

Dear All,

Ahead of the national re-opening of schools in September, Wigan Council recognises the understandable concerns and worries that many people, including children and young people, parents and carers, and school leaders and staff will have around the reopening. This letter therefore aims to provide information and reassurance around the September reopening of schools.

Our Current Circumstances

It is important to recognise that the circumstances we are in now are very different to when schools were closed in the first place. The prevalence of COVID-19 in the community has decreased, and the national Test and Trace system has been put in place, and is now working more effectively with local contact tracing teams. There is now greater understanding of the virus and how it behaves, as well as the measures that need to be in place to keep everyone as safe as possible.

In the UK, the Government uses a COVID-19 alert system to inform decisions and to explain the level of disease risk to the public. Using the data collated and analysed by the UK's Joint Biosecurity Centre, the UK Chief Medical Officers sets the alert level for the whole of the UK. This alert level is currently at Level 3, 'a COVID-19 epidemic is in general circulation', which enables a gradual relaxation of restrictions under the plan for recovery published by the UK Government in May.

At the moment, the 'R' (infection rate) for the whole of England is calculated to be between 0.9 and 1.0, whilst the R rate for the North West is calculated to be between 0.9 and 1.1. People will be aware of the recent restrictions on all areas in Greater Manchester, which was lifted for Wigan at the weekend, as a result of the lower prevalence of the virus in Wigan borough than in other areas of Greater Manchester. Over the last seven days (as at 25th August), Wigan had 36 new cases of COVID-19 identified, which is a rate of 11.0 per 100,000 population. This remains the lowest rate of new cases in Greater Manchester. The total number of confirmed cases is now 2,289, a rate of 696 per 100,000 population. This is lower than for Greater Manchester as a whole (782) but similar to the North West (701). Although our rates in Wigan are currently lower, we cannot be complacent and must continue taking all the preventative measures we can do to keep the infection under control.

Are Schools Safe to Re-Open?

The Chief and Deputy Medical Officers of the UK, on the 23rd August, released a statement outlining their view that *'very few, if any, children or teenagers will come to long-term harm from COVID-19 due solely to attending school'*. The statement outlines a range of evidence that they have taken into account in forming this judgement. This also includes evidence on the transmission risk for teachers, other staff working in schools, and parents, as well as the potential impact of opening schools on the local and national infection ('R') rate. The statement can be found [here](#).

Both the Chief and Deputy Medical Officers and the Government have stressed that there is no completely risk-free option available to us, and that the risks from opening schools up again have to be balanced against the impacts on children from not attending school. We know that not attending school is detrimental to children's cognitive and physical development, academic learning, emotional and mental health and wellbeing, and greatly reduces their life-long outcomes.

To help schools ensure that the risk of all our pupils returning to school is reduced as much as is possible, the Government has set out in their [guidance](#) a framework and set of principles that will enable schools to implement a set of risk controls that is specific to their school. Each school's specific risk controls will be different, depending on things like the number of pupils they have and the layout of their building. Schools are best placed to talk through with parents the specific risk control measures they have planned to put in place. The Government has also produced guidance for parents and carers on the re-opening of schools, which can be found [here](#).

For the re-opening of schools to be successful, it will also be **critical** that everyone connected to a school **does not attend school if they, or a member of their household, has suspected symptoms of COVID-19**. For more information on the symptoms of COVID-19, please visit the [NHS website](#).

Face Coverings

There have been many questions asked about whether face coverings should be worn by children and young people on their return to education.

Current national guidance does not recommend the use of face coverings in nurseries, childminding settings, schools or colleges, except in some specific circumstances.

Recently, the government said that secondary school pupils in local lockdown areas should wear face coverings. As Wigan Borough has been removed from local restrictions, this rule will not apply to our secondary schools at this time. However, we will continue to monitor this guidance and we advise parents to speak with their head teachers directly to find out if their school has a specific policy. Wigan Council is presently looking for ways of supporting schools and pupils to access masks and will be in touch with schools around this as soon as possible

Support for Schools and Parents

It may also be helpful for parents to reflect that many schools have been open during the pandemic for children of key workers, and from June, for other groups of children, and therefore already have experience of planning and implementing COVID-19 safety measures. However, we recognise that parents will, understandably, have lots of questions around the re-opening of schools, and have produced a FAQ sheet for parents, which can be found below.

To support the wider re-opening of schools from September, we are working with our colleagues across Greater Manchester, and the appropriate regional and national bodies, including Public Health England, to ensure that schools and parents are provided with consistent and helpful advice and information, and we will always strive to provide this in as timely a manner as we can.

