

ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL – REPORT TO MEMBERS

1. Meeting:	Children and Young People’s Scrutiny Panel
2. Date:	Friday 18th February 2011
3. Title:	School closures due to extreme weather
4. Directorate:	Children and Young People’s Services

5. Summary

This report outlines the progress made by Children and Young People’s Services in response to the findings and recommendations of the scrutiny review into ‘School closures due to extreme weather’, undertaken by the Children and Young People’s Scrutiny Panel. (The report and findings were endorsed by Children and Young People’s Scrutiny Panel and Performance and Scrutiny Overview Committee at their meetings of 15 October 2010 and 22 October 2010 respectively).

6. Recommendations

- a. That the Children and Young People’s Services Scrutiny Panel notes the actions taken by Children and Young People’s Services in response to the report and the progress made.**

7. Proposals and Details

7.1 The review, chaired by Cllr Ann Russell, looked at:

- current policy and legal responsibilities
- operational arrangements – what is in place locally and how does this compare with practice elsewhere?
- can other support be provided?
- how we communicate closure to parents

Questions were raised about the procedures for closure of schools during periods of adverse weather or in other emergencies. The Children and Young People’s Scrutiny Panel was asked to undertake a short review to see if lessons can be learnt to ensure that future disruption is minimised.

The review began its evidence gathering in February 2010. Interviews were organised with Cabinet Members and relevant officers. In addition, the review group received written submissions and spoke to a number of Headteachers and Senior Staff from Primary and Secondary Schools.

7.2 The recommendations from the review are detailed below including the progress made by Children and Young People's Services in response:

1. *The LA should reissue the guidance to schools with an emphasis on the presumption that schools should remain open unless faced by extraordinary circumstances:*

The guidance on exceptional school closures was updated following the recommendations and emphasises the importance of remaining open wherever practical. The guidance is issued to schools termly and in response to severe weather warnings eg snow of 2009 and 2010.

2. *The LA should confirm with governing bodies their approach to delivering the statutory 190 days of learning and in the case of closure, how they are able to make up some or all of the lost time:*

The guidance on exceptional school closures was updated to reflect this recommendation – schools are advised to consider setting work where possible / practical eg in advance of severe weather warnings as a contingency or by using technology eg. Email to parents / pupils, texts, phone calls to parents, school websites etc. The guidance on closures was originally rolled out via chair and vice chair of governors and head teacher briefings with the instruction that it would be reviewed periodically and reissued.

In relation to the delivery of 190 statutory days of learning, schools are able to set more work or homework for pupils to catch up but are not able to require pupils to attend schools for additional hours. Any decision to ask pupils to stay at school outside normal school hours would require parental consent as is the case for detention, out of school clubs etc. Responsibility for the provision of 190 days statutory learning is delegated to the Head Teacher / Governing Body.

3. *The LA should collate strategies or actions that have or would assist in maintaining a 'school open' status. This good practice should be shared with colleagues across cluster groups and wider school communities:*

CYPS / HR Manager are currently in discussion with unions via the Officer / Union group forum, in relation to the feasibility of school staff reporting to the school nearest to their home as opposed to their school of employment in the event of severe weather periods. The guidance on school closures has also been updated to include schools considering later opening, partial closure eg selected year groups attend etc as opposed to full closure. Schools have also focussed on site safety eg only opening one access gate and focussing their efforts on making this point of entry to the site and adjacent footpaths and screening off etc other points eg keeping other gates locked / signage / taping off out of bounds areas etc

4. *The LA should confirm the process for monitoring and reporting on school closures, including any specific circumstances to identify if there are common trends or factors. This data should be used to inform salting routes, continuity planning across clusters and communication issues:*

CYPS communications team have developed an electronic reporting system which the vast majority of schools embraced during the heavy snow of December 2010. The system requires schools to provide justification for the closure eg. unable to make the site safe, insufficient number of staff, local roads inaccessible etc etc Information is then uploaded on to the RMBC website. Further work is being developed to link the system to local media websites so schools will only need to register the closure once with the Authority and all other organisations will be informed. Closures are reported within the Authority to several departments and elected members. Schools reporting dangerous road conditions etc were encouraged to report concerns to the appropriate RMBC department.

5. *Each school should be encouraged to develop their business continuity plans to cover extreme weather to include:*

How minimum staffing levels will be maintained

How sufficient stocks of salt are maintained and linking with other cluster schools

Contact details of local contractors etc who are able to clear snow

Consideration of later opening as opposed to closure

Measures to ensure exams or tests are able to take place

How closure will be communicated to parents

How communication systems are to be maintained

Although schools do not have specific business continuity plans, they all have specific school emergency plans which cover the points above. The emergency planning template was introduced after the floods of 2007 and was rolled out via head teacher and chair and vice chair of governors briefings.

