

Director of Public Health Office
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Web Site: www.sheffield.gov.uk

Message from the Director of Public Health: Greg Fell

Dear Parent/Carer

Thank you for all that you are doing at this challenging time. I realise that many of you are thinking carefully about whether your child/children return to their child care setting or primary school. For many this is a difficult decision and I wanted to reassure you that I understand how difficult this is.

From the start of the pandemic Sheffield schools have continued to open. Over the coming weeks our approach in line with the Governments gradual easing of lockdown measures is to support schools/settings, where it is safe to do so, to start to increase the number of children who attend.

Understandably a key concern is the risk having more children in settings may have on the transmission of the Covid-19 virus. Over recent weeks you will have seen different information shared in the media relating to the safety and risks of increasing the number of children. I wanted to share some information which you may find helpful.

We know across the world that studies and research are underway in order to better understand Covid-19. Findings are emerging from a number of studies but conclusions that are being drawn at this stage have not necessarily been through rigorous peer review and it is not possible to say that this information is therefore definitive and fact. It should be treated with a level of caution. As these studies continue and findings emerge the evidence will increase.

It is important to note that in making a decision to increase numbers in school/settings the Government has had to assess this against the 5 national pillars published on 16th April 2020.

1. Protect the NHS's ability to cope. To be confident that we are **able to provide sufficient critical care and specialist treatment** right across the UK.

The NHS in Sheffield has responded amazingly to the challenge it has faced. The local health system to date has not been overwhelmed. Critical care and specialist treatment has been provided to those who have needed it.

Sheffield is fortunate to have the renowned Sheffield Children's NHS Foundation Trust in the city, which is fully prepared to deal with the challenges associated with COVID-19 for children and young people. To date there have been seven inpatients at the hospital who have tested positive with COVID-19.

Sheffield Children's is keen that children and young people still access healthcare when they need it. If your child is ill and needs help, please seek it whether this is through the local GP, NHS 111, the walk in centre, specialist services or the Emergency Department.

2. See a **sustained and consistent fall in the daily death rates** from COVID-19 so we are confident that we have moved beyond the peak.

Sadly in Sheffield as of Tuesday 12th May there have been 348 deaths registered in Sheffield with a mention of Covid-19 on the death certificate. 178 of these were in hospital and 170 were outside hospital. Locally we reached the peak of the pandemic in April 2020 and death rates have been falling. No children and young people in Sheffield have died having been diagnosed with Covid-19.

3. Reliable data from SAGE showing that **the rate of infection is decreasing to manageable levels** across the board.

Unfortunately we do not have access to the scientific evidence, modelling, data and information which SAGE are using to inform the decisions being taken at a national level.

Recently the DfE published an **Overview of scientific advice and information on coronavirus (COVID-19)**

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/885631/Overview of scientific advice and information on coronavirus COVID19.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/885631/Overview_of_scientific_advice_and_information_on_coronavirus_COVID19.pdf)

This shows:

- There is a high degree of confidence that the severity of disease in children is lower than in adults.
- There is a moderate to high degree of confidence that the susceptibility to clinical disease of younger children (up to age 11 to 13) is lower than for adults. For older children there is not enough evidence yet to determine whether susceptibility to disease is different to adults.
- The susceptibility to infection of younger children (up to age 11 to 13) might be lower than for adults, but the degree of confidence in this is low. For older children there is not enough evidence yet to determine whether susceptibility to infection is different to adults.
- There is no evidence to suggest that children transmit the virus any more than adults. Some studies suggest younger children may transmit less, but this evidence is mixed and provides a low degree of confidence at best.

4. Be confident that **the range of operational challenges, including testing capacity and PPE, are in hand**, with supply able to meet future demand.

We are providing schools with support to develop their risk assessments for this and have also provided advice, guidance and support to ensure appropriate levels of PPE.

We are awaiting the launch of the national Contact Tracing Programme. Contact tracing is about breaking the chain of virus transmission and viral spread. It is not directly about protecting individuals and keeping people safe, though it does have that effect indirectly by limiting transmission of the virus and keeping the number of cases low. Contact tracing is important.

Sheffield is well placed to respond to this and to support and augment the national programme. The local Public Health team has experience of outbreak management and will support Public Health England to help schools/settings if and when contact tracing is required. Contact Tracing is an important part of the 'contain' phase of a pandemic and is key to effectively containing the virus.

Locally we have an effective Testing offer which is increasing its capacity. All adults and children aged 5 years and above will be able to access testing if they become symptomatic.

5. Be confident that **any adjustments to the current measures will not risk a second peak of infections** that overwhelms the NHS.

Locally we continue to analyse and review the impact of the virus. We do this through robust analysis of a range of different data. This informs our local response and also is shared nationally. If it appears that the 'R' Value is increasing this will be identified and considered locally.

England is following the rest of the world in gradually phasing and reopening schools. This is happening across Europe and largely we appear to all be following a similar approach increasing the number of primary age children attending school in the first instance.

Children of course benefit from spending time with their friends and from the social interaction and structure that school provides. All schools will be following public health measures when they do increase the number of pupils attending to help reduce virus transmission. The way that pupils attend will be different to how things worked before. Class sizes will be small (no more than 15 pupils and sometimes less), schools will be working to where possible implement social distancing. This means lessons may run differently, break times and lunch times may be staggered, school start and finish times may be different. Inside the classroom pupils will form a 'social protective bubble' – spending time with the same group of children during lessons, break and lunch and working where possible with the same members of teaching staff. This is to reduce the risk of virus transmission and protect pupils and staff.

Most Sheffield schools have been open throughout the Covid-19 pandemic for vulnerable children and the children of key workers. Therefore, we are not preparing for reopening but for increasing the number of children who are in school. This means that, assuming that the five Government tests have been met that need to be passed before a final decision is taken nationally, we will continue to work with schools and childcare settings to increase the number of children who are attending through a phased and incremental approach in June. If your child is in one of the year groups identified by the Government, your child's school will contact you directly when they are able to offer a place.

Our priority is to make sure that children and staff are as safe as possible at all times, and I will work with schools and settings to support them to make the best decisions for them. All schools will need to undertake a comprehensive risk assessment, covering staffing levels, building layouts, and other issues that have an impact on safety. Based on these risk assessments, schools will be supported to welcome children back as soon as it is safe should their parents wish to do so.

I will never be able to guarantee that there is no risk. But by working constructively and collaboratively with parents, teachers and trade unions I believe that we can do this in as safe a way as possible that minimises the risk whilst ensuring that children and young people begin to benefit once more from education, learning and quality childcare.

The message to reduce the risk of Covid-19 remains the same and I'd like to take this opportunity to remind everyone that it is really important that you continue to promote hand washing with soap and hot water for a minimum of 20 seconds.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'AG Fell', written in a cursive style.

Greg Fell (Director of Public Health)