The next few weeks is likely to be fast-moving and challenging for everyone connected to our schools. It will be really important that we all understand the pressures everyone is facing, and work together to support each other during this time. There have been so many fantastic examples during the last few months of where this has happened and how our communities have come together to support each other. I would also like to thank school staff for their incredible hard work and commitment, not just during the last few months, but for the hard work that has already been put in place to get schools in Wigan ready for full re-opening in September.

Yours,

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

Professor Kate Ardern MBChB MSc FFPH
Director of Public Health
Wigan Council

School Opening Q&A

This document is intended to provide parents in Wigan with information in relation to some of the questions they will, understandably, have ahead of the reopening of schools in September.

The information in the below answers comes from a range of sources, which are linked to where available on the Internet:

- [Statement from the UK Chief Medical Officers on schools and childcare re-opening, 23rd August 2020](#)
- [Guidance for full opening: schools, 7th August 2020](#)
- [What parents and carers need to know about early years providers, schools and colleges during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak, 21st August 2020](#)
- [COVID-19: guidance for households with possible coronavirus infection, 13th August 2020](#)
- [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): safer travel guidance for passengers, 21st August 2020](#)
- Advice to schools from Public Health England North West on identifying COVID-19 symptoms
- [Update on face coverings in school, 25th August 2020](#)

This information is correct as of 26th August 2020

Q. Is it safe to open schools again?

The circumstances now are very different to when schools were closed in the first place; the prevalence of COVID-19 in the community has decreased, the national Test and Trace system has been developed, and there is now greater understanding of the virus and how it behaves, as well as the measures that need to be in place to keep everyone as safe as possible.

This week, the Chief and Deputy Medical Officers of all UK countries put out a [statement](#) on the re-opening of schools. As part of the statement, there was a summary of the evidence that:

- There is an exceptionally small risk of children of primary or secondary school age dying from COVID-19 (less than for most seasonal flu infections). Almost all deaths are in children with significant pre-existing health conditions.
- There is a very low rate of severe disease in children of primary and secondary school ages compared to adults, even if they catch COVID-19 (the hospitalisation rate for children is 0.1 or 0.3% depending on age, compared to 4% hospitalisation rate in the general population).
- The great majority of children and teenagers who catch COVID-19 have mild symptoms or no symptoms at all.
- Although it is not conclusive yet, primary school age children are less likely to catch COVID 19. The evidence around older children and teenagers is mixed (they are either less likely to catch COVID-19 than adults or to have the same risk as adults).
- There is some transmission of COVID-19 in schools, but on the current evidence it is probably not a common route of transmission. It may be lower in primary age children than secondary age children.

Very few, if any, children or teenagers will come to long-term harm from COVID-19 due solely to attending school. There is no risk-free option, and the risks from opening schools up again have to be balanced against the impacts on children from not attending school.

The guidance from the Government outlines to schools what measures can be taken to reduce the risk to children.

Q. Why is the Government opening schools again?

We know that there are significant impacts on children from not being able to access school, with negative effects on cognitive and academic development, emotional and mental health and wellbeing, and in some cases, obesity and physical development. We know that the impact of these can be life-long and significantly affect some individual children's life chances.

There is no-risk free option, but the position of the Government is that the risk from children from missing education now outweighs the risk to children from opening up schools.

Q. Will re-opening schools lead to an increase in the R rate?

It is likely that opening schools will lead to an increase in the R rate because schools are a connection between different households, however the current evidence suggests that schools are much less important in the transmission of COVID-19 than for influenza or some other respiratory infections. Other work and social environments also increase risk and are likely to be more important for transmission of COVID-19.

The evidence from other countries suggests that reopening of schools has usually not been followed by a surge of COVID-19 in a timescale that implies schools are the principal reason for the surge, however not enough time has passed for us to say this with confidence.

It is possible that opening schools will provide enough upward pressure on R that it goes above 1 having previously been below it, at least in some local areas. This will require local action and therefore early identification and quickly managing outbreaks of COVID-19 in schools is essential as part of a local response to COVID-19, as is giving pupils and staff clear advice not to attend schools with symptoms.

Q. What happens if my child falls ill?

Anyone who develops symptoms of COVID-19, or whose household member develops symptoms, should immediately self-isolate. They should not attend school.

You should let the school know of your absence by phone. The school will record this information and direct you to the Stay at Home guidance, which currently advises that the person with symptoms should isolate for 10 days starting from the first day of their symptoms and the rest of their household for 14 days. If your child is in school when they start showing COVID-19 symptoms, the school will isolate them in a safe place and contact you immediately.

