health providers and wider stakeholders to continue to communicate our local offer to young people. Recognising that young people will seek and access support in different ways – we tailor and vary our communication accordingly.
- 4.2 Examples of this include but are not limited to:
- [Kooth](#), our online counselling and support provider, promoting their offer through various popular social media platforms.
 - Widely promoting accessible content such as our [knowing your mental health leaflet](#) through our various channels and out through our partners working directly with young people.
 - Branded, [online video platform](#) developed by our delivery partner *Mind*. The platform is populated with interactive video content on a range of mental health and emotional wellbeing topics (hosted on an online video site, like YouTube). There are embedded clickable quick response codes (QR codes) which will direct the viewer to associated digital handouts.
- 4.3 In these particularly challenging times, we are working closely with schools and youth providers to promote the available offer. We will continue to develop and expand our approach to promoting and communicating our offer to children and young people over the coming months.

5 18 TO 25 MENTAL HEALTH SERVICE PILOT

- 5.1 Work continues to progress on the pilot of an integrated 18-25 year old service that will provide young adults with holistic support in the community from mental health practitioners and other workers. The support will encompass a range of needs, including employment, training, housing, substance misuse and mental health. We held our inaugural working group meeting with stakeholders before Christmas following many informal meetings. We have also commenced discussions with potential providers to test the market and have begun the drafting of a business case and commissioning strategy. This is taking place alongside engagement with key stakeholders and with young people.

6 LAUNCHING OF THE INCLUSION STRATEGY

- 6.1 In recent years there has been significant national and local interest relating to school exclusions. Exclusion from school is increasingly recognised as an issue pertinent to child health and wellbeing. We know that particularly groups are disproportionately likely to be excluded from schools, these groups include; boys, children who are looked after, children living in poverty, children with SEN or those from certain ethnic minorities.
- 6.2 We have heard from schools, Children's Services colleagues, the Voluntary Sector, parents, children and others about what would we can do to promote inclusion in

schools and thereby make a real difference to some of our most vulnerable children and young people.

- 6.3 There are already extensive examples of good practice taking place to promote inclusion within in our schools. This strategy celebrates and builds on this work and will enable us to share inclusive practice. The Inclusion Strategy will set out how we will all work together as a local area to promote positive engagement in education, reduce rates of exclusion and improve outcomes for young people who have been or at risk of exclusion. It will be finalised this month and is due to be launched in March/April time. It will be complemented by an Inclusion Action Plan which will underpin and drive the delivery of the ambitions set out within the strategy.

7 SEND STRATEGY REFRESH

- 7.1 The Westminster City Council Strategy for Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (our 'SEND Strategy') was published in 2018. It is underpinned by a dynamic Action Plan which has, over the past few years, driven ongoing service improvements based on co-production and our desire to learn from the experiences of our local community and our aim to deliver outstanding services in an ever-changing landscape.
- 7.2 We are now updating the strategy and the refresh will take us to 2024, when the SEND reforms (under the Children and Families Act) will have been in place for a decade. Over the course of the next few months we will be engaging with a wide group of stakeholders, including parents/carers, children and young people, providers, third sector organisations and others, to review the progress that we have made since 2018 and to shape ambitious priorities for the 2021-2024 Strategy. We are aiming to launch the new strategy in September 2021.

8 WORKING WITH CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILIES

- 8.1 **Social Care** staff continue to support families during these difficult times. The response has been agile, creative and consistently focused on keeping children and young people safe. Our front-line workers have continued to visit those most at risk and multi-agency child protection conferences continue to be facilitated, albeit virtually.
- 8.2 Social workers continue to maintain high levels of contact with our looked after children and care leavers. We continue to work hard with foster carers and care providers to ensure they have access to the necessary support to promote safe and stable care environments for our young people. We are monitoring this on a weekly basis so as to provide additional support in a timely way as and when it is necessary.
- 8.3 **Family Hubs** are remaining open for walk-in support. There will be someone on reception, who can direct families to the appropriate help.

