Remote Learning and Secondary Schools

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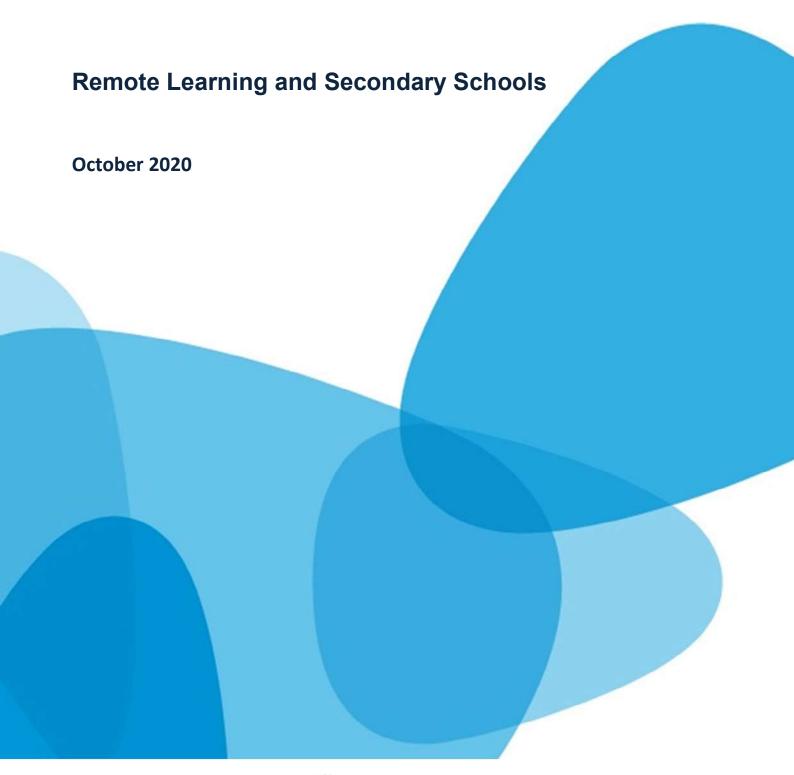
Introduction

During the summer of 2020, the Department for Education (DfE) published its thinking regarding the provision for remote learning by schools. It makes clear that as part of any such learning schools need to:

- set assignments so that pupils have meaningful and ambitious work each day in a number of different subjects, including new material - planning a programme that is of equivalent length to the core teaching pupils would receive in school
- teach a planned and well-sequenced curriculum so that knowledge and skills are built incrementally, with a good level of clarity about what is intended to be taught and practised in each subject
- gauge how well pupils are progressing through the curriculum using questions and other suitable tasks, and set a clear expectation on how regularly teachers will check work
- enable teachers to adjust the pace or difficulty of what is being taught in response to questions or assessments including, where necessary, revising material or simplifying explanations to ensure pupils' understanding

This is a significant step change from the previous guidance produced during lockdown.

The DfE has also produced guidance setting out how education will continue for pupils in light of any local outbreaks. Whilst this makes clear the importance of keeping schools open, it also sets out the notion of secondary schools potentially needing to operate on a rota basis and in the extreme, returning to a situation where only emergency provision is available on the school site.

Quality remote learning is clearly going to be a key element for schools in maintaining pupils' learning. Even if schools do not have to implement the 'tier two' arrangements, it is likely that there will be disruption in education due to higher rates of absence in the current circumstances. In Hampshire, we would all want children who are not at school to receive a high quality education. We do not want pupils being disadvantaged as a result of local outbreak control measures. The DfE guidance, then, helpfully sets out the key criteria we would expect to see to achieve this.

The DfE have also announced the broadening of the scheme for providing computers for vulnerable pupils who are facing self-isolation. Further details about this can be found on the government covid web pages under 'Get help with remote education' (www.gov.uk/guidance/remote-education-during-coronavirus-covid-19). Further support around this can be provided by Sue Savory (sue.savory@hants.gov.uk) who is leading on this this for the local authority.

