

## PHASED REOPENING OF SCHOOLS – BRIEFING UPDATE

Dear Colleague,

On Friday 22nd May the Government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) published its scientific papers on school safety, advice provided to Ministers relating to the reopening of schools. This information was not available to Durham County Council (DCC) before 22nd May.

The Report states that there is, 'a consensus that evidence on the role of children in transmission of COVID-19 is unclear with a number of gaps in understanding'. It also says there is some evidence to suggest that children are as susceptible to COVID-19 as adults', but advised that is not conclusive. Scientists have also advised Government that the messaging to parents and teachers had to be 'robust' in order to 'enhance confidence and willingness to return'.

In addition, a critical part of the way in which an expansion of school attendance is due to be managed is the new Track and Trace process. Whilst we are aware of some progress with the local element of this process it is clear that the national elements including the App are not yet in place and will not be fully implemented by the 1st June. This is not acceptable and needs to be addressed if schools are to expand the numbers of pupils safely.

Although DCC has been clear about providing information to schools about rigorous risk assessments at an individual level, the publication of the SAGE papers, delay in Contact Tracing implementation, and infection rate data showing the North East as the highest in the country, do not provide the clear higher level assurances that DCC, school communities and parents have been seeking.

The DCC position has always had the safety of staff and children at its core. Extensive advice and guidance has been issued to headteachers and governing bodies with the emphasis on reopening only when risk assessments have been carried out and found to be of a high enough standard. At no time has DCC stated or advised 1st June as a target date for our schools to phase a reopening.

In view of the SAGE Report findings and because we wish to give the highest protection to staff, children and our wider communities DCC reiterates that it is not advising schools that they commence wider phased reopening on 1<sup>st</sup> June. The position of vulnerable and key workers children remains the same. Government guidance now indicates that Secondary Schools should start to reintegrate Year 10 and 12 pupils from the 15th June and based on current information available to us, we believe this is a more realistic timeline for all Schools to work towards for expanding their numbers subject to Government scientific advice and individual school risk assessments.

DCC asks that as a matter of urgency the Government convenes a task group comprising trade unions, health experts and parent organisations to review the advice contained in the SAGE Report and agree on safety conditions.

Headteachers have been carrying out tremendous work to make schools as safe as possible and we thank them and all their staff again. Ultimately, it remains a decision for schools to open when they think it is safe to do so but we believe in the light of the SAGE Report they will welcome this updated DCC position. DCC will continue to work with schools and trade unions for the benefit of all children and staff.

In an ever changing COVID-19 landscape DCC is aware that these changes can cause confusion for parents, school staff and governors. However, as a Council it is our responsibility to take account of all the evidence as it becomes available and act in the best interests of all.

Best regards,

Councillor Simon Henig, Leader Durham County Council

Councillor Olwyn Gunn, Cabinet Member Children and Young People's Services