



Jonathan Gullis MP

Member of Parliament for Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke

Mr Jonathan Gullis MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

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Dear Parents & Carers of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke

Re: schools reopening

Thank you for your recent correspondence expressing concern about schools reopening.

The Prime Minister has set out a COVID-19 recovery plan. As part of the second step of this plan, there will be a phased return for schools and early years settings. No earlier than the 1st of June, and only if the science says it is safe to do so, will children be able to return to early years settings, and Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 classes will be able to return to school in smaller sizes. Secondary schools, sixth forms and colleges will also work towards the possibility of providing some face-to-face contact with young people in Year 10 and Year 12 to help them prepare for exams next year.

As a former teacher and school trade union representative, I understand the anxieties teachers, parents and pupils will be experiencing about the government's plan to reopen schools. I know that Trade Unions are only acting in the interests of their members and some parents are understandably anxious as we continue to navigate this virus, the likes of which haven't been seen since the Spanish Flu in 1918.

However, drawing on my many years as an educator, I also know the importance education plays in the development of a child. It is the most significant factor in improving social mobility and provides immeasurable social and emotional benefits. The school building is a safety net for some of Stoke-on-Trent North, Kidsgrove and Talke's most vulnerable children.

In this letter, I hope that I can explain and help to address some of the concerns you might have as we move towards a phased school return.

The Department of Education is engaging closely with schools and early years providers to develop further detail and guidance on how schools should facilitate this.

Why scientists and government think the time is right

As a result of the enormous efforts everyone has made to adhere to strict social distancing measures, the transmission rate of coronavirus (COVID-19) has decreased.

We, therefore, anticipate, with further progress, that we may be able, from the week commencing the 1st of June, to welcome back more children to early years, school and further education settings. We will only do this provided that the 5 key tests set by government justify the changes at the time, including that the rate of infection is decreasing, and the enabling programmes set out in the roadmap are operating effectively. As a result, we are asking schools, colleges and childcare providers to plan on this basis, ahead of confirmation that these tests are met.

The safety of pupils and staff is of paramount importance. I know the increased time our children are away from school is a primary concern for teachers and parents. We want to get all children and young people back into education as soon as scientific advice allows because it is the best place for them to learn. We also know how important it is for their mental wellbeing to have social interactions with their peers, carers and teachers.

Children returning to educational and childcare settings in more significant numbers will also allow more families to return to work.

I know that Ministers are committed to supporting schools, teachers, parents and pupils. Schools have asked to plan reopening in conjunction with government guidance.

The scientific monitoring of data is ongoing, and should it become apparent that the infection rate increases, the reopening phasing won't go ahead if it is not safe to do so.

Professor Sir David Spiegelhalter at the University of Cambridge estimates that the mortality rate for children having contracted coronavirus is one in 5.3 million. Coronavirus is far more dangerous to those with underlying health conditions and the elderly.

The government advice seeks to support staff working in schools, colleges and childcare settings, to deliver this approach in the safest way possible, focusing on measures they can put in place to help limit the risk of the virus spreading within education and childcare settings. At the point that we think it is appropriate for more children and young people to return to schools and colleges, the guidance will be revised.

Why schools closed

As part of national social distancing measures to limit the spread of coronavirus, the government had to limit the numbers of children and young people attending educational and childcare settings, to ensure that pupils and staff attending could do so safely. That is why, since the 23rd of March, education and childcare settings have only been open to priority groups

The closure of schools helped to reduce social interaction played an essential role in severing remaining contacts between households, and this ensuring transmission declines.

Chief medical officer Prof Chris Whitty explained that schools were “not dangerous” for children during the pandemic, but that the decision to close them would slow the rise of infections. The priority in responding to Covid-19 is the safety of the public and to ensure the NHS isn’t overwhelmed.

The peak of the virus occurred on the 8th of April – about two weeks after school closures and the infection rate has reduced considerably since that date.

The NHS was not overwhelmed during the peak, and the number of coronavirus cases continues to fall.

The government therefore anticipates, with further progress, that we may be able to welcome back more children to early years, schools and further education settings from the week commencing the 1st of June.

We are now in a different position.

