



Date: 20 May 2020
Our Ref: MC/MT
Your Ref:

Phased Reopening of Schools

Dear Parent/ Carer

Working with our schools we have made it clear that although it is a matter for the governing body, not the council, we will fully support them in their judgement on when it is safe to re-open their schools.

We will also fully respect the decisions made by parents and carers on whether or not they choose to send their child back to school.

As you will be aware, the Prime Minister announced last week the Government's intention for a phased return for early years settings and schools.

Since lockdown began on 23rd March schools have been open for a small number of children who are vulnerable or whose parents are key workers.

If the government's 'five tests' are met then schools are being asked to welcome more children in nursery, reception, year 1 and year 6 who may return to school from 1st June. Other primary year groups are expected to follow from late June/ early July. In terms of older children, secondary schools should also prepare to begin some face to face contact in groups with years 10 and 12 who have key exams in 2021 to maintain teacher contact and support young people with their continued home learning. In special schools there will be a phased return of more children where the risk assessment supports this. There will not be a focus on specific year groups for these children.

The Government's 'five tests' are:

1. Protect the NHS's ability to cope.
2. See a sustained and consistent fall in the daily death rates from COVID-19
3. Be confident that the rate of infection is decreasing to manageable levels
4. Be confident that the range of operational challenges are in hand i.e. testing and PPE supply.
5. Be confident that any adjustments will not risk a second peak of infections that overwhelms the NHS.

The evidence so far is that thankfully very few children have been affected by coronavirus. Some research also indicates that children are far less likely to become infected compared with adults, but other studies suggest that when children do become infected, they carry as much risk of passing the virus on to others, including to each other, to school staff and to members of their family, even if they show no symptoms.

The Council is working with schools on risk assessments to ensure that the safety of children and staff coming back into the school is the highest priority. Whilst school governing bodies are responsible for health and safety in school and so will sign off these risk assessments, we all need to be satisfied that, whilst the risks presented by the virus cannot be fully eliminated, they can be mitigated as far as is humanly possible.

As a parent/carer we understand and appreciate that you will have very real concerns with the idea of returning your child to school and that is why we are taking a cautious and measured approach in plans for re-opening schools in South Tyneside.

In making your decision about whether to send your child back to school in June, we believe it is important for you to have as much clear information as possible and understand how your child's experience of school will be different to the time before the lockdown started in March. In coming to a decision, you also need to be aware that the government have been clear that attendance is voluntary and there will be no fine if you choose not to send your child to school.

The government's guidance is that schools must consider social distancing, re-plan classrooms and the size of classes so that pupils can observe the 2m rule. Government, however, also acknowledges that social distancing will be challenging, especially for the youngest children. Schools have told us that in many cases the maximum class size will be 7 or 8 rather than the 15 mentioned in the government guidance. Groups of children and staff will remain together all day in social 'bubbles' and will not come into contact with other children or staff.

Your child may not have the same teacher or have the support from staff that they are used to. They may also not be taught alongside their friends. The school day will also look very different with the potential for different start and finish times and there will be a limited range of activities and resources on offer.

Whilst we have been asked by Government to ensure each school has a plan for re-opening on 1 June, we must be honest and clear with you that we expect this will not be possible for all schools from 1st June. Please be assured that we will only support a date to re-open if the evidence shows and confirms that the Government's five tests are being met and the schools' risk assessments are clear that absolutely everything has been done to keep your children safe.

Your school will also be in touch with you with more specific details about how they intend to implement the government's plan for re-opening schools.

To help you with your decision we will shortly be including some frequently asked questions on the Councils website. Further guidance for parents can also be found in the following government link:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/closure-of-educational-settings-information-for-parents-and-carers>

Yours sincerely



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