Introduction and background

During the autumn term, Ofsted will be carrying out a series of ‘interim visits’ to schools. The visits will last for one day; no graded judgement will be made. The aim of the visits is to help parents and the public understand how schools are returning to their normal curriculum. Before beginning these visits, Ofsted piloted its approach by making 121 pilot visits to schools (71 to primary schools, 40 to secondary schools and 10 to other types of school including pupil referral units). The schools volunteered to take part in the pilot visits, so the picture presented may not be representative. This is the first briefing note to be published; more will follow throughout the term.

Key points

The current state of children’s school education

- All the schools visited had opened to all their pupils full time from the second week of September. Most schools reported that their attendance rate was normal. Some schools had higher attendance than usual. Many leaders attributed this to the work with families during the summer term to build trust in the school.
- Leaders reported that pupils seem happy to be back at school. In a few schools, leaders commented that absence was starting to increase because some pupils were unwell and awaiting COVID-19 tests. Over a third of the schools reported that, due to anxiety about COVID-19, some parents had removed their children from school to home educate them or were about to do so.
- Leaders had made many changes to their daily routines to ensure a safe return for pupils. These included staggered starts and ends to the day and changes to break and lunchtimes. In some schools different playground zones had been set up. In some secondary schools, lessons had been lengthened to minimise movement.
- In both primary and special schools, there was a variety of approaches to the autumn-term curriculum. Some schools began teaching all subjects straight away. Others are taking a gradual approach to reintroducing foundation subjects such as modern foreign languages and geography. Practical aspects of subjects such as physical education (PE) and music were sometimes not being taught.
- All the primary school leaders reported that they are concentrating hard on reading, including phonics. Many leaders stated that they wanted to mitigate learning losses, particularly in reading. Leaders of special schools were also concentrating on the aspects they considered to be priorities for their pupils, such as language and communication.
- Many secondary schools reported that pupils are back to studying the full range of subjects. Most also reported that pupils are continuing with all their GCSE courses, although a few schools suggested that some pupils may need to drop an option subject.
- The secondary schools had generally re-ordered their curriculums in order to prioritise key concepts and knowledge. Others said they were prioritising what they thought could not be taught effectively through remote learning. A few schools had extended their teaching time to provide catch up opportunities for Y11 pupils.
- Some leaders talked about a ‘recovery curriculum’ but this meant different things to different schools. Some meant that they had carefully selected the subject specific knowledge and skills that needed to be taught in the first few weeks back to enable pupils to ‘recover’ any lost learning. Others meant an increased focus on personal, social and health education (PSHE) and pupils’ well-being. Overall, the focus in the schools visited was getting back to the normal curriculum as quickly and efficiently as possible.
- Most schools were providing remote education for some pupils such as those in self-isolation or quarantine. Schools that were not providing remote education stated that they currently had no pupils who fell into these groups, but were ready to use remote learning when needed. A few leaders had to put remote education in place for whole classes or whole year groups, because of confirmed cases of COVID-19. The schools were generally using online methods of delivery – recorded online lessons, individual study
modules or often a combination of the two. A few leaders said they were using live online lessons.

- Leaders said that they sometimes supplement or support online work with textbooks and printed packs of work. Many reported that they were working on how they can best align their remote learning with their existing curriculum. Leaders reported that in some subjects their remote education was only aligned with their pre-existing curriculum to some extent. In others, it was not yet aligned.

- Schools already had e-safety guidelines in place before the lockdown. Most schools communicated with parents about online safety, including how to raise any safety concerns. A few schools reported safety concerns about the use of live lessons, such as pupils being alone in a room while the lesson was taking place. They had chosen not to use live teaching because of these concerns. Some others had put measures in place to help, such as recording the whole lesson (including any discussion in the chat box) or only using audio.

- All schools had undertaken online training with their staff during the summer term. Some training was delivered directly to staff through online platforms and staff could access other training online independently. A few leaders had brought all staff in for face-to-face training at the end of the summer term. Senior leaders had to deliver the same training several times because of the constraints of social distancing. Some schools had delivered training outdoors to avoid this problem.

- Many leaders said that they had continued to recruit staff during the summer term, generally through online interviews. The biggest concern expressed by leaders was not being able to see a prospective teacher teaching. Occasionally, schools had recruited teachers on fixed-term contracts for this reason. However, some leaders said that online interviews had worked much better than they had anticipated. A few had carried out socially distanced interviews in school. A small number of leaders did not like the idea of interviewing virtually so had delayed recruitment until this term.

**How children were affected by partial school closures**

- Leaders frequently highlighted the challenges involved in establishing remote education at the start of the national lockdown in March. Schools in more deprived areas faced issues when they wanted pupils to use information technology, as many families did not have devices or internet access. Most schools had at least some pupils in this position.

- Leaders also talked about the challenges of communicating with families about what they wanted pupils to learn, helping families to become confident in working with their children and making sure that all pupils had some good-quality learning to do. Some mentioned issues with completing work at home, for example because of a lack of space.

- The pilot visits took place when schools had been back for around a week. Many leaders said that it was too early to have identified specific gaps in pupils’ learning or have a detailed picture. Some, however, felt that they understood which aspects of the curriculum pupils had not learned during the last term.

- Primary leaders were mainly concerned that pupils were behind where they should be at this point in reading, particularly phonics, and in mathematics. For pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), particularly those who do not communicate verbally, some leaders reported that being away from school had caused communication skills to regress. They also noticed the impact of missed physiotherapy and speech and language therapy sessions.

**Pupils’ physical, emotional and mental health**

- Although most pupils were happy and had settled back well into school, leaders reported that some children were finding it harder to concentrate or that they were showing less resilience. Several leaders reported pupils appearing more subdued than usual.

- Some leaders said that they had noticed that some pupils’ physical health seemed to have deteriorated during the lockdown period. Some also reported that a minority of pupils had been very anxious about returning to school. Leaders described how they were providing additional support for affected pupils, including one-to-one counselling and, in a few cases, a phased return.

- Many schools said that they had identified pupils who were newly vulnerable, due to parents’ changed financial situations, or the separation of parents.

- Some leaders reported an increase in safeguarding cases and referrals, most of which were attributed to incidents of domestic abuse.

**Maintaining high standards**

- Most schools visited are aiming to return to their normal curriculum by the summer term 2021.

- Many leaders reported that they were using assessment to find out what pupils had learned in different subjects during last term and to determine where there had been loss or regression. Many leaders had started to adjust the content of the curriculum to take account of what their assessment told them.

- Schools continue to face significant challenges including staff absence and lack of access to COVID testing. A further challenge was lack of clarity in national and local guidance; many reported conflicting guidance between agencies.

- Concerns about safety in both primary and secondary schools meant that they were struggling with the delivery of practical subjects such as PE, design and technology and music. There were also concerns about the likelihood of Year 11 pupils being ‘exam ready’.

- Most schools had introduced measures to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on pupils’ wellbeing. These included staff training, an increased emphasis on PHSE and wellbeing ‘hubs’.

- Some of the schools had tentative plans to use the COVID-19 catch up premium to support their curriculum work. Most were aiming to use the funding to help pupils to catch up with learning they had missed, such as aspects of reading and mathematics, based on their assessment. Some leaders thought that they might use the funding to pay extra staff for this work and others were planning to use it for resourcing their reading curriculum.