

Written evidence submitted by MAT CEO Network, PRUSAP and National Association for Hospital Education

Joint response to C19 call for evidence - MAT CEO network, PRUSAP & NAHE

- The implementation of the critical workers policy, including how consistently the definition of 'critical' work is being applied across the country and how schools are supported to remain open for children of critical workers

LA interpreted guidance in different ways with some using attendance data as a competitive yardstick to see how many pupils were attending. APs have used the opportunity to personalise their approach so that families can be supported to be able to work, whilst remaining empathic and sensitive to the economic needs of the families. Similar to our SEND colleagues, PRUs and AP also extended their offer to children from families where they were struggling to cope with having been in lockdown together for a long period of time.

- The capacity of children's services to support vulnerable children and young people

Experience has been varied depending on the approach of each LA. Some are significantly proactive and supportive, engaging fully with AP/SEND provisions. Others, passive and sometimes, obstructive. This is more often the LAs in special measures, particularly for safeguarding, who are asking for unreasonable levels of risk assessments.

A major concern is those children are not currently engaged with Social Care (with referrals having not met thresholds or families refusing to engage). Pupils were stepped down to 'Child In Need' without meeting or consultation leaving them more vulnerable. Resourcing does seem to be an issue as capacity has not always been available to support these pupils. There were significant concerns in the sector that social workers were not expected to undertake home visits, whilst AP staff were. Other LAs have been quick to find ways to work flexibility and creatively where needed.

AP has high percentages of vulnerable children and support from staff in social care has varied both individually and between LA areas. Numbers of risk assessments and safety plans have meant that these haven't always come through in a timely manner when Social Care lead, and therefore AP staff have had to request and prompt for these.

- The effect of cancelling formal exams, including the fairness of qualifications awarded and pupils' progression to the next stage of education or employment

Some pupils have been relieved that they don't have the stress or anxiety of sitting formal exams, others have struggled to cope with the 'loss' of their right to sit exams and be able to demonstrate progress they have made in their learning. Some who started the academic year very unwell, were just starting to feel engaged, positive and motivated, and this has been a real blow for them.

Cancelling formal exams has resulted in a lack of focus and motivation for some Year 11s, who have struggled to see the point in continuing to engage with their education this term. Some will have a gap in education from March to September which will impact on their ability to re-engage with learning in September. This will also mean that they will struggle to settle and engage with the work at their post 16 provider, which may have an impact on the sustainability of the placement and longer term NEET figures.

A significant concern for many AP leaders is the statistical model that is being applied by Ofqual, although we appreciate the challenge that they are facing. It particularly impacts on the results of children in AP as our historical data shows no patterns of attainment since we have a different cohort of pupils taking GCSEs yearly, each pupil has their own disrupted history of education engagement. The majority of pupils in AP will come into our settings at the start or during year 11 having missed most or significant amounts of previous schooling. Through our approaches, we enable them to 'catch up' at least to a point where they are able to take exams. We are concerned that some of our pupils this year who would be gifted and talented, and attain the highest grades had the exams been taken in the normal way, will miss out. We recognise that they may be able to sit the exams in the autumn series, but also know how hard it will be for these pupils to prepare appropriately for them as most will have moved on to their post 16 providers. This is also difficult as it does not reflect the improvements made this year or the small and changing cohort year on year.

There is a considerable need for continued transition support for Year 11 learners in the first term and a half in their post-16 setting to prevent drop-out or to offer provision that will help them to regain confidence before progressing.

- Support for pupils and families during closures, including:
 - The consistency of messaging from schools and further and higher education providers on remote learning

Parents/carers have struggled with the number of announcements and information being sent out during the pandemic. AP's have tried to interpret this information where possible to support their understanding of some complex and challenging issues. This has generally worked well alongside extensive work undertaken with families to keep them engaged with their child's learning. AP's have used a layered interventions to enable this to happen effectively. Many of these have helped relationships to improve with the most challenging families. These interventions have included the use of virtual counselling, mental health support and safety checks via phone, visits (where necessary) and using video calls using clear safeguarding protocols.

The advice from the DfE is designed to be 'nuanced', this is more open to interpretation and parents need to feel reassured that leaders know what they are doing and can make that information they need to know accessible to them and their child.

