

Cheshire West & Chester Council

Head Teacher
Letter sent via email

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Date: Thursday 11th June 2020

Dear Head Teacher, Chair of Governors, Parent/Carer

In discussions with primary head teachers on Saturday there was a strong feeling that there was a need for more clarity about the current public health situation. We have now further reviewed the situation locally and we are able to provide further information about the public health context below. In the light of this information, we now confirm our position, outlined below, that schools should continue to widen their opening in line with the careful approach we have advised before and in line with the risk assessments that schools have undertaken.

Firstly, we want to acknowledge that all schools and a good proportion of early years settings have continued to remain open to provide support to vulnerable children, children with Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) and children of Covid-19 critical key workers. Many schools and settings have sought over recent weeks to increase the level of offer for those groups. Several schools have already started to open wider and have felt able, through their risk assessments, to manage the return of children successfully, implement effective social distancing and infection control and mitigate against any risks. We value all the efforts that schools have undertaken to support children and families. This has also been valued by parents and carers during the lockdown period.

The Department for Education (DfE) has identified a number of year groups that it expects to return to school. Primary schools should also note that the Secretary of State for Education announced on 9 June 2020 that all remaining primary school pupils will not be able to attend before the end of this summer term.

We are clear that there will always be individual school factors which can impact upon a school's ability to open wider for all those year groups. These factors can include the availability of staff (some of whom may be clinically vulnerable and shielding), the configuration of school buildings,



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transport, the response of parents, etc. These very local factors mean that it is right that individual schools should make their own decisions in the light of all the information available to them through their risk assessments. Some head teachers have suggested that we should tell them what to do. These very local factors mean that this is not appropriate. We also believe it's important to back the judgement and responsibility of headteachers, rather than set a one-size-for-all rule which ignores your local context.

We have provided schools and settings with a wide range of tools which enable them to carry out their own risk assessments. There has been regular updates and guidance to schools. Officers are available for head teachers to contact. We have, therefore, supported head teachers in their decisions whether to delay a little further for some or all year groups, or whether to already open more widely as some schools have done successfully. We have always adopted a co-leadership approach across the Local Authority, working in partnership with schools, respecting the autonomy of schools, sharing challenges openly and honestly, working together on priorities and co-producing solutions. Having said that, we have always sought to establish high expectations and to champion the needs of children and families, not least the most disadvantaged. In that context we expect that schools, through their risk assessments, will want to be as ambitious as they can be in seeking to open more widely.

We recognise that the wider local and sub-regional picture has caused some head teachers to be uncertain about the timing of their wider opening. A joint assessment by the Cheshire and Merseyside Directors of Public Health has now been issued, and this is attached. It is their view that where head teachers have rightly paused to consider if they should expand the number of children coming back to their school, the Directors of Public Health would support their decision to now progress plans for a phased return of children if they deem it safe to do so, noting the points in the joint letter. We are also aware of the updates and guidance that head teachers (primary mostly) have had from Dr Matt Butler and his advice on the public health knowledge that can inform the decisions that the Local Authority and schools make about wider re-opening. This has been facilitated through the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) Coronacast meetings.

Both assessments reinforce that the 'R' value is just one factor that needs to be taken into account when assessing the easing or tightening of lockdown measures. There are several regional 'R' values that are calculated and reported. Other considerations include:

- As a group, children and young people aged under 20 make up 24% of the England population. Confirmed cases of Covid-19 in children and young people aged under 20 account for 1.7% of all confirmed cases in England and that trend is replicated in Cheshire West and Chester.
- The number of schools that have needed to close temporarily due to potential Covid-19 related issues has been low. There have been 25 instances of schools having to temporarily close since 16th March and most have been closed for just a few days. In a number of those instances, they were suspected or potential cases rather than confirmed cases. The number of members of staff in schools that have become confirmed Covid-19 cases has been low.
- The number of cases and deaths at a local level must be factored into decision-making, which must also be balanced against the wider impact of lockdown on certain sections of the population. As of Tuesday 9th June, there had been a total of 1,180 laboratory confirmed cases of Covid-19 reported to us in Cheshire West and Chester. We have continued to promote the greater uptake to local testing which is vital to helping safely manage and find any further outbreaks.