Many schools in Hampshire have taken time over the summer to review their provision in light of the DfE criteria and put in place contingency plans. In doing so, schools have given careful thought to ways in which remote learning can support classroom learning in any case, through such areas such as homework and revision for examinations, and are looking to integrate it into their everyday practice.

Hampshire Inspection and Advisory Service (HIAS) Inspectors have been in discussion with a number of schools as they reviewed their on line work and started planning for the coming year. This document draws together the challenges that schools have faced with on line learning along with approaches that have shown success. It is not intended that this document is a comprehensive guide to on line learning but rather a summary of 'lessons learned' which have been compiled to add to schools' thinking and planning for the coming year and to support them in ensuring provision meets the DfE criteria.

Issues for schools

This section provides a summary of the main issues raised by schools in discussion with inspectors and some of the strategies and thinking used to address them. The issues have been grouped under broad headings:

1.   Purpose, clarity and communication

Despite direct communication to parents and pupils, a number of schools report significant misunderstandings - that in some cases grew over time - regarding the nature of remote work, its purpose and how it needed to be completed.

In these cases, pupils might not always be clear on how any remote work related to their "normal" classwork and in some cases saw it as "optional". There were also cases in which pupils appeared to be unaware of set work and expectations regarding its completion.

For some parents, an expectation began to grow as time went by that pupils' home learning should equate directly to online teaching, and that pupils should be spending significant amounts of time being taught directly online. The situation was made more challenging in some circumstances as parents compared the school's provision to that of their, sometimes incorrect, understanding of what was happening in other schools.

In such cases, school leaders found that they were having to spend significant time in addressing parent concerns about work and dealing with the misconceptions.

Schools found the following approaches to these issues to be helpful and are seeking to build them into their work for the current academic year:

- Having a clearly defined and accessible point on their website where all covid related communication to parents and pupils was held. Parents could see what had been published over time and could remind themselves easily of the contents. This enables the school's expectations regarding remote learning to be set out in one clearly defined place along with information regarding timetables etc.

- Using a clearly defined process to send out work to pupils. For example, schools used their IT homework publishing solution to provide pupils work during the period of school closure. This was left "live" so that they and parents could see what had been set over time, and was linked to the above communication hub so that parents and pupils were aware when a new publication was due.

- Making regular contact with groups of parents through the school's text messaging service. This was used to alert parents to new covid communications that had been published, new remote learning that

had been set, or as a way of providing feedback about their childrens' work. It appears that schools that adopted this approach had to spend less time in addressing the sort of concerns described above from parents.

- As part of this, some schools reported that they revised their reward/sanction policy to tailor pupils working from home. They then used this as a basis on which to contact a wide range of parents. Setting up a "virtual" rewards/sanction policy was reported as playing a significant role in reassuring parents and pupils alike.

2. Approach to remote learning

Schools used different approaches to remote learning. Some attempted to transfer as many lessons directly on line so that pupils could broadly maintain their timetables. Others set pupils longer term projects which might draw on on line resources, amongst other things. These were completed and sent to the teacher for marking. Teachers also supported this work through email.

Schools reported that with both these approaches, pupils initially were highly engaged but motivation began to tail off. They questioned the degree to which pupils learned effectively from either of these approaches. Certainly, pupils could be 'busy' when engaging with either of them but to what degree did they learn new knowledge or skills effectively?

On this point, schools felt it was not always clear what skills or knowledge pupils should have learned through project work in particular. They also reflected that it was challenging for pupils to teach themselves new things independently and that these 'project' type approaches had greatest effect when pupils had to apply previous skills or knowledge. However, it needed to be clear what these might be when the work was set to maximise impact. There is some evidence that higher attaining pupils tended to maintain higher levels of motivation in project work, potentially learning more from the approach than other children.

With directly taught on line lessons, schools reported that teachers could slip into more 'presentational' or didactic approaches. They linked this to the fact that teachers were keen to just 'get on with it' in the face of the emergency and whilst it is possible to set up group work, discussions etc in online classrooms, teachers needed further training in doing so. As a result, some schools have questioned the degree to which pupils' learning has progressed in such lessons and also suspect a link in the tail off in engagement and the teaching approach used.

