Return to school

Early feedback from Parent Carer Forums

16 September 2020

This paper summarises the main themes of feedback we have heard from parent carer forums following the first week or so of the return to school. This should be considered initial feedback - we believe that further issues may emerge in the coming weeks as concerns around anxiety, exclusions and catch up become more evident.

As an appendix to the paper, we attach two powerful testaments from parents about their experiences.

1. **Aerosol Generating Procedures**

We are hearing of numerous cases of children requiring AGP (e.g. suction and tracheotomies) not being offered a place in their school or being told they can only have a part time place. There remains confusion about what correct procedures (e.g. level of use of PPE) that is causing further concern and anxiety.

“Heath met yesterday with us – they are sorting out the guidance which will only apply to a small cohort of children.  Seems health colleagues are wrestling with guidance conflicting. They are producing advice to parents as we speak “

1. **Testing**
   1. Swab testing children with sensory issues or learning difficulties and/or autism can be very distressing for them and may prevent them getting the test.
   2. Parents and schools are unclear about what permissions schools need to test children
   3. A lack of available testing locally (the national issue) effectively stopping children with symptoms attending school
   4. The capacity of schools to test – very few testing kits made available to schools– if schools are a priority to be kept open, it should follow that they should be a priority for testing
   5. Staff training to carry out testing on children – some forums reporting that schools have kits but staff do not feel confident in using them
2. **School and local lockdowns**

Parents are worried about mandatory attendance in a local lockdown scenario especially If things escalate to a tier 3 or 4 scenario. They may be unwilling to send their more vulnerable (but perhaps not extremely vulnerable) children into school. Others are concerned about the impact on other vulnerable members of their household. There is also a concern about crossing lockdown borders especially in special schools where children come far and wide.

Families are also raising concerns about the provision of remote education during any school closures and local lockdowns. The importance of a differentiated curriculum that includes health services input (not just education) is critical.

1. **Masks and PPE**

There is genuine confusion about policies for the wearing of masks and PPE in schools. We learnt of a School asking for doctors note to prove child exempt from wearing a mask (mainstream secondary) and another where a child was sent home for wanting to wear mask in class as well as in communal areas (if wearing a mask helps child’s anxiety this should be viewed as a reasonable adjustment).

“Our special school continues to enforce full (hazmat style) PPE at collection and drop off due to contact with families, this is terrifying some of the children to the point of school refusal, two children physically reacted on first day with aggressive protective behaviour”.

1. **When to isolate and test**

Over-zealous interpretation of symptoms keeping SEND children out – for example some conditions mean that many children with respiratory issues have a cough more often, or some children’s conditions mean they more frequently have temperatures. We are hearing of schools sending these children home – given the frequency of their symptoms, there is a possibility the child may never be clear long enough to attend school. There is also confusion in schools about when a test is required – some are asking for it for symptoms of the common cold.

“I know x has a cold but I've still got to keep her off & TRY to get her tested. Way things are it might mean 14 days at home as tests are like gold dust. The school has said on newsletters they have tests, but I can see them having a lot of phone calls today with kids having the common cough.”

1. **Transport**

As anticipated, transport has been an issue. Local areas have taken a wide range of approaches to transport with mixed results. Some PCFs report issues with sourcing taxis, others are reporting a mixing of bubbles on transport which is compounded by long journey times. Practices and policy about the use of facemasks on transport is also very varied.

“Transport is a huge issue as kids are being split into two journeys, effectively the bus takes half of them then comes back for the rest. This means some kids are getting in @10.30 and leaving @4.30/5 - parents are furious!”

1. **Communication**

Good communication with families lies at the heart of a successful return to school. Experiences have been very varied with some families getting little or no communication from schools and other praising the contact they have had.

“What's been most upsetting is schools communication or lack of, no support, empathy or compassion for the situation. Not once have they said we are working towards bringing S back as quickly as possible, we miss him, he's part of our school community. Or simply asked how I am, given that we've just spent all year out of school, with an ICU admission followed by lockdown with no support”.