Pupils need to be engaged in communications in the same way - treat them with respect and give them the information that they require in order to remain informed and manage their unknowns, of which there are many. The only change to make is the language/communication that is used so that it is accessible to the child.

Many families have struggled to cope without any remote IT access. Whilst it has been encouraging to see the response to the problem by implementing a national programme of laptops and remote internet access for the most vulnerable pupils the scale of the programme has led to delays in pupils receiving the equipment yet.

- Children's and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education

This has been a challenge for leaders in AP settings due to the vulnerability of our children. The sector has responded in a clear and focused manner using a wide range supportive and nuanced strategies. Many AP settings have tried to maintain as much of a structure to the school day where possible which mirrors the pupils' usual experience. This has helped to provide some structure and routine to their day at home. AP settings have engaged with pupils and their families throughout the pandemic with mentoring sessions taking place virtually and through door-step visits. For many of the most vulnerable pupils they have been contacted daily where required and this support has included a range of virtual therapeutic interventions wherever possible. There are significant concerns about the impact of the time away from their settings for pupils when planning for the phased return to schools.

For pupils who were already experiencing mental health difficulties this situation has been additionally challenging. The significance of their mental health difficulties when we went into lockdown meant that they were already not accessing their mainstream school and hence were being educated through an alternative provision. The keeping of their routine of the offline timetable in the online space has been helpful, being able to 'see' their teachers and other peers (if they choose to), and not overdoing the direct lessons has been helpful. Many have found that taking away the pressure of attending school has significantly improved their emotional and mental health and they are now beginning to feel unwell again at the thought of returning.

AP staff are also providing support for parents too, as often their own mental health support has been reduced or withdrawn and they are struggling to cope with their own mental health and their child who is deteriorating. Information about online support and helpful apps have been shared across our association.

There are HUGE concerns, both from AP providers and colleagues in CAMHS, about managing pupil's anxiety once we are given the go ahead to reopen physically and how we can support them manage this anxiety.

For pupils with complex medical needs, they have had the opportunity to access their own school in the same way as their peers, as schools had to look at how they provide remote learning for all of their school cohort. This has lessened the feeling of social isolation that they feel every day and we need to ensure that this continues post lockdown. This is because for some pupils, they will not be able to come out of isolation for at least 12 months. They have probably had a positive experience from the lockdown which has allowed them to reconnect with their home school community which may have helped their mental health. However, they are much more at risk of potentially dying from C19, and we cannot ignore the impact on those pupils.

- The effect on apprenticeships and other workplace-based education courses

Many pupils in AP move to apprenticeships - we are concerned that these opportunities won't exist as companies will be focusing on their own employees or gone out of business. This will leave our year 11 cohorts with no post 16 destinations becoming NEET. We know that pupils who aren't engaged with their learning are less likely to become unwell again or to engage in anti-social behaviours.

- The financial implications of closures for providers (including higher education and independent training providers), pupils and families

A significant number of AP academies and free schools are commissioned by schools and other settings to support their work with pupils at risk of exclusion. Many are reporting concerns that the financial constraints that will be placed on these settings may lead them to reduce the amount of support they are prepared to pay for. This could have a significant impact on inclusion across the country with it being easier for schools to just exclude a child rather than pay to try to include. For pupils with medical needs, because of the clause in the current statutory guidance, we may see an increase in off rolling in year 11 in order to avoid any additional costs for those pupils. Some LAs are adopting a blanket off rolling for pupils with medical needs in year 11, which is unacceptable.

Many AP leaders are also concerned that a wide range of the smaller but high-quality AP providers who work in partnership with AP academies will have to close due to reported financial constraints. This will have a significant impact on the quality of educational offer for our learners during the next academic year.

This is also the time when we would be looking at referrals for next year, and negotiating commissioning arrangements for places with our local authorities. The additional impact on LA High Needs budgets, which were already under strain, is leading to some unethical behaviours in some LAs when looking to secure place funding going forward. All of this means that it is impossible to plan ahead and whilst trying to cope with managing the current situation, is adding additional pressures to leaders in our sector.

