



The impact of school closures on service delivery



Introduction

A key service area within local authorities is Soft FM services; the collective description for catering services, including school meals, building cleaning, caretaking, and janitorial services, and other ancillary services.

Local authorities throughout the UK have provided these services to schools throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, which supported keeping establishments open for the children of key workers and vulnerable children.

The respective governments across the UK have made it a priority to re-open schools to all children and have provided guidance to support this aim. However, as the level of the virus in the population begins to increase again, partial or full school closures have had to be put in place.

APSE conducted a survey and held a combined Catering and FM and Building Cleaning Advisory Group to highlight the impact that these closures are having on service delivery and to outline how councils are managing the issues.

This report details the plans for the services and focuses on four key areas: -

- Workforce
- Financial considerations
- Supporting schools and maintaining relationships
- Planning for the future

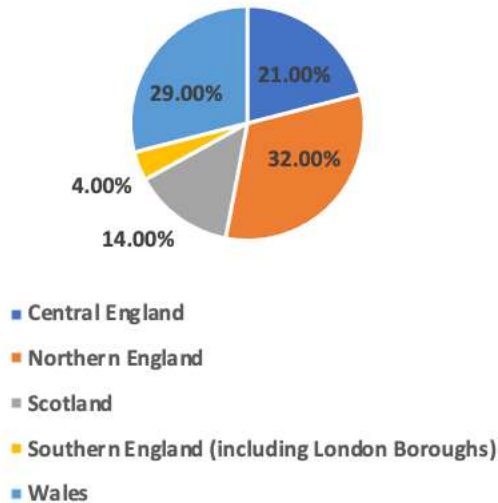
Whilst this report may only provide a snapshot of the issues at any given point in time it will support our member councils to ensure that what they are doing is 'sense-checked' against the actions of others, within their specific service sector.

This report was facilitated by Vickie Hacking, APSE Principal Advisor, working with APSE member councils.

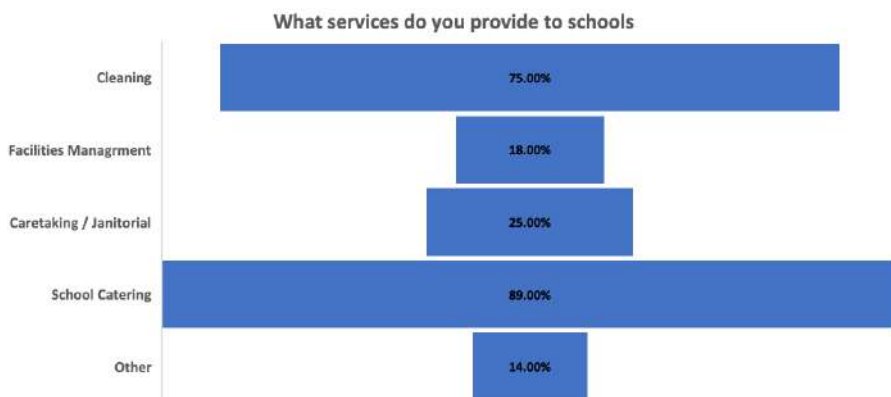
The current position

To gain an understanding of the current picture across the UK, APSE conducted a survey over the first three weeks of October 2020. The chart below provides an overview of the areas of the UK that respondents reported being from.

Location of respondents



It is recognised that the services that a local authority provides to schools differ from one council to another, therefore the survey asked what services councils provided for schools. The majority of respondents, 89% provided school catering and 79% advised that they provided cleaning. In addition, to the list of options provided to respondents, it was stated that they provided school crossing patrols, PAT and fire maintenance testing, and cleaning and catering consultancy services. The following graph provides an overview of responses received.

