



WARRINGTON

Borough Council

The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education
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Councillor R Bowden
Leader of the Council

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Our Ref: RB/MS/CO

28 August 2020

Dear Secretary of State

In Warrington the local authority, our schools and partners have worked exceedingly hard to minimise and mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic upon children and young people. It is our belief that the opportunity to achieve the best possible educational outcomes is a cornerstone of a happy and healthy life in which people can thrive. Warrington Borough Council is unwaveringly committed to enabling the children in our town to succeed, none more so than those who experience disadvantage. We are also mindful that getting a good start in life is one of the wider determinants of health.

A small sample of our successes include:

- Good attendance rates of vulnerable children in school during lockdown. Actively promoted by our schools and social care teams working directly with families to keep children in school. Prior to June, 33% of children with a social worker were attending school, compared to around 20% nationwide.
- High contact rates for our most vulnerable children by social workers and schools. Whilst schools were closed to the majority of children, high proportions of our children with a social worker were seen or contacted each week.
- Good rates of attendance following the wider opening of schools, which took place in Warrington from 15th June. Our attendance figures for the final weeks of the summer term were well above regional and national averages. As of the 17th July, 49.5% of the priority groups were attending school here. This was driven by the collaborative approach between schools and the local authority which led to high levels of confidence from parents about the systems put in place to promote a safe return to school.
- Our school meals service produced over 15 000 meals between the start of lockdown and the end of May. All children entitled to benefits related FSM were provided with a packed lunch from the beginning of lockdown and our schools moved quickly to provide supermarket vouchers before the national system was set-up. All children attending school during this period, including keyworker children and those with an EHCP, were provided with a free packed lunch.
- Our Edge of Care Hub opened in mid-April in response to the potential increased risks for some young people during the pandemic. The hub provided a safe space for young people and

interventions taking place there include those around CSE, healthy relationships, self-esteem and confidence building. Since it opened, the Edge of Care Hub has been very successful in keeping the young people accessing it within their home or foster placement.

We have also faced significant challenges during this period, including:

- Laptops for disadvantaged children. The allocation of laptops was approximately 400 short of the number we required based on DfE calculations. Whilst schools supported us with additional technology, including broadband connectivity, and we received support from the Local Enterprise Partnership, this left us well short of filling the gap left by the scheme.
- Edenred school meals vouchers. The extensive problems with this scheme have been identified nationally. Our schools mounted a commendable effort to mitigate the failings of the scheme, but this time could have been far better spent in other ways benefitting children if the scheme had worked as expected.
- The poor flow of information from the government's covid-19 track and trace system to local authorities late in the summer term. Local public health officials were either left partially in the dark or behind the curve regarding local data which in turn led to concerns around the wider opening of schools. Although we consider the wider opening of schools to have been successful in Warrington, better sharing of information from the government could have led to improved confidence and made the expansion of provision simpler and smoother.
- 2020 exam results. Another topic covered extensively in the national media and this was the subject of our letter to you on 17th August. We were pleased to see that grades reverted to the centre assessed grades in the majority of cases which was fairer to young people. However, this could and should have been addressed prior to the release of A-level results on 13th August as the hugely regrettable failings in the calculated grades and the methodology by which they were generated should have been evident to anybody who looked at them. The distress caused to the young people and their families, the additional pressure on our schools and sixth form settings, and the implications for their future educational and work destinations have been a major additional burden and cause for worry for all concerned.

As we prepare for the return of all year groups to school in September, our thoughts move to the future challenges this will bring. The new Y11 and Y13 students returning to school have missed a significant amount of curriculum time, but will be sitting formal examinations less than nine months from now. The current guidance suggests that there will be minimal modifications to most GCSE and A-level examinations; almost no allowance is going to be made for the curriculum time missed. The challenge to schools and young people is considerable if they are to be suitably prepared for the 2021 examinations.

Nationally, disadvantaged children and young people have become more greatly disadvantaged than their peers during the pandemic. Despite the best efforts of everybody who works with children this will be true in Warrington as elsewhere. Disadvantaged children have found it more difficult to keep up with remote school work for a variety of reasons. These are the young people who are going to find it most difficult to be suitably prepared for formal examinations next summer. A lot of work has been undertaken in Warrington to reduce the disadvantaged gap which was narrowed by 5.2% at GCSE, 1.5% at KS1 and 7.6% in the EYFS from 2018 to 2019. It is clear that some of this work will be undone for the 2021 cohort if further changes are not made to the examinations. Indeed their educational disadvantage will be further entrenched.

We welcome the additional funding provided to schools to help address these issues, but given the short amount of time until the 2021 examinations, the amount of curriculum time already lost and the minor modifications announced to those examinations, we do not feel that all disadvantaged young people will

have sufficient time and opportunities to address the widening gap. We maintain that no young person should be unfairly disadvantaged by the pandemic, but are very concerned that this is likely if no further action is taken by the DfE.

Schools should be welcoming back students in September with a view to considering their emotional, social, physical and mental wellbeing. These children and young people have been through an unprecedented experience during formative parts of their development and unfortunately for some this will not have been a positive experience. Whilst we know that our schools will take the wellbeing of their children seriously, for the new Y11 and Y13 cohorts curriculum pressures could impact the effectiveness of such provision.

The comments above assume no further curriculum time is lost for these children and young people. In reality we might see children missing more school, either individually due to self-isolating, in year group bubbles due to outbreaks in schools or more widely. Any additional loss of curriculum time will further compound the issues described above and might not equally impact all children, leading to a further widening of the attainment gap for some groups of young people.

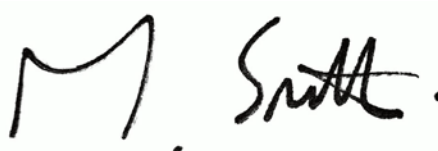
To address these issues we believe that you must give serious and prompt consideration to tackling the challenges outlined above, so that no young person will be disadvantaged by the impact of covid-19 on their education. You should consider actions such as:

- Reducing the curriculum content assessed in the 2021 GCSE and A-level examinations.
- Urgently providing further laptops and broadband connectivity for disadvantaged children and young people, including those with medical needs who may be required to continue their learning from home, where the initial DfE provision was inadequate.
- Developing a robust and absolutely fair national system for centre assessed grades, so that the problems encountered with this year's examinations can be mitigated if there is further disruption to the 2021 examinations.
- Reviewing the current examination arrangements comprehensively and with speed to establish how they can be adapted or improved to avoid a wholly unacceptable repetition of such issues in future. It is worth noting that many of the challenges faced in the awarding of qualifications this year would have been avoided in the past when more qualifications had modular components and students sat examinations at multiple points during their courses.

Yours sincerely



Councillor R Bowden
Leader
Warrington Borough Council



Councillor M Smith
Cabinet Member, Children's Services
Warrington Borough Council