

AGENDA ITEM 6

**OVERVIEW SCRUTINY BOARD**

**23 SEPTEMBER 2010**

**Local Authority Advice and Guidance for Schools experiencing Severe Weather  
Conditions**

**John Catron, Deputy Director, Achievement, CF&L**

**PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

- 1 The purpose of this report is to clarify the role of the Local Authority in terms of advice and guidance to schools during periods of severe weather.

**BACKGROUND**

2. Historically, Local Authorities made decisions about school closures during periods of severe weather and communicated those instructions to schools. Following advice from the Department for Education (previously DCSF), Middlesbrough Local Authority's position is that decisions about school closure should be delegated to individual schools because they are best placed to make critical judgements about conditions in their areas. Nonetheless, in particularly severe situations, the Local Authority is still able to direct maintained and Voluntary Aided schools to close. However, current policy within CF&L is to consult with schools leaders on particular problems they may be experiencing so that the rationale for the decision made by the school is clearly understood and agreed by all parties.
3. Local Authorities do not have the power to oblige foundation or voluntary aided schools, or academies, to close, but may come to an agreement with governing bodies that these schools will close if area-wide closure seems necessary, but only in extreme circumstances.

4. The principle underpinning any decision to close due to severe weather is that schools should plan for severe weather on the assumption that they will generally stay open. In the outbreaks of severe weather in early 2010, staff at many schools worked hard to keep their school open for the pupils who could get in. However, there were some cases where the exceptional nature of the severe weather disrupted the contingency plans of some schools.

#### 5. **Contingency Plans**

Schools should include the following as part of contingency plans for dealing with severe weather:

- contact details for pupils, their families and staff
- ensuring stocks of salt or grit are maintained
- identifying which walkways or areas need to be kept clear to allow people to get around the premises safely
- estimating how many staff members need to get in for the school to operate safely, if not to deliver the full normal curriculum

6. Schools also need to be clear which members of staff will make any decision about closure. In most cases this decision rests with headteachers, who will know local weather and ground conditions, and the likely impact of the weather on the numbers of staff and pupils who will be able to get into school. When making the decision, headteachers need to balance the likely accuracy of weather forecasts against the benefits of early decisions to help parents and staff plan ahead. In many cases, decisions will, however, need to be taken in the hours immediately before the start of the school day.

7. As a decision-maker, the headteacher needs to take a proportionate approach to assessing risks. Closing the school has a clear impact on children and families. Remaining open may increase risks arising from less supervision, longer journeys to and from school, minor slips and bumps, etc. There may be practical steps headteachers can take to manage these increased risks, for example:

- reducing the extent to which children have to move between school buildings for different lessons
- bringing some classes together in the hall to ensure adequate supervision
- ending the school day early so that children do not get home too late (while making arrangements for children who cannot get collected by parents until later).

8. In some cases, closing the school will be the right decision. If headteachers judge that children or staff will face significant risks of injury in school, or travelling to and from school, then a balanced decision may be that the school should close. Information about local road conditions will normally be available on local media, and the police may issue advice to travellers.

9. If headteachers cannot get enough staff in to manage safely the expected numbers of pupils, closure may again be advisable. But headteachers may wish to consider whether varying the school's activities for the day will enable the school to operate safely with fewer staff.
10. When severe weather coincides with public examinations, headteachers should make every effort to open for examination candidates even if the rest of the school is closed. In early 2010, schools and other examination centres in Middlesbrough made great efforts to enable candidates to take examinations.
11. Communication with parents and the general public is clearly important. Schools have a variety of mechanisms for disseminating decisions about school closure including telephone and use of local media.

#### History

12. The severe weather experienced by schools in the winter Of 2009/2010 led to number of school closures in Middlesbrough and elsewhere in the region. On days when decisions regarding closure were required, meetings were arranged between Gill Rollings, DCS and John Catron, Deputy Director, Achievement so that the weather forecast and patterns could be monitored and so that a senior officer was on hand to provide advice and guidance for school leaders.

#### Ward Implications

13. Some variation may have been experienced between schools which took different decisions with respect to closure, as severe weather can impact in different ways on sites and surrounding areas.

### **PROPOSALS**

14. CF&L proposes to offer opportunities for school leaders to discuss contingency planning with respect to severe weather at headteacher forums prior to the onset of winter this year.

#### Reasons

15. This will be an opportunity to re-iterate the severe weather protocols; rationalise schools' responses to severe weather and to reinforce contingency planning arrangements

#### Outcomes

16. School leaders will be more confident in their response to severe weather so that schools remain open whenever possible

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

17. Overview Scrutiny Board is asked to note the policy guidance from CF&L

### **AUTHOR**

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