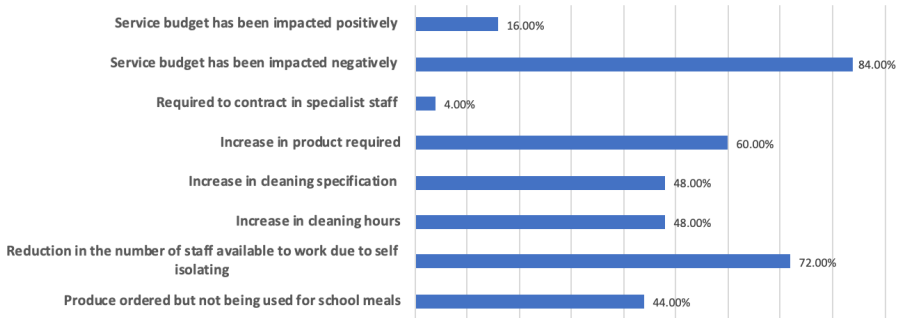


The survey sought to understand what policy approach and procedures councils had in place for school closures. Just over half of the respondents, 57% had standard procedures in place that were adapted on a case-by-case basis. Approximately a third of respondents, 32% commented that they had a standard set of policies and procedures for all full closures. There were 18% that reported that they had a standard set of procedures for partial school closures and a further 18% advised that policies and procedures were implemented on a case-by-case basis.

The next question in the survey asked if the local authority had experienced closures in schools that they provided services for. The majority of people responding to the survey, 79% reported that there had been a partial closure of a primary school and 54% advised there had been a partial closure of a secondary school. Details of other responses include 36% reporting a full closure of a primary / special school, 11% advising that there had been a full closure of a primary school, 18% of the respondents reported that there had not been any closures put in place in a school that they provided services for. In addition, it was commented that although the school had not shut there had been full closures of the kitchen in a school.

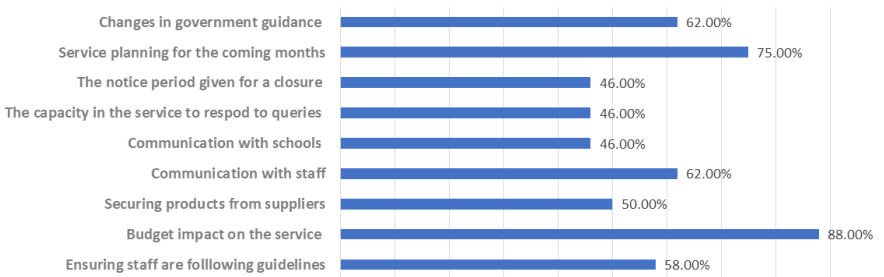
To gain an understanding of the impact that these closures were having on service delivery, the next question in the survey explored this and highlighted that the greatest impact was a negative impact on the service budget. The graph overleaf highlights the responses received.

What impact has the closure had on the service



In a bid to understand what has presented the biggest challenges from the school closures, the survey presented respondents with a range of options. The majority of the respondents advised that the budget impact on the service, 88% was the most challenging, closely followed by service planning for the coming months. The graph below provides an overview of the full range of responses received

What has presented the biggest challenges from school closures



The final question of the survey asked what plans councils were putting in place to mitigate the impact of school closures. The vast majority of respondents, 85%, reported that they had amended school meal menus and half, 50% had implemented new methods to communicate with staff. It was also commented that councils were developing new ways of working and utilising surplus staff from other areas to cover staff shortages.

APSE Catering and Facilities Management and Building Cleaning combined Advisory Group

To provide further context regarding the findings of the survey, APSE convened an advisory group that focused on the impact of school closures on service delivery. The group focused on four key areas:-

1. Workforce
2. Financial considerations
3. Supporting schools and maintaining relationships
4. Planning for the future.

The following sections of this report provide an overview of the key points that were raised by APSE member authorities.

1. Workforce

Prior to and as the schools opened fully, local authorities have reported that they had worked with schools to develop risk assessments, that informed how the service would operate to ensure that the environment was 'COVID secure' for the workforce, such as the implementation of rota systems to reduce the contact that staff had with each other to mitigate the impact of the wider workforce being required to self-isolate.

In instances where a COVID-19 case is identified or a staff member has reported symptoms, councils have reported that they are using government guidance and working closely with public health teams to identify which staff are required to self-isolate. In effect operating a triage type system that is assisting in reducing the need for a whole kitchen or cleaning team being required to self-isolate.

This involves staff being asked questions to establish the level of contact with colleagues, both in the workplace and out of the workplace, following the same principles set out in the track and trace guidance.