Youth Clubs in Westminster are providing a blended offer. There is currently some provision of online sessions and check-in phone calls and also some after-school provision for the children of key workers. Two of the Westminster clubs are considering opening for on-site activities to vulnerable children in bubbles.

- 8.4 In **Churchill Gardens**, a Financial Capability Officer (FCO) has been appointed since October 2020 and linked in with agencies in the Bessborough Family Hub and other partnerships on the estate. Communications have been produced to promote the service. The FCO has received referrals from formal services but also through links with local community organisations as well as self-referrals. The FCO is currently working with 10 families, having received 20 referrals. The majority of referrals have come from Rent Officers. Support provided has focused on dealing with debt, maximising income, rent arrears and budgeting. The work is continuing, subject to restrictions on face to face meetings resulting from the current lockdown.

9 CHURCH STREET TRANSITION PROJECT

- 9.1 The Churchill Transition Project works with Year 6 primary school pupils in the Church Street area. It aims to build resilience and reduce youth violence. As part of the project, boys are supported with the transition to secondary school by the youth provider Future Men. Following the transition to secondary school last term of the previous cohort, the project is working with 14 more recent referrals from local schools and youth providers. A meeting with another local school in January is expected to lead to an increase in referrals.
- 9.2 Because of COVID restrictions, group work has not taken place. Support is therefore provided on a one-to-one basis, some of it taking place at local youth clubs. In addition to the usual concerns, children receiving support have other needs relating to the confusion, disruption of routine and isolation caused by the pandemic. The project takes a trauma-informed approach to addressing the anxieties and worries of the group.

10 DOMESTIC ABUSE: CAMPAIGNS AND FUNDING

- 10.1 From the beginning of September 2020 to mid-January 2021, cases of Domestic violence have increased 4.56% in Westminster compared to last year's figures. Concerns and evidence of increased rates of Domestic Abuse nationally, WCC ran two publicity campaigns in March 2020 and November 2020, making it clear what domestic abuse is, where to report any concerns and the support that is available locally. Posters were distributed widely in GP surgeries, local shops and children's centres. In addition to the above campaigns, the Local Children's Safeguarding Partnership website provides information on how to report any incidents of child abuse.
- 10.2 Westminster has also provided local Domestic Abuse charities with grant funding to increase the capacity of their services in order to respond to increased demand and also increased complexity in the nature of cases over the next year. This is on top of

existing Council funded services which have continued to provide support to domestic abuse victims throughout the pandemic.

11 FALLING ROLLS IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

- 11.1 Addressing the continuation of falling rolls in primary schools is a priority for the Council. Approximately 6 forms of entry have been removed since 2018; this equates to 1,190 places across all year groups. Falling birth rates, and other attributing factors, such as Brexit, changes to how state benefits are paid and affordability has seen fewer families locating to Westminster. A variation of tried and tested projection models forecast a continued downward then stable trend for at least a further 5 years.
- 11.2 To support the School Organisation and Asset Strategy work, Schools Forum commissioned the ISOS Partnership to carry out a detailed analysis of school capacity and budgets in collaboration with schools, the Catholic and Church of England Diocese and Officers.
- 11.3 Further to the ISOS findings and subsequent report, a Strategic Working Group has been established to consider required action and the report recommendations that are then presented at each stage to Schools Forum for approval. The timeline of work will expect to see a final report for recommendations towards the end of the Summer term.
- 11.4 The key recommendation is the removal of 4 to 5 forms of entry by 2023. Options will range from reduction in capacity for schools that currently exceed one form of entry, amalgamation and school closure.

12 LIBRARIES

- 12.1 Following the announcement of the third national lockdown, government guidelines have allowed libraries to remain open to provide a number of clearly defined essential services (as they were able to in the second lockdown). From the start of the current lockdown period, eight of our libraries have remained open with a service offer in line with current government guidelines which ensures that social distancing can be maintained, and our residents continue to have the opportunity to read, learn and connect.