You must then arrange for your child to have a COVID 19 test. You can do this via nhs.uk or by contacting NHS 119 via telephone. If the test is negative, and your child feels well and no longer has symptoms similar to COVID-19, they can stop self-isolating. However, they could still have another virus, such as a cold or flu, in which case it is still best to avoid contact with other people until they are better.

If your child tests positive for COVID-19, they should still follow the Stay at Home guidance, which states that they must continue to self-isolate for at least 10 days from the onset of their symptoms, and then return to school only if they do not have symptoms other than cough or loss of smell/taste. Other members of the household should continue isolating for the full 14 days.

Q. What happens if I or another family member falls ill. Should my child attend school?

Anyone who develops symptoms of COVID-19, or whose household member develops symptoms, should immediately self-isolate. They should not attend school. If a test on the member displaying COVID 19 symptoms is negative, then your child will be able to return to school.

Q. What happens if another child in my child's bubble falls ill?

If a child who attends or staff member who works at a school tests positive for COVID-19 then the school will be contacted by a contact tracer.

The school will then work with the contact tracer to identify direct and close contacts of the case during the 48 hours prior to the child or staff member falling ill. This is likely to be the classmates and teacher of that class.

The social distancing measures put in place by educational settings outside the classroom should reduce the number of other direct/close contacts.

If your child is identified as a direct or close contact, they will be asked to stay away from the school/ setting and advised to self-isolate for 14 days starting from the day they were last in contact with the case.

Anyone else in your child's household does not need to self-isolate unless your child develops symptoms. Your child does not need testing for COVID-19 unless they develop symptoms.

Q. Will I be fined if I don't send my child back to school?

In March, the Government made it clear no parent would be sanctioned for their child's non-attendance at school. However, the circumstances have now changed, and it is vital for all children to return to school to minimise as far as possible the longer-term impact of the pandemic on children's education, wellbeing and wider development. Parents have a legal duty as a parent to send your child (if they are of compulsory school age) to school regularly.

School attendance will therefore be mandatory again from the beginning of the autumn term, and schools' responsibilities to record attendance and follow up absence apply again. This could potentially lead to the issuing of fixed penalty notices, in line with Wigan's code of conduct. It is therefore critical that parents and carers have open and honest conversations with school staff about the barriers to attendance so support can be put in place at the earliest opportunity.

Q. What measures will my child's school have in place to make it safe for my child?

The guidance the Government has given schools provides a framework and principles for schools to follow, particularly around the PHE-endorsed 'system of controls'. The Government's position is that if schools follow the guidance and maximise the use of control measures, they will effectively minimise risks. However, the way different schools implement some of the requirements will be different based on their individual circumstances, and parents should ask their school where they are unsure what measures are being taken in the school.

Q. Are children going to have to keep 2 metres apart?

It is clear that minimising contacts and the mixing between people reduces transmission of COVID-19. The guidance from Government is clear that schools must do everything possible to minimise contacts and mixing whilst delivering a broad and balanced curriculum.

Children in schools will be kept in 'bubbles' and these groups will be kept separate as much as possible and for the distance between individuals within bubbles to be maintained. The guidance does recognise that there will be a range of factors that affect how this works in practice, including the age of children, layout of the school, and the feasibility of keeping groups separate whilst offering a broad curriculum, particularly at secondary school. Each school's planning and measures will therefore be different.

The guidance acknowledges for younger children, schools' emphasis will be on keeping groups separate, whilst for older children, it will be on distancing.

Q. I am a parent who works in a school. Is it safe for me to go back to work again?

The statement from the Chief and Deputy Medical Officers also summarises the evidence that:

- Teachers are not at increased risk of dying from COVID-19 compared to the general working-age population. ONS data identifies teaching as a lower risk profession (no profession is zero risk). International data also supports this.
- Transmission of COVID-19 to staff members in school does occur, and data from UK and international studies suggest it may largely be staff to staff (like other workplaces) rather than pupil to staff.
- If teachers, other school staff, parents or wider family catch COVID-19 their risks of severe illness are similar to those of other adults of the same age, ethnicity and health status.

The guidance from the Government outlines to schools what measures can be taken to reduce the risk to staff, including social distancing and good infection control measures.

Q. How do I get my child to school safely?

It is possible that your child's start and finish time will be changed, depending on the bubble they are in. This helps keep groups of people apart as they arrive and leave the premises.