For staff that are required to self-isolate, the group advised that how these hours were covered was dependent on the individual circumstances. Examples provided included asking staff from schools that have had a partial closure to cover the work or call on bank staff.

However, the group advised that the biggest challenge with this approach was the behaviour of staff, as the triage system relied on the workforce reporting instances of contact both, in the workplace and out of the workplace and the individual understanding the latest guidelines. Many authorities reported that they have revised and enhanced their communication with staff, a council reported that they had utilised the [GOV.UK notify system](#) effectively, and others advised they were using WhatsApp groups and other social media channels to reinforce messages with staff and communicate changes in guidance.

Catering

The group highlighted that in addition to providing school food, the catering service were still preparing and distributing food parcels for children eligible for free school meals who were required to isolate and also for those identified as vulnerable.

Building cleaning

The APSE Soft FM remobilisation report highlighted that the building cleaning service had implemented measures such as day time cleaning and enhanced cleaning specifications. Therefore, to ensure business continuity as demand increased with the full opening of schools the services reviewed their staffing levels and set about recruiting additional staff in August to ensure they were trained and able to meet the demand. It is reported that additional staff have either been redeployed from other services in the council, through agencies or local advertising.

2. Financial considerations

The UK government re-issued guidance on the 25 June 2020 - [Procurement Policy Notice \(PPN\) 02/20 and 04/20: Supplier relief due to coronavirus \(COVID-19\) - additional sector guidance for state funded schools](#) which, to some extent, has assisted in mitigating some of the financial impact from COVID-19 on councils providing services to schools. Concern has been expressed that this guidance is due to expire on 31 October 2020 and at the time of writing this report there has not been any clarity on future arrangements.

The impact on the budget was cited as the greatest challenge in the APSE survey, with 88% of respondents stating this as one of the biggest challenges. However, it became clear from the group discussions that the impact on budgets differed greatly for catering and building cleaning.

Catering

When the government announced the closure of schools in March 2020 to the majority of children, councils had supplies of food which in many cases was utilised to support the food parcels for children eligible for free school meals and the vulnerable. Where this was not possible food was donated to food banks and charities. Although this was a financial loss on the service, it has been acknowledged that it was a response to the situation and the council would have been required to purchase food, in any case, to support the authority's response.

At present, with partial and full closures being implemented at short notice the issue of produce not being required for school meals continues. To mitigate the impact of food being purchased but not being used by the service, school caterers have adapted their menus, for example reducing the options available. The group were keen to point out that although menus had been adapted, the service was still providing hot nutritious meals in the majority of schools.

The extent of the financial impact on the service was dependent on the contractual arrangements that catering services had in place with the schools, and during the discussions, it was clear that for some local authorities, the loss of income was significant for the period from April to September.

Although schools are now back open, there is a reported drop in meal uptakes of around 30% across the UK, this will vary from school to school but in a service that is reliant on economies of scale, the reduction in uptake is liable to impact on the cost of running the service. The coming months will highlight if this a temporary drop or a longer-term trend. However, it was reported by the group that councils are developing strategies to increase uptake, including looking at how the newly eligible children are registered for free school meals.

Some of the income generated from the school meal is gained from the paid-for meals due to the discretionary additional spending, and although it is too early to quantify it is envisaged that this will also decrease in part due to the catering service not providing multiple options such as salad bars and also impact due to the increased number of children eligible for a free school meal. The extent of this issue is going to be very dependent on the demographic of the children attending the school.

The group also highlighted an area of additional expenditure that was causing a great deal of concern. In the circumstance where a partial or full closure is implemented, the service continues to provide food for the children eligible for free school meals not able to attend the school. In the main, this is being provided in the form of food parcels and in one example given, the cost of the food parcel is double that of providing a meal at school. Due to the uncertainty of the length of COVID-19 restrictions and school closures being in place, the cost to the council has been estimated as being considerable.

On a final point, the group highlighted that although the financial viability of the service was critical, it should also be recognised that providing a hot school meal for children at school, and providing parcels for eligible children had a value in a wider social sense, aspects of which could not be quantified in financial terms.