Some additional costs are the same as for all schools - the purchase of equipment for staff to be able to work effectively from home e.g. white boards, special chairs, printers etc, purchase of hardware, WiFi dongles (we can't wait for the DfE scheme as too much will be lost), impact on families of losing their jobs, not having family support for childcare so providing additional financial support/food parcels etc.

- The effect on disadvantaged groups, including the Department's approach to free school meals and the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups (such as pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and children in need)

The challenges of planning for FSM distribution among all disadvantaged groups were considerable. The most effective AP settings and trusts quickly bridged that gap in the early

phase of the pandemic ensuring pupils were not disadvantaged. Considerable work continues to take place across the sector ensuring that young people and their families receive the support they need. There was confusion about who was applying for FSM for those pupils who were dual registered (that is at least 95% of pupils in medical AP) with there being little time to communicate. This resulted in some families receiving double amounts: however, this was preferable to none.

Pupils have not yet received the IT resources that were being provided by central government and children would have likely returned by this point to school. The data on which the allocation was based was also not helpful for AP: the January census for us is simply a snapshot of our settings, as vulnerable pupils come and go every week and our cohort is constantly changing. This has left us frustrated by not being able to offer the same to all pupils who require it.

All pupils in AP receive a personalised learning programme, designed to holistically support their unique needs. This means that during the lockdown, all of our pupils, those with SEND and CIN, have received bespoke programmes which are flexible and have been continually adapted so that we can continue to engage with them and maintain those relationships that not only underpin everything we do now, but will be critical to a successful transition back into our settings in the coming week.

For some pupils with social and communication difficulties, they have found it almost impossible to engage in learning from home - to them home is home and you only do your learning in school.

We have been conscious of the additional strain that learning from home has put on parents of pupils with SEND and disabilities and have deliberately taken the pressure off of them in order to ensure that they can maintain positive relationships within their households.

We have done our best to encourage pupils to attend but anxieties have been high and we have been respectful of this. Daily engagement, face-to-face, phone calls, visits have ensured that we know we are keeping them safe.

- What contingency planning can be done to ensure the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency

Considerable work needs to be undertaken to ensure that the learning from the current pandemic is captured extensively. This has not always happened in relation to previous critical incidents in this country. Lessons can be learnt from looking at how other countries have supported their young people to return to school following significant critical incidents. The existing issue of local variation in quality of LA provision and response to the current pandemic needs to be addressed in future plans. Only then can the associated risks of variability in local performance be mitigated.

Head teachers have always had critical incident plans and pandemic plans - this was our learning from the SARs, avian and swine flu, but we need to ensure that we use the learning

from this pandemic to good effect in order to plan for the future. As a result, we have been looked at research from other countries who have suffered disasters and how they managed to engage their pupils in learning whilst they were closed. As well as their planning for reopening e.g. after the New Zealand earthquakes, Ebola outbreak, and Australian bushfire. We have also looked in detail in how they managed the impact of the trauma also in order to deliver a personalised curriculum allowing all pupils the opportunity to recover and heal. All heads will now have a much more robust contingency plan.

Future proofing depends on finance and whether you live in a local authority that is in special measures for finance and safeguarding, then any additional financial resources for their planning to support us is severely restricted. However, below are some solutions:

- 1) Checking and providing for appropriate infrastructure in all pupil homes would be essential. Changing basic hygiene and health and safety procedures to reflect ongoing risks.
- 2) Training for pupils, their parents and staff in good hygiene practices.
- 3) Consider the current accountability framework in schools - it is all about how you do in the Ofsted inspections - no one inspects you on your systems and procedures to keep your pupils safe and your ability to respond in a crisis.
- 4) Closer work between education providers and post 16 provisions so that transitions can be more effectively managed if there were ever any future periods of lockdown. This would include starting transition planning much earlier.
- 5) Consideration of inclusion of pupils who would have moved into AP through blended learning packages - this would particularly be the case for pupils with medical needs who could be maintained in their home schools whilst unwell.
- 6) Creative use of technology for pupils in AP to remain connected to their home schools e.g. using the outcomes from the Alternative Provision Innovation Fund telepresence robot trial for pupils with complex medical conditions. This will have to be considered as these pupils will require shielding for a long period of time, even when the rest of the country is coming out of lockdown and schools are returning.

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