Having said that, a number of schools reported significant success with their approach to on line teaching. There were several elements to this:

- Moving away from a 'normal' school timetable/lesson pattern. The length of lessons in school is predetermined by the timetable. Lessons are planned to fill that time but teaching on line removes that boundary.

Some schools reported success in planning lessons that lasted as long as they needed to last, so that pupils learned effectively.

- Exploiting other freedoms. Class size is no longer constrained. Some schools reported significant successes in bringing classes together and team teaching. This provided opportunities for teachers to plan and teach together, and thoughtful pairing of teachers provided a good basis for professional development. Having two teachers meant that the 'chat bar' facility could be used as an effective tool, with teachers taking it in turns to respond to comments and use it proactively whilst the other carried on working with the class in a more traditional role.

- Blending on line and off line work. Teachers planned blocks of work to last approximately a week and shared this with pupils so that they were clear when lessons would be taking place, what they needed to do between lessons and how the work all fitted together. Teachers were able to present lessons as 'events' and therefore something special. Schools report that this approach was highly effective at maintaining motivation for both pupils and teachers.

- Communication. Schools published these blocks of planned work regularly, showing the points of teaching and the points of pupil self study using the approaches to communication outlined above. As a result both parents and pupils had a clear sense that focussed, meaningful learning was underway. Schools report that parents found the structure helpful as they were able to help their children maintain it.

As a result of the removal of the constructs and potential constrictions of classrooms, schools reported teachers have been able to reflect more deeply on how pupils learn in a given subject and adjusted their teaching accordingly. Everyone has an understanding of the features of a good classroom lesson and uses them in every day planning and teaching. But there's a question about the degree to which they are directly applicable in an on line classroom. Arguably, it is more helpful to look at the first principles of learning and then use these to plan blocks of work.

So, for example, schools have found the distinction between "sites of instruction" and "sites of application" helpful in planning such work.

Sites of instruction are the points where pupils are taught a new idea/construct. In general terms this involves some direct teaching and discussion of the idea, with pupils then carrying some work to help them understand/embed it. As this section of work continues, the teacher checks pupils have understood the idea/construct and makes any corrections on the basis of this.

Sites of application refer to the points at which pupils use these ideas or skills in a different context or as part of their own creativity, with the teacher again checking that they've understood the idea correctly through this work and helping pupils to refine and deepen their thinking. The application work follows from the instruction.

This distinction was used to help teachers structure blocks of work and give clarity to pupils and parents about the purpose of each element. So, the on line face-to-face element focussed on "sites of instruction", whereas the work that pupils completed outside of the direct teaching focussed on "sites of application". This structure also helped teachers assess pupils' work as there was a clarity about the purpose of each section. Schools were able to use this as the basis for feedback to parents as per the modified rewards/sanctions policy.

Teachers found that the pre-recording of elements of the "site of instruction" section of the "lesson" was helpful. When new concepts or ideas were introduced having this "pre-recorded" helped bring clarity and precision, as well as providing a useful, flexible resource. Teachers would work together in carefully scripting in the necessary detail to produce a really precise piece of teaching. In the hurly burly of the classroom, it can be easy to forget to mention key elements related to the idea or concept. Sometimes teachers might introduce things that reinforce prior misconceptions. Some teachers are better at helping pupils understand these new ideas to a greater depth. With teachers working together and pre-recording these elements, it was possible to produce a precise and consistent piece of teaching that could be used across a number of classes. This process became a useful focus for teacher development and provided a helpful vehicle to discuss standards and the depth of understanding that's needed across the department. By pre-recording them, these clips are then available for pupils to view themselves again as necessary both during the on line lessons and whilst pupils are working for themselves. Schools reported that pupils found this to be a particularly helpful resource and associated way of working. Schools have also reflected that a bank of such clips will be a useful tool to support pupils when they are revising in the future.

The distinction between sites of instruction and application is a helpful one. It is worth noting that it is the application of skills and knowledge that pupils can often find more challenging, so in planning such "application" type activity, it's important to consider how challenging pupils might find them in relation to the "instruction" part of the work. If the jump is great, pupils will struggle on their own. One school at least was considering how it might make use of very short, small group tutorial type activity to support pupils with the application work, where necessary.