Wigan Council is currently working with Transport for Greater Manchester and our schools to provide additional capacity. Schools will be informed of the outcome of this as soon as possible. However there may be reduced capacity on both public transport and dedicated school transport as a result of social distancing measures. Therefore, parents and children may want to consider walking or cycling

to school if at all possible, and some families will also have the option of driving their child to school. Wigan Council acknowledges the challenges this delay in confirmation places on families who need to plan for how they will get their children to school, however this is linked to the funding allocation we are due to receive from the Government, and is not unique to Wigan.

If you and/or your child is using public or school transport to get to school, they will need to adhere to the rules around public transport, including social distancing and the wearing of masks.

Q. Should my child be wearing a mask at school? Will the teachers be wearing a mask when teaching my child?

As of the 25th August, the Government has changed its position on face coverings. Whilst the Government is not recommending face coverings are necessary, schools will have the discretion to require face coverings in communal areas if they believe that is right in their particular circumstances. The exception to this are in areas under local lockdown, such as parts of Greater Manchester at the moment, where the Government is advising that face coverings should be worn by adults and pupils in secondary schools when moving around the school, such as in corridors and communal areas where social distancing is difficult to maintain. As Wigan is no longer under local lockdown, these measures will not apply in Wigan. The decision to require pupils in secondary schools and further and higher education is therefore down to the individual school. This does not apply to primary schools. Wigan Council is presently looking for ways of supporting schools and pupils to access masks and will be in touch with schools around this as soon as possible.

Please note that face coverings will still be required when travelling to school on public transport or on school transport.

PPE will be used in all schools in some specific circumstances, such as if a child is showing symptoms of COVID-19.

Q. Do I have to wear a mask when picking up my child?

The guidance from Government does not require parents to wear a mask when picking up their child. If parents are travelling with their child on public transport, they will need to comply with the rules around face coverings whilst travelling on public transport.

We are awaiting updated guidance on the use of face coverings in school, however the current guidance is that schools should have a process for removing face coverings when pupils and staff who use them arrive at school. This will include washing their hands, disposal of temporary face coverings, or placing reusable face coverings in a plastic bag they can take home with them, and washing their hands again before going to their classroom.

Q. My child is in the clinically vulnerable list, should they go back to school?

Shielding advice for all adults and children was paused from 1 August. This means that children and young people can return to school or college if they are on the shielded patient list, or have family members who are shielding.

However, a small number of children under paediatric care (such as recent transplant or very immunosuppressed children) may need to discuss their care with their health professional before returning to school or college. This should usually be at their next planned clinical appointment.

If children are not able to attend school because they are following clinical and/or public health advice, you will not be penalised.

Q. If my child falls ill or tests positive for COVID 19, will Social Care take them away for two weeks?

No, this will not happen. The Staying at Home guidance outlines the measures households should take where a member of the household starts displaying COVID 19 symptoms or has tested positive for COVID 19.

Q. If there is a local outbreak, will schools be closed again?

If there are more confirmed cases linked to the school, Wigan Council's Health Protection Team will investigate and will advise the school on any other actions that may be required.

In the event of a local outbreak, the PHE health protection team or local authority may advise a school or number of schools to close temporarily to help control transmission. We are awaiting further guidance from the Government on what the process or measures would be if a local area were to see a spike in infection rates that is resulting in localised community spread.

However, schools are now being asked to undertake contingency planning for this eventuality. This includes planning for the delivery of remote education provision, and schools are expected to have plan for delivery in place by the end of September. This expectation that remote education is provided also covers where an individual child or a small group of children is self-isolating.

What if my child only has one of the symptoms, for example only a temperature, and we really think this because of something else than COVID-19, for example teething?

Naturally the symptoms of fever (high temperature) or new continuous cough can be caused by many other things than COVID-19, and will become more common in the winter months.

The Public Health England advice around responding to possible COVID-19 symptoms still applies, as it is a precautionary approach based on what we know of the COVID 19 virus and how it spreads, and takes into account the risk and impact of a symptomatic person spreading COVID 19 to other members of the community.

The only possible exception is where a person has a fever (and no other of the three COVID-19 symptoms) following receiving a vaccine.

Should my child wear a school uniform? How often should I wash it?

The Government is encouraging all schools to return to their usual uniform policies from September. You do not need to clean uniforms differently or any more often than usual because of COVID 19.

Will school dinners be available as they were before schools were closed?

School and college kitchens should be fully open from the start of the autumn term. They will provide food to all pupils who want it, including free school meals and universal infant free school meals as usual for those who are eligible.