The death rate has dropped, and rates of infection are down. The R rate (how the infection multiplies in society) had peaked in early April, and it is now steadily under 1. Rates of infection and rates of the virus have come down significantly, therefore, as the science demonstrates, the risk to children is very low.

This number must come down further and maintain a consistently low figure before it is safe for larger numbers of children to return to school. The government understands teachers and parents alike are worried and have concerns, and therefore there is extensive guidance available for schools to implement special provisions.

School life post coronavirus will undoubtedly be different, and that will take some time for everybody to get used to it. Protective measures will be put in place for staff and pupils, as far as is possible, to ensure that the risk of transmission has reduced.

Schools should refer to this guidance and continue to follow the [advice from Public Health England](#). These measures, along with handwashing, cleaning, and self-isolation, will lower the risk of transmission.

The government will maintain a strong dialogue with unions, schools and parents to ensure that feedback is received and acted upon moving forward.

Why schools need to reopen

Medical and scientific advice (the SAGE group) says it is the right time to start bringing schools back in a phased and controlled manner. There is an almost complete loss of formal school education for children while at home.

The Sutton Trust in a survey of teachers in April 2020 suggested that disadvantaged pupils are at most risk of a widening attainment gap. Our teachers are working in creative ways to support parents and pupils in-home learning, and they recognise, particularly the poorest children, are most likely to be most impacted by time away from the classroom.

The report suggested in the most deprived schools, almost a third of teachers (32%) are getting less than a quarter of the work they set returned. Furthermore, half of all teachers in state schools say the standard of work teachers are receiving is lower than classroom standard.

Teachers recognise the implications of school closures have on learning. The research brief suggested half of the teachers cited some form of staggered return to school, or summer 'catch up classes' for disadvantaged pupils to prevent pupils from the falling behind.

According to a study by the Institute of Fiscal Studies, 700,000 pupils are getting no lessons at all and as we know, missing a day or a week of school can be detrimental. Many other pupils are getting small amounts of education that are inadequate; let me be clear, there is no doubt that teachers are doing their absolute best and are providing fantastic lessons for pupils during the lockdown, but this is not an equal substitute for most children.

The experts say there is virtually no risk to the children or teachers, that is the experience of countries who have kept their schools open. The World Health Organisation Chief scientist Dr Soumya Swaminathan has said children are at "very low risk" of getting ill from the disease and children are "less capable" of spreading the disease. England's Deputy Chief Medical Officer Dr Jenny Harries has backed the reopening.

In the UK, while schools have been open for key workers, there has been no example of transmission.

Educational disadvantage

There have been improvements in the education gap between poorer pupils and their peers.

However, last year the Education Policy Institute says disadvantaged pupils – defined by those on free schools' meals - are on average 18 months behind the rest of the class in academic achievement by the age of 16.

If school closures were to continue to September, the gap would inevitably widen. By starting to reopen schools, our great teachers can tackle and eliminate the 'Covid-19 gap'.

Children from disadvantaged groups are falling behind rapidly.

Research carried out by the Institute for Fiscal Studies suggests children from wealthier backgrounds spend more time studying in the coronavirus lockdown those pupils from the poorest backgrounds.

The gap of the poorest and the wealthiest households in education is a challenge, but the lockdown is potentially increasing that challenge further without a return to school. The survey also suggested more than half of parents were finding it hard to support their children's learning at home.

The UK government's plan for a phased return of some year groups from 1 June at the earliest will help narrow the gap.

The reality

Education is incredibly important, to pupils, their life chances and mental health. Only a small number of the most vulnerable kids and those of key workers have attended school throughout the last two months; the number of kids having interactions with other kids is down hugely.

Coronavirus may be with us forever, and though we can manage and mitigate the risks and adverse effects of this virus, we cannot stall the reopening of schools if the science and data report it is safe for them to attend. The cost to children's health and wellbeing will be enormous and we must balance the risk and value. I believe the value of our children returning to school is far greater, at this stage, than keeping them at home.

The UK government to follow the example of Denmark.

The Denmark approach assumes social distancing is unreliable, and the UK government accepts this approach. There was anxiety from many, and a large proportion of parents were understandably in two minds.