6. *CYPS / HR should explore with schools the feasibility of teachers and support staff being redirected to their nearest school to help deal with staffing shortages, to keep closures to a minimum:*

CYPS / HR are currently in consultation with union representatives re this subject via the union / officer group.

7. *The LA explores with RBT whether cost effective text notification systems or other social networking alternatives are available for those schools without current access to these facilities:*

Following 'lessons learnt' reviews following the heavy snow periods, schools able to invest in text alert systems have done so and schools unable to fund the system at present are planning to factor this in. It should be noted that schools receive allocated funding including a budget for health and safety and emergency planning arrangements. All schools are provided with electronic resources eg RGFL and support from the LA, schools have developed websites and other communication channels in an effort to improve communication with parents.

8. *The RMBC 'school closure' webpage is redesigned with the capacity to instantly capture information for each school including date of closure, reason, expected date of reopening and contact details. This page should have 'quick links' to other relevant pages eg policies, gritting routes etc*

The school closures page on the RMBC website has been revamped and, more importantly the system for updating it has been improved. The page now incorporates a password protected form which schools can fill in to give all the details outlined above. This information is currently manually updated by website editors, although remote access now means that this can be done any time of day or night.

During the recent cold spell updates were added at around 10pm and then updated throughout each morning from approx 7.30am. Although the new system was only put in place days before the cold spell hit the area more than 100 schools were using it by the end of the first week. The page also became the second most used page on the whole website during that period. Rather than linking to other information just from this page, an 'alert banner' was used across all RMBC web pages to link all relevant pages together under an "adverse weather information" section which was updated corporately. In addition, the page includes links to the following sites: BBC Travel, Met Office, Environment Agency, Rother FM, BBC South Yorkshire and Hallam FM. We will also now be linking to the schools directory information which gives contact details for all schools. Currently, school policies are not included on the page as they sit on the RGfL portal.

Communications Officers are now investigating the possibility of schools updating the page automatically and will be soon testing a system which is part of the website's operating system to allow this to happen, meaning officers can have instant updates 24 hours a day.

9. *Guidance to parents is reissued by schools on a timely basis, incorporating details of the updated RMBC website:*

Schools have been made aware of this requirement via the guidance on exceptional school closures, school emergency plans and via communications to schools.

10. *Priority salting routes are reviewed by RMBC and other relevant agencies to accommodate schools wherever possible:*

Schools were encouraged to report concerns re local roads but this is EDS responsibility to prioritise eg 'A' roads will always be their first priority. It should also be noted that within the guidance on exceptional school closures staff have a responsibility to make every effort to attend school as normal. The Head Teacher and Chair of Governors are responsible for the decision whether to pay staff who have not attended work.

11. *The feasibility (with due regard to health and safety, relevant checks etc) of recruiting a pool of volunteers to assist with site clearance, either on a school, cluster or Area Assembly level be explored:*

This recommendation was sent to schools and the success will vary from community to community.

12. *Streetpride explores the feasibility of schools hiring small-plant machinery to clear sites in extreme weather:*

CYPS were able to identify 2 companies who are able to fulfil this role and details were provided to schools and are now included in the guidance on exceptional school closures. Schools were also encouraged to source other contractors and share contact details with other schools. Several schools did invest in site clearance

in an attempt to make site safe and ensure school was able to open as early as possible.

13. *The Cabinet Member and Director of CYPS write to the Minister for Education supporting the LGA call that in the case of extreme events, Ofsted and other regulatory targets should be suspended to enable the most appropriate response to be taken locally:*

Letter sent by Dorothy Smith Senior Director - Schools and Lifelong Learning. No response has been received to date.

8. Finance

A number of the review recommendations may have financial implications if adopted. This would require further exploration by Schools on the cost, risks and benefits of their implementation.

9. Risks and Uncertainties

In circumstances of extreme weather conditions, the decision to close a school is delegated to its Headteacher in consultation with their chair of governors. Given the likelihood of extreme weather events occurring more frequently in future years, the Local Authority and schools are working together to develop comprehensive plans to mitigate against potential disruption.

10. Policy and Performance Agenda Implications

Although this review focuses on the closure of schools during periods of adverse weather, other pressures on schools (as demonstrated by the 2007 flooding and the recent threats of flu-pandemic) also require emergency decisions about how to keep the school open. CYPS have worked extensively with schools over recent years to develop policies and procedures, emergency plans and training resources and workshops to cover all reasonably foreseeable situations.

11. Equality and Diversity

No specific Equality and Diversity issues or impacts have been identified and there is no requirement to complete an Equality Impact Assessment.

12. Background Papers and Consultation

Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel – 15 October 2010
Performance and Scrutiny Overview Committee – 22 October 2010

Contact Name:

Dean Fenton Risk and Regulation Manager Children and Young People's Services
Telephone: 01709 254821
Email: dean.fenton@rotherham.gov.uk