“I’ve been blown away by how amazing the junior school has been this week. Wonderful communication, all the EHCP support in place from day 1, amazing updates if anything unexpected changes. I honestly couldn’t be happier with their hard work and effort to get it right! My daughter has come out of school smiling for the first time in 3 years!”

1. **Home schooling**

We are hearing of increases in requests for home schooling for children with SEND. For example, one PCF reports a 42% increase in home schooling applications compared to last year for their local authority. This may be a combination of factors – some parents are worried about the risks that covid poses if their children return to school, whereas others are making a positive choice after having found that home schooling works better for their young person.

We remain concerned about off-rolling being presented as elective home schooling and will continue to monitor this area.

“Because of lockdown I have my happier 13-year-old back. Less threat of hurting herself, much less dark thoughts. Thinking of not sending her back. Especially after she told me how she gets no help at school when she needs it, despite an EHCP”

1. **Health**

Not all services are fully restored and many areas report that services that their children rely on (including those written into EHCPs are not being delivered yet.

“Our therapy teams are telling us that accessing children and young people in various bubbles is not possible within each school, as bubble crossovers are not permitted due to possible COVID-19 cross contamination. Therefore, some CYP are missing out on the provisions in their EHCPs because of the "bubbles" concept.”

This lack of services is having an impact:

For a child who has not had his regular physiotherapy – “Mobility has decreased dramatically in lockdown”

Conversely, some families have praised the work done by some teams in continuing services during difficult circumstances.

“My son had OT via school zoom sessions and she was amazing!”

1. **Attendance, behaviour and exclusions**

This has been relatively quiet so far but we are concerned that more cases will emerge as the term progresses. However, we are already hearing of cases where children and young people are being denied education as a result of anxiety and a reluctance to attend school. Many schools have been quick to set out new behaviour expectations that make little reference to the anxiety or concerns that children may exhibit after such a long time out of school. (see also point 1 on AGP above)

There are some social media reports of exclusions – we will continue to monitor this area carefully.

“Now college are refusing to allow him to access the course that he’s applied for in September, because of his attendance (which was low because of his anxiety). College want him to do the same course that he’s already successfully completed. They also want him to sign a ‘Behaviour and Attitudes Contract’ which does not align with the provision in his EHCP and which says that students ‘may be withdrawn’ if they don’t meet expectations.”

1. **Rush to get an EHCP**

Some forums report that more parents have asked for an EHCP – perhaps driven by the messaging from govt during the C19 lockdown that focussed heavily on EHCPs. At the same time, the impact of Covid 19 means that local areas are less able to respond to these requests with SEND teams and SENDIASS services either working from home or below capacity. We will monitor this closely and will be very interested in official statistics.

Appendix – parent testaments0

(we have many more available on request)

# Story 1 – parent of a child who requires occasional suction procedures

Sorry for the delay in writing this, there are not enough hours in the day and we are almost 6 months in to providing full time care without support to A, his disabled younger sister and 3 other siblings, so we are absolutely exhausted.

Coming back to the events of the last week and A though, I received a phone call from the school Nurse at [setting] on Wednesday last week, in the early afternoon. I had spoken to this nurse a few times in August as they did keep asking about A’s suction requirements. He doesn’t have a tracheostomy and he only requires suctioning on rare occasions when he has a heavy cold and struggled to spit out mucous, so he requires oral suctioning only and I was always advised that this wouldn’t be a problem or barrier for returning to school.

The phone call on Wednesday, the nurse said that there was a ‘training’ requirement that meant that A couldn’t attend school the following day....less than 24 hours notice, and she claimed it was due to a new policy that had to be adhered too.  When I asked how long it would take for the training to be given, the nurse claimed to not know and not even able to indicate if the wait would be days, weeks or months.

