

## CABINET ITEM COVERING SHEET PROFORMA

**AGENDA ITEM**

**REPORT TO CABINET**

**1 DECEMBER 2011**

**REPORT OF CORPORATE  
MANAGEMENT TEAM**

### **CABINET DECISION**

Children and Young People – Lead Cabinet Member – Councillor McCoy

#### **MANAGING A SCHOOL EMERGENCY OR CRITICAL INCIDENT**

1. Summary

Parents and carers trust schools and providers to keep their children and young people safe. Thanks to the efforts of staff and governors, schools normally remain a safe haven for children but there are occasions when an emergency or a critical incident can disrupt the smooth running of a school. Schools can become involved in an emergency or critical incident at any time and at such times a Headteacher is often required to operate in a complex circumstance, of which s(he) may have no previous experience. This may, or may not, involve the closure of a school.

The document appended as Appendix 1 will provide schools with the information they need to respond to school emergencies and critical incidents. It includes a section dedicated to school closures due to adverse weather conditions. It is proposed that this document be circulated to all headteachers and principals of Stockton schools and academies and to the chairs of governing bodies.

2. Recommendations

Cabinet is asked to:

1. Note and comment upon the attached guidance and the role of the local authority set out within it
2. Agree that the guidance be circulated to schools and academies

3. Reasons for the Recommendations/Decision(s)

The Council is committed to supporting headteachers in dealing with a low level emergency or critical incident, and where necessary, providing a co-ordinating and communication role. This reflects the importance placed upon the safety of children and young people, the smooth and effective running of local services and the Council's responsibilities in relation to communicating information to the residents of Stockton.

4. Members' Interests

Members (including co-opted Members with voting rights) should consider whether they have a personal interest in the item as defined in the Council's code of conduct (**paragraph 8**) and, if so, declare the existence and nature of that interest in accordance with paragraph 9 of the code.

Where a Member regards him/herself as having a personal interest in the item, he/she must then consider whether that interest is one which a member of the public, with

knowledge of the relevant facts, would reasonably regard as so significant that it is likely to prejudice the Member's judgement of the public interest (**paragraphs 10 and 11 of the code of conduct**).

A Member with a prejudicial interest in any matter must withdraw from the room where the meeting considering the business is being held -

- in a case where the Member is attending a meeting (including a meeting of a select committee) but only for the purpose of making representations, answering questions or giving evidence, provided the public are also allowed to attend the meeting for the same purpose whether under statutory right or otherwise, immediately after making representations, answering questions or giving evidence as the case may be;
- in any other case, whenever it becomes apparent that the business is being considered at the meeting;

and must not exercise executive functions in relation to the matter and not seek improperly to influence the decision about the matter (**paragraph 12 of the Code**).

**Further to the above, it should be noted that any Member attending a meeting of Cabinet, Select Committee etc; whether or not they are a Member of the Cabinet or Select Committee concerned, must declare any personal interest which they have in the business being considered at the meeting (unless the interest arises solely from the Member's membership of, or position of control or management on any other body to which the Member was appointed or nominated by the Council, or on any other body exercising functions of a public nature, when the interest only needs to be declared if and when the Member speaks on the matter), and if their interest is prejudicial, they must also leave the meeting room, subject to and in accordance with the provisions referred to above.**

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**SUMMARY**

Parents and carers trust schools and providers to keep their children and young people safe. Thanks to the efforts of staff and governors, schools normally remain a safe haven for children but there are occasions when an emergency or a critical incident can disrupt the smooth running of a school. Schools can become involved in an emergency or critical incident at any time and at such times a Headteacher is often required to operate in a complex circumstance, of which s(he) may have no previous experience. This may, or may not, involve the closure of a school.

