May 2020



Thank you for contacting me about school closures as a result of Coronavirus.

The Government put in place strict social distancing, including the closure of schools for everyone except vulnerable children and the children of critical workers, to slow the spread of the virus so the NHS would not be overwhelmed and lives could be saved. And thanks to the hard work and sacrifice of the British people, and despite a tragic loss of life, the UK has slowed the spread of coronavirus.

Our health system was not overwhelmed – with spare beds, ventilators, and hospital capacity at all times. The Government has now set out a roadmap for recovery – focusing on not just saving lives, but also livelihoods. However, it is absolutely vital that as we do so, we avoid the risk of a second peak that overwhelms the NHS. And importantly we do not waste the huge sacrifices the British people have made in lockdown to get the virus under control.

As the Government begins to slowly and cautiously lift some of the restrictions, it hopes to be able to return some pupils to school. This will not happen any earlier than the 1st June, and only if the five key tests set by Government justify the changes at the time. We are asking schools, colleges and childcare providers to plan on this basis, ahead of confirmation that these tests are met.

Initially, the Government expect children in Reception, Year 1 and in Year 6 to return to school, in smaller class sizes. The ambition is for all primary school children to return to school before the summer, if feasible.

For older pupils, the Government hopes to get Year 10 and 12 pupils who have key exams next year some face-to-face contact with their teachers, to supplement their remote education. It is unlikely that other secondary pupils will return to school before the summer.

We will also ask nurseries and other early years providers, including childminders, to begin welcoming back all children from the 1st June. Alternative provision settings should mirror the approach being taken for mainstream schools. Special schools, special post-16 institutions and hospital schools should look to achieve an equivalent phased return without a focus on specific year groups.

I would stress again that this is all conditional on the rate of transmission of the virus coming down and the scientific advice saying it is safe to do so. Rest assures that guidance and support is being provided to schools to ensure that both children and teachers are kept safe.

Keeping children and staff safe is our utmost priority. The Department for Education’s guidance on implementing protective measures in education and childcare settings contains detailed advice for settings on:

* cleaning, including supplies of cleaning and handwashing products
* testing and tracing
* PPE (personal protective equipment)
* what settings should do in response to a case of coronavirus being confirmed

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 guidance can be found on the Government website here:

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

Children and young people will need to stay within their group wherever possible and the Government will ask settings to implement a range of protective measures including frequent cleaning, reducing ‘pinch points’ (such as parents dropping children off at the start and end of the day) and utilising outdoor space. In early years settings, existing space requirements and staff child ratios for these age groups should allow for small group working. Staff and children in all settings will be eligible for testing if they become ill with coronavirus symptoms, as will members of their households and the track and trace approach will be applied to any confirmed cases.

Priority groups (children of critical workers and vulnerable children) of all ages should continue to be offered a place and strongly encouraged to attend.

We are keenly aware that the extraordinary measures that have been taken to prevent the spread of coronavirus present an unprecedented challenge for schools, trusts, and local authorities, as well as the communities they serve. We appreciate the selfless dedication that school, trust, and local authority staff, demonstrate in their work every single day.

As this outbreak progresses, we will aim to provide you with as much certainty and flexibility as possible and will do all we can to support the vital service all education providers are giving.

We expect schools and local authorities should work together to ensure that different settings are supported to stay open wherever possible, taking into account their circumstances and cohort (for example, special settings and alternative provision). We hope local authorities help coordinate what this means, working with education settings to deliver the services required. That includes academies, the independent sector, and boarding schools.

As the Education Secretary has said, every one of us wants the very best for our children and we know how stressful this time has been for many families. The Government’s approach is based on the best scientific advice, with children at the very heart of everything it does.

The latest Government guidance can be found online at <gov.uk/coronavirus>.

Thank you again for taking the time to contact me.

   
Yours faithfully,

**CHRIS HEATON-HARRIS MP**

**MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT FOR DAVENTRY**