Building Cleaning

The financial impact appears to be less significant for the cleaning service. That said there have still been additional costs incurred due to continuing to pay staff their full wage throughout lockdown and the changes in cleaning specification, for example more products required and additional staff hours. However, this impact has been mitigated by focusing on cleaning on areas of most demand, being able to charge for additional products such as cleaning wipes and hand sanitizer required in classrooms, and adding to existing contracts.

3. Supporting schools and maintaining good relationships

The group provided examples of how the existing provider to the school had been unable to provide the service or had requested extra payments and the local authority had stepped in and in certain circumstances have been able to gain additional contracts, or extend existing ones.

Community hubs and the delivery of food parcels had provided the opportunity to promote the service to the schools and the wider community.

Both of these examples outlined to schools the benefits of a local authority as a supplier of services and schools have recognised this with the group reporting that many emails and communications had been received to highlight thanks for the good work undertaken.

However, during the group discussion, it was commented that the service had to be mindful of the balance between maintaining a good relationship and doing extra by providing services over and above the contract arrangement as this could set a precedent for the future and be detrimental to the service in the future.

There was a conscious amongst the group, that although the local authority was seen in a good light currently this may not be the case when schools are reviewing their future budgets and re-tendering for contracts. Therefore, councils needed to continue to promote the work that they do within the

community and develop strategies to utilise the current support moving forward.

4. Planning for the future

As highlighted in the survey, 75% of respondents reported that service planning for the future was challenging and the group confirmed that this was due to the current uncertainty and the deficits in council budgets as a whole. However, in some local authority's work is being undertaken to establish the full impact of COVID-19 on the service, establishing the weaknesses and strengths in their service to assess if their current delivery model is fit for purpose. The extent of these programmes of work is dependent on each authority.

It was clear from the group discussions and examples provided that councils were taking their experience to date and implementing new initiatives to assist in making the service more sustainable. One example provided centred on staff training and how the situation since March had highlighted the need to be able to provide training for staff at speed and using different methods to classroom-based training. Therefore, the authority is in the process of implementing an interactive online programme for their staff training to be more flexible and develop modules regarding changes in government guidance through to continuing to develop and invest in their workforce.

APSE Comment

APSE would like to thank all the authorities that responded to the survey and participated in the APSE Combined Catering and FM and Building Cleaning Advisory Group for their contribution to the information contained in this report.

This report is a follow on from the [Soft FM Services remobilisation report](#) that was published in May 2020. Since then the measures imposed to combat the pandemic have become more localised in response to the level of the virus in the local population. The impact on authorities varies vastly from minimal closures to full 'circuit breaker' closures. However, as demonstrated at the advisory group the ability to sense-check procedures with peers and share learning will be invaluable over the coming months.

APSE has a range of services which are designed to support member authorities through this challenging time. These include the following: -

APSE COVID – 19 Information Hub and WhatsApp groups – The hub has been set up to deal with frontline service issues as they arise; ensuring greater resilience and learning between each other during this difficult time.

APSE Online Training – APSE Training is designed to help local authorities invest in their greatest asset – their staff. With staff working at home, or remotely, APSE Training can assist staff with developing new skills during this time to help maximise opportunities

Performance Networks – The Performance Network teams have developed a variety of ways to support Councils with data collection. The new suite of indicators explored the impact of COVID-19 on service cost, quality and productivity. The reports will be produced in October but APSE strongly recommends ensuring the collection of data is on-going so changes in service performance are explicable during budget setting processes or when revising business plans.

APSE Solutions – Providing in-house consultancy and interim management Services, available to both APSE members and non-member authorities and organisations.

APSE Energy which is working on greening frontline councils' services including energy management issues, which may be critical to saving money in services where budgets have been impacted by COVID-19

APSE Membership Resources remain committed to supporting our member local councils with the ongoing briefings service, network queries, access to Principal Advisor advice and online meetings, advisory groups and events.

There are opportunities for councils to share best practice and learning through virtual Advisory Groups and thematic sessions. Details of these sessions will be communicated to APSE Members as the sessions are arranged.

For further information on the services that are available, please contact

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