3. Assessment

Schools indicated that this was an important area for ensuring remote learning has impact. In a sense this is no surprise as it is also key in 'normal' classroom teaching. In physical classrooms, teachers are able to 'read' non verbally how well pupils are understanding the work and whether they are finding it hard or too easy. They can move around the classroom scanning work or listening to conversations and intervene appropriately. Part of the craft of teaching lies with assimilating this information and adjusting lessons in response. But there are barriers in virtual classrooms to teachers working in this way and schools report teachers spending significant time developing on line equivalents.

Schools are clear that assessing remote work by providing pupils with detailed feedback once they have finished a piece or block of work is not a particularly effective way at either addressing misconceptions or helping the standard of work to improve. Schools also felt that pupils' motivation and engagement can slip when this is the only approach used. Providing detailed comments on a significant volume of work also has implications for teachers' workload.

Teachers have been experimenting with the approaches they can take in this area in virtual classrooms so that they can provide the checks, the timely interventions and advice to help secure pupils' learning and also maintain their motivation. They describe strategies such as the careful use of the chat bar; sharing examples of work during lessons and using them as the basis for pupils' self assessment; and the use of online quiz software to set quick tests as being helpful. Generally, there is a sense that this is an area that is ripe for further investigation. Having a more structured approach to learning as outlined above helps give a clearer purpose for assessment at that point in the block of work. Schools which have adopted an approach based on 'instruction' and 'application' can see ways in which they might be able to set up small groups of pupils who need a short, focussed tutorial on elements of the work.

Schools have particularly noted that in real classrooms, pupils can easily see other pupils' work and get a sense of the required standard and how close they might be to that. This positive aspect of a peer group is harder to create in a virtual classroom. Schools have made use of, for example, visualisers to display samples of work and help pupils to use it to self assess their own work more deeply.

4. Organisation

Schools have found that remote learning can be particularly testing for pupils whose organisational skills are not so well developed. The tight timetable and structure of the school day, along with 'falling in' with the activities of other pupils, provides a scaffold for them. Remove this and these pupils become challenged with organising and focussing upon their work.

Schools have addressed this by producing home learning timetables for pupils. They report that the effectiveness of this can be improved by ending each day with an online version of' 'tutor time'. In this time, the form comes together on line. The teacher talks to the class about what has happened during the day, how people have got on with their work, the deadlines that are looming, highlighting the taught lessons that are taking place on the next day, highlighting the self study lessons etc. Issues about on line learning can be raised by pupils and fed to the appropriate teacher. It also gives an opportunity to catch up with pupils who have not had the appropriate attendance in on line lessons.

Form tutors have extended this work by then contacting parents of pupils who have shown low levels of attendance, as well as those whose children have worked well.

5. Use of external resources

Schools report there are many on line resources available to support teaching. At the moment, there is not a particularly strong consensus emerging regarding the 'best' to use in particular areas. It's rather a case of "horses for courses". A favoured resource in a subject department in one school can struggle to find favour in the same department in another school.
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HIAS subject inspectors have maintained a broad overview on those resources and can provide helpful guidance for schools in this area.

6. Scope

Schools took different approaches to the range of subjects that would be covered and how that might be done. Generally, the emphasis was on direct teaching in English and mathematics, with other subjects making use of more project type approaches. However, as teachers began to experiment more with the IT packages and move more to a blended approach, the range of subjects covered began to expand.

There was no clear consensus across schools about the coverage of subjects. If there was a general pattern it was that foundation subjects tended to make more use of 'project' type learning, particularly in the lower school. However, as schools reflected on their provision and structure of work, and teachers became more acclimatised to working on line, work became more 'blended' and sophisticated, covering more subject areas.

7. Lesson guidance

Whereas the audience for classroom lessons is quite definite, the same cannot be said for lessons that pupils are receiving at home. Given these circumstances, a number of schools described how they had felt it helpful to produce guidance for teachers on the delivery of on line lessons.