- In context to this, the daily number of these confirmed cases has continued to fall. During April, the number of new daily cases was regularly above 30. In addition to there now being much greater access to testing, the numbers in early June are now below 10 per day.
- Very sadly by the end of May, there had been 335 deaths in Cheshire West and Chester as a result of Covid-19. Reaching a peak in the second week of April, Covid-19 associated deaths have continued to decrease, with the weekly numbers having declined in all Cheshire boroughs.
- The New NHS Test and Trace has been introduced and it requires further development before we can be assured that an adequate system is yet in place. Cheshire West and Chester Council is one of 11 Beacon Councils that has been invited to be part of a project to implement a more enhanced local solution. We are working at a national level to continually shape this service, developing local outbreak management plans, improving access to testing and local data to continually improve this offer for Cheshire. We will work with some head teachers to help ensure that this also enhances the support to schools. We work very closely with local Public Health England teams with Test and Trace and you have all received the PHE North West Covid-19 Resource Pack to support you with this. The Education and Public Health Services are fully committed to work locally with all schools and provide rapid support and high-quality infection prevention and control advice in addition to that provided by Public Health England teams.

In the light of all the above information and the data available to us today, we now confirm our position that schools should continue to widen their opening. We also confirm that, in reviewing their risk assessments, schools should also seek to open more widely as much as they can as follows, whilst ensuring the safety, health, well-being and education provision for their children. Every school must have completed a risk assessment and all schools are expected to keep their risk assessments up-to-date, reviewing them on at least a weekly basis.

For Primary Schools

Primary schools should continue to encourage vulnerable children and children with an EHCP to attend alongside offering provision for children of key workers where this is required – as they have done over the last several weeks. We are aware that some schools have already chosen to open more widely last week and this week. We are also aware that some schools have indicated that they will start their wider opening from week beginning 15 June. We consider that all primary schools should seek to welcome back Reception, Y1 and Y6 children by 22 June (and possibly for some children in some years groups from next week if schools feel able to). The ability to do this will vary between schools due to the constraints outlined above.

We would also ask primary schools to consider how they can offer some time in school to enable Y6 pupils to celebrate their achievements, to plan for transition to secondary school and to say goodbye.

For Secondary Schools

Secondary schools should continue to encourage vulnerable children and children with an EHCP to attend alongside offering provision for children of key workers where this is required – as they have done over the last several weeks. We are also aware that some schools have indicated that they will welcome back Y10 and Y12 children from week beginning 15 June. We consider that all secondary schools should seek to welcome back Y10 and Y12 children by 22 June if not earlier for some “face to face” contact with a maximum of 25 per cent from the year group at any one time.

Pupil Referral Units and Alternative Provision

We will liaise with these provisions individually but along very similar lines to the expectation for the above phases.

Special Schools

Officers have been in regular contact with Special School head teachers given the complexities of the needs of the children they support. We are aware that some Special Schools have already chosen to open more widely last week and this week and some will start their wider opening from week beginning 15 June. Others will start their wider opening from week beginning 22 June. All the wider opening will be in line with not only the risk assessments for the school as a whole but also, of course, the risk assessments for individual children.

Children Not Returning to School

Some year groups will not be returning to school this summer term. Some parents may also choose not to return their children who are in the eligible year groups. We ask schools to continue to regularly refresh their risk assessment for individual children that are vulnerable or who have an Education Health and Care Plan using the Vulnerable Children Lists and using the guidance we have already provided. We also ask schools to continue with their best endeavours for home learning arrangements. Schools should continue to have regular contact with all children not in school.

We will, of course, continue to keep our local situation under regular review and it must be recognised that these continue to be challenging times. There is much stress and anxiety for us all. Everyone is working immensely hard. We would all like absolute certainties, but we cannot provide that. We can, however, continue to work in close partnership, with mutual trust and respect, in the spirit of shared leadership that we have enjoyed in West Cheshire over many years and understanding that we are all making our very best endeavours.

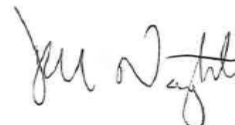
Head teachers are asked to share this letter with their governors and parents.

Stay safe.

Yours sincerely



Ian Ashworth
Director of Public Health



Mark Parkinson and David McNaught
Directors of Education and Inclusion