The document appended as Appendix 1 will provide schools with the information they need to respond to school emergencies and critical incidents. It includes a section dedicated to school closures due to adverse weather conditions. It is proposed that this document be circulated to all headteachers and principals of Stockton schools and academies and to the chairs of governing bodies.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Cabinet is asked to:

1. Note and comment upon the attached guidance and the role of the local authority set out within it
2. Agree that the guidance be circulated to schools and academies

**DETAIL**

1. Following the severe weather conditions toward the end of 2010, the Department for Education issued guidance for schools on school closures and dealing with emergencies in schools. This guidance clearly stated that, with regard to school closures, the decision as to whether to close must be for headteachers to make.
2. In March 2011 the Department for Education made available resources for schools to use to help prepare for such circumstances. The 'Developing Community Resilience through Schools' pack was developed from examples of good practice drawn from local authorities and emergency planning professionals across the country, working in collaboration with the DfE and the Cabinet Office.
3. Whilst the Department for Education (DfE) provides this guidance to schools to deal with such situations, the Council is also committed to supporting local schools facing such circumstances, and where necessary, providing a co-ordinating and communication role. The guidance we are proposing to issue, therefore, is meant to supplement that of the Department for Education. This reflects the importance we place upon the safety of our children and young people, the smooth and effective running of local services and our

responsibilities in relation to communicating information to the residents of Stockton. It also draws a clear distinction between managing low level emergencies and critical incidents, that may or may not involve a school closure, and larger scale emergencies and critical incidents that would be part of the local authority emergency planning.

4. The attached guidance, which we propose to issue to all schools and academies in Stockton, has been developed in conjunction with Headteachers, through a series of workshops held in the summer term 2011. It provides the context for dealing with emergencies and critical incidents (Section 1), the role of Corporate Communications Team (Section 2), managing unplanned school closures (Section 3), managing a critical incident in school (Section 4), and related health and safety matters (Section 5). The final section (Section 6) provides contact details of key local authority officers.
5. Where an incident is confined to one school, although headteachers will, as required, independently assess the situation and make decisions including whether the school can remain open, the impact is likely to be relatively contained. However, where the situation affects a number of schools, it can have a wider impact upon the local community, as was experienced during the bout of adverse weather in 2010. In that period, the majority of Stockton schools closed and only 12 primary schools and one academy remained open. The average closure was 2 days per school and 145 days were lost to learning across the Borough.
6. School closures as the result of adverse weather was, therefore, a key aspect of the dialogue with headteachers. There was strong endorsement of the need to have an agreed process to inform members of the public, elected members and other interested parties of unplanned school closures at the earliest opportunity, consensus on the factors that should be taken into consideration, and sharing of emergency planning that could be put in place to minimise disruption. Headteachers stressed that the health and safety of children, young people and staff was central in all decision making. To support headteachers through this process, the guidance in section 3 of the attached guidance directs them to the Department for Education guidance on decision making (December 2010) and the 'Developing Community Resilience through Schools' pack (March 2011).
7. To provide more effective communication the Council has developed a new 'Tell Us Once, Tell Everyone' communication tool. Headteachers will inform the Corporate Communications Team at the local authority of the reasons for, and details of, any closure. The Corporate Communications team will then report the information to local radio stations and display it on the Council website. Elected members and local authority officers will be kept up-to date with the situation via the Corporate Communications Team. Headteachers will publish the information on school websites.
8. As well as adverse weather and unplanned emergencies, the guidance outlines the support that is available to headteachers to support them in dealing with other critical incidents in school. Such incidents are described as situations that have a significant impact upon the welfare and wellbeing of children and/or staff who may need support in dealing with the incident.

## **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

None

## **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

None

## **RISK ASSESSMENT**

Schools are required to have in place emergency planning that incorporates risk assessment. The 'Developing Community Resilience through Schools' pack (March 2011) emphasises the need for risk assessment

## **SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY IMPLICATIONS**

No implications

## **EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT**

Not required.

## **CONSULTATION INCLUDING WARD COUNCILLORS**

Headteachers have been consulted and information circulate to Governing Bodies