I was so shell shocked at this news that it took me a while to process, but Thursday morning I decided to contact school to gain further insight. I spoke to reception who passed my details to the headteacher for a call back. The HT re-iterated that there was a training issue, dealing with new guidance by PHE and DfE that had only being released on the 1st September and HT was working really hard to get all the kids back.  I asked about an individualised care plan in view of A’s need for suction being rare and getting plenty of warning for several days in advance that suctioning may be required, but HT was not going to allow A into school. HT advised I spoke with the Head Nurse for [area] schools to discuss and would pass my phone number on.

I had a call from the head nurse (HN) who confirmed that the ‘training’ was actually FFP3 mask fitting and testing, not training. The PHE guidance was that suctioning had to be done in full PPE and staff had not been mask fitted. HN assured me that she was working on getting the fitting done and would want children back within the week.  On Monday evening, the [setting] nurse calls me again, this time to tell me that a child within A’s bubble/zone has symptoms of COVID and may not tolerate a test. She then went on to say that A would need to self-isolate for 2 weeks.  At this point I couldn’t help my anger and astonishment of what I was hearing. I did ask if she remembered that A was one of the children unable to attend school.  She said that she did know but she had to tell everyone the same thing.

On Tuesday I phone the HT to ask about creating a bubble for all the children that had been excluded on the grounds of requiring AGP’s so that they could return safely as soon as the mask fitting was completed. HT advised that they didn’t have enough staff to do that, which makes me wonder if they have enough staff to run the school at capacity, sorry...I digress.  I also challenged HT and asked that in future, parents were told the truth about why things are happening (so for this it wasn’t a training issue but a mask fitting/PPE issue). HT defended the school nurse and continued to be adamant it was a training issue. I asked how HT was going to limit the impact to the children HT was unlawfully excluding and HT said that my child was not excluded, but when I offered to bring him to school, HT said he wouldn’t be allowed in.  When I said that was the definition of exclusion she was really argumentative and incoherent.

A few hours after that call on Tuesday, I had another call from HT to advise that there had been a mistake and that A could attend school, however due to the staff self-isolating in the bubble, it was unlikely that A would be able to return to school before the 22nd September.

We had received emails last week to say that we would be supported with home learning with a video everyday and a phone call. To date we have had 1 video link emailed to us (which is pointless as Alfie is registered blind) and we haven’t had a single phone call outside of the ones mentioned above.

As a parent, I have fought for A, fought for a diagnosis, fought for his health, fought for his education, fought for support. This is yet another fight, I won’t give up or ever stop fighting, but I’m not getting any younger and I do worry what impact all this is having on my long term mental and physical health.

# Story 2 – From a parent of 4 year-old who has an EHCP and is transitioning from an SEN nursery to Reception at a Specialist Unit within a Mainstream School

My son is pre-verbal and has no understanding of anything that has happened during lock-down or the upcoming transition to school. He was offered a place at nursery throughout lockdown due to having an EHCP. However, after discussions with his teacher it was agreed that he would not cope with the change as he would be in a different setting with different children and different staff. As we were not at work there was not a NEED for him to attend nursery and it was agreed he would stay at home with mum and dad.

After 10 weeks I called the nursery to discuss a return to the setting. A gentle phased return was agreed; and the process begun. Soon after the Government released that nurseries and schools could open again so a new plan took effect. My son was moved back into his original setting prior to lockdown but would be mixed with mainstream children and different staff. The day would not follow the same structure as before and no SEN intervention would take place (except some PECS at snack time).

I felt disappointed by this as I understood that enough of the children from the SEN class were returning for it to be run as normal. I was also keen for my son to be in the same bubble as one of his peers as they would be going to the same school in September; however, due to how the bubbles were formed this was not possible. Whilst it was disappointing that the SEN provision could not be run as normal I understand that careful guidelines needed to be adhered to and to manage this within the previous bubbles that existed. It is worth mentioning that I feel confident that the utmost care has been provided and the welfare of the children has been put first.

With regards to transition into his new school we unfortunately have had very little if any contact. The class teacher and manager from the [setting] were present during a video call for my son’s annual EHCP review and I was very grateful for this. They advised that they would being sending materials through soon but that they were still working on what school would look like in September. They said they would send through social stories, videos and information on settle sessions but I have yet to receive anything.