Children spend their day in a virtual cocoon with no crossover with other groups. Children arrive at school at different times and break times are staggered. Delivering education is different.

After several weeks of reopening, there are reports that children are relieved to be back, and parents have become more confident about safety, numbers of returning students have increased.

The use of face masks has not proved necessary for pupils or teachers.

The Danish Union of Teachers believes PPE isn't an issue because the strategy has ensured pupils are in small groups with a strong emphasis on hygiene. The Head of the Union, Dorte Lange has said the "reopening up to now has been quite successful".

In Germany, the Netherlands, Australia, and Belgium pupils are returning to school with similar strategies in place.

Social distancing and safety

The government recognises that kids clearly cannot social distance.

Although there are logistical challenges, the guidance set out to schools will introduce 'bubbles' of 15 pupils, or teams or extended families, if you like, and a teacher. Breaks and lunchtimes will be staggered, but 'bubbles' will stay together, mix within the 'bubble' but not meet others. The 'bubble' will be an extension of a child's household. The idea is minimising mixing much as possible, to reduce cross-contamination. This will keep children as safe as possible.

Many people have been working throughout the lockdown where social distancing is not possible, but other measures have successfully been put in place. In returning to work, in different sectors, the idea of 'bubbles' and staggered work times is included in government guidance. I recognise this is a challenge and schools will be creating their version of this for their school.

Anyone in the group demonstrates symptoms; everyone in the 'bubble' is sent home. Testing will be available to all if one in the 'bubble' test positive, all in the group will stay at home and isolate.

Further information about safety for education settings, please visit:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-educational-settings-about-covid-19/guidance-to-educational-settings-about-covid-19>

Why youngest year groups first?

The government wants a phased return for those at the early stage of education and Year 6. Those at the early stages are least able to use online learning. Also, this group have far fewer social interactions with others outside of their family. The 'bubble' is much more contained, and smaller, reducing risk considerably further and the impact of losing education in the early years is more significant than in other year groups.

Year 6 is a critical transition year, with potentially no school for 5/6 months and then expected to attend high school in September, the government recognises this is a giant leap forward.

Why is it safe for kids to return to school but not see extended family members?

The government guidance requires no household mixing. That was the advice at the peak. Key workers have had to continue to work. But to suppress the virus, most of us have had to stay at home, and we have seen virus transmission reduce.

As we start to come out of the lockdown, we need to choose some new interactions. School closures are impacting children's emotional wellbeing and future life chances, education is incredibly important. The first phase is a carefully considered interaction.

Social interactions, such as mixing between households, should be kept to a minimum. We will see our family at some point, we all want this desperately, but we are choosing

interaction amongst children as a first step.

Will I be forced to send my children to school?

Parents won't be forced to send children to school. That is their choice. There will be no fines.

Moving forward, schools will be in touch with parents. Please respond in the way that is right for you and your family.

Some kids in the extremely vulnerable category – who are much more at risk, are not expected to come back to school, this is the same with kids who live with someone who is extremely clinically vulnerable. If you're unsure, speak to your GP.

Priority groups, including vulnerable children and children of critical workers who have been eligible to attend throughout school closures, will continue to be able to participate in schools, colleges and early years settings as they are currently.

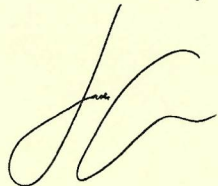
Further information about who can send their children to school can be found via this link - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/closure-of-educational-settings-information-for-parents-and-carers/closure-of-educational-settings-information-for-parents-and-carers>

These measures do mean that summer assessments and exams will not go ahead as planned. Students who were due to sit A level, AS level or GCSE exams this summer will receive a calculated grade, based on a range of evidence.

Families across the country are going through enormous difficulties, whether that be due to the stress and fear of living through a pandemic, worries for loved ones or financial strains. Returning children, in a controlled, phased and safe manner will help to instil routine and a degree of normality. However, I stress for a final time if the data says it is not safe, schools will not open.

Thank you again for taking the time to contact me.

Yours sincerely



Jonathan Gullis MP