

We have been asked by many providers if we could stay open during this Coronavirus epidemic as the children we work with are almost all classed as vulnerable. Fortunately the weather has been kind to us and we have been able to spend most of the time outdoors utilising the facilities of our Rural Centre. We have unfortunately had to close our Portsmouth Centre for the time being but intend to re-open it as soon as the schools are back.

It is a difficult time for all of us but especially our dysfunctional families that otherwise would have been couped up together in their homes and the inevitable frictions would lead to all sorts of problems.

At the beginning of the lockdown we sought advice and this is what we had from The Department of Education. Just in case anyone should take a contrary view to our own one.

The Department for Educations (DfE) guidance to us indicated that because our children are

- supported by the child social care system
- with education, health and care (EHC) plans
- in alternative provision (AP) settings

and because we are

- an alternative provision, including as a pupil referral unit
- operating as an independent special school
- a general further education (FE) provider, as a special post-16 institution
- a provider of children's social care

That our Chief Executive and designated safeguarding lead knows who our most vulnerable children are and are therefore given the flexibility to offer a place to attend our provision to those on the edges of receiving children's social care support and should therefore remain open.

The DfE have said to us that they know that some families need more support than others and that attending education settings is an important protective factor for children receiving support from a social worker. They have said they want to prioritise supporting those most in need at this difficult time.

The guidance the DfE have given us says that for those children who are being supported by children's social care, we will be expected to prioritise support to the most vulnerable, including undertaking necessary visits whilst taking appropriate infection control measures.

They have said they will give us the flexibility to provide meals or vouchers to children eligible for free school meals.

Where children are accessing an education setting that is not local, transport can be provided. Where children are receiving support from a social worker, they have said they would expect us to review transport arrangements and make appropriate provision for children to reach their education setting safely.

The guidance we have been given says that "there is an expectation that vulnerable children who have a social worker will attend an education setting, so long as they do not have underlying health conditions that put them at severe risk. In circumstances where a parent

does not want to bring their child to an education setting, and their child is considered vulnerable, the social worker and education setting should explore the reasons for this, directly with the parent”.

The guidance also goes on to say that “Providers may also want to consider how to encourage children and young people to attend an education setting”. We are remaining in contact with vulnerable children and families, including remotely if needed.

With regard to us working during the school holidays we have received the following guidance from the government. “Education is a protective factor for vulnerable children and we want to make sure that protection remains in place during the Easter holidays given the current circumstances.

We are asking providers, wherever possible, to maintain provision for children of workers critical to the COVID-19 response and vulnerable children over the Easter holidays. We are asking ... wherever possible, to encourage vulnerable children to continue to attend an education setting during the Easter holidays, so long as they do not have underlying health conditions that puts them at severe risk”.

With regard to our children with EHC plans the guidance says, “colleges, other training providers and local authorities will need to consider the needs of all children and young people with an EHC plan, alongside the views of their parents, and make a risk assessment for each child or young person. During this outbreak, educational settings, local authorities, health bodies, parents and young people with SEND should work together to respond pragmatically and flexibly to each individual’s needs. Local authorities will need to work closely with educational settings – and in particular, special schools and specialist colleges, and other specialist provision – to ensure sufficient provision is available across the local area”.

With regard to our recognition as an Alternative Educational Provider the DfE says the following “We have defined vulnerable children as those who have a social worker and those with EHC plans. Alternative provision settings serve a small number of children and young people, a high proportion of whom meet this definition of vulnerability.

AP providers are well-placed to cater for the needs of the children we are defining as vulnerable in a way that would be difficult to replicate elsewhere. The AP sector therefore has a key role to play in helping safeguard this group of children at this difficult time.

The government is asking head teachers of AP providers to work with us, ... to protect these vulnerable children (and others that the education provider/local authority agree are vulnerable for other reasons), including by keeping AP settings open where it is feasible to do so”

So bearing all this in mind and the final piece of guidance issued to us which says “The cohort of vulnerable children in AP is small but at high risk of harm if they are not in an education setting. The scientific advice shows that education settings are safe for this small number of children to continue attending – but asking others to stay away will help to slow the spread of coronavirus.” We have decided as far as we possibly can to stay open and provide care for any of the children whose parents, schools or social workers want us to continue.

Doug Hulme  
Chief Executive  
17 April 2020