

**Scientists
for Labour** 

ON THE REOPENING OF SCHOOLS

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Scientists for Labour

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Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, Scientists for Labour are preparing briefings and summaries of the latest research into coronavirus for Labour Party representatives and their staff. If you would like to receive these briefings or have any other queries, please contact Ben Fernando: chair@sfl.org.uk.

Aims and Scope

This report is intended to be a summary of some of the scientific evidence surrounding the reopening of schools as lockdown measures are relaxed, and also discusses the policy implications of such research. For details on devolved education in Scotland, see the SFL Scotland report (www.scientistsforlabour.org.uk).

It should be noted that this is a rapidly evolving field, with no clear scientific consensus (or route to even achieving such a consensus) for whether reopening schools is 'safe to do'. As such, and given the time pressures associated with writing it, we cannot claim that it is free of error or omission, or necessarily accurate in all regards.

Categorical statements in either direction on this topic are likely simplistic and do not capture the full spectrum of scientific opinion, nor the significant uncertainties associated with it. **We do not attempt to reach a consensus on this document, and its readers are advised to exercise caution in using it as a basis for claimed consensus. This topic is rapidly evolving and as such this report should not be taken as including all the latest updates once released.**

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Executive Summary

This report discusses some of the scientific evidence which is relevant to the reopening of schools as a part of the exit from lockdown strategy. We first summarise the current situation with regards to schools' policy in England, and then consider the transmission and infection rates associated with pupils themselves.

Finally, we consider the latest research around the implications of this policy (or any changes therein). This includes the likely effect on the effective reproduction number (R), and the potential social, emotional and educational attainment considerations, especially in relation to early years. The attainment gap has been touted as one of the main reasons that children should go back to school with minimal delay, however we discuss whether the loss of teaching time actually causes enough of a difference to justify the potentially traumatic experiences of a return to school for younger children and the risk in localised R rates rising.

In the absence of clear evidence regarding the extent to which children can spread the virus, and without an established and proven track and trace scheme in place, it is hard to see what evidence the government is working from to make these decisions. This lack of evidence is particularly concerning regarding the decision to have selected years returning to school, with early years children the least likely to be able to understand and follow social distancing and hygiene guidance necessary to control the spread of the virus.

Our Policy Position

It is our opinion that the scientific evidence provided by the government thus far is insufficient to conclude that it is safe to push onward with a return to schools beginning on 1 June. Of course, this does not mean that such evidence (such as that only available to the government) does not exist, but even after analysing the release of today's SAGE reports we are unable to answer all the questions we would wish to see addressed. Furthermore, the use of international best practice (UNICEF/WHO/IFRC) as a standard suggests that schools, parents, pupils, and teachers in England are not adequately prepared at present for such measures given the uncertainties therein.

1. Introduction

Deciding when to reopen schools is one of the most difficult options to be considered in the lifting of lockdown – this is true in England (the primary focus of this report), the devolved nations of the UK, and internationally.

While most children are currently not attending school, it is important to point out that most teachers are still working on virtual teaching projects, and others are working, often on a rota basis, in the schools that are still open for key workers and vulnerable children.

1.1 Uncertainties

The simple truth is that information about what the effects of reopening schools will be is limited and uncertain, and hence policies developed based on such information are inherently risky. Reasons for this uncertainty include:

1. The lack of a clearly translatable historical precedent to judge what the effect of opening schools will be, as this pandemic is unprecedented
2. Limited information about how susceptible to the virus children are
3. A lack of understanding of the susceptibility of children to a potentially related Kawasaki-like syndrome
4. Uncertainties about the capacity of children to transmit the virus
5. Wide-ranging estimates of the number of people who may be asymptomatic
6. A lack of knowledge of the degree of immunity conferred by past infection
7. Questions about the number of children who will be sent to school by their parents

In short, a scientific consensus does not exist, and we should not expect one to emerge anytime soon. This is not necessarily due to contradictions in the literature (though conflicting views do of course exist). More research is urgently needed.

1.2 Factors to consider

In making any decision about when to reopen schools, regardless of the current level of scientific advice, the following factors must be weighed up:

- The risk to students' physical and mental health
- The risk to teachers' physical and mental health
- Risks to family members of both students and teachers
- Educational disadvantages created or exacerbated by a lack of in-classroom education
- The inability of some groups to receive high-quality remote education
- A need to provide a 'safe haven' for students with unsafe or unwelcoming home conditions
- Challenges associated with the provision of remote assessment
- The inability of some workers to return to work without the provision of adequate childcare

1.3 Timelines

Alongside the above factors, some concerns are especially time sensitive and hence some decisions must be made before a comprehensive picture of the scientific evidence has become available.

- For older pupils, university admissions are likely to continue on the same annual cycle. Future examination or alternative assessments must be complete by given dates.
- The school year will end in July, decisions must be made in the next month if students are to have any contact time before the academic year ends.
- If a decision is taken to shorten or modify school summer holidays, extra planning is needed (and renegotiation of teaching contracts is likely to be challenging).

1.4 What does the science say?

Many of the questions posed and issues raised in this report have come about due to the lack of scientific transparency with which the Government in England has acted. Without the full details of the advice given by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), and the deliberation which led to this advice, it is impossible for us to say whether or not the government is ‘following the science’.

The lack of evidence surrounding the justification for the schools’ reopening plan (for example, the chosen prioritisation of year groups) and limited degree to which the inherent uncertainties have been acknowledged suggests that the government may have attempted to force a scientific consensus where none exists.

Full provision of the modelling, deliberation, and advice upon which the government is relying will be crucial to understanding the scientific rationale for their decisions. If such evidence is lacking in certainty or significance, it would be pertinent to rely upon the precautionary principle (taking steps to avoid uncertain risks which may turn out not to be less threatening), rather than claiming definitive (but secret) evidence.

The admission by the Chief Scientific Advisor to the Department for Education (DfE) last week¹ that he had not yet considered evidence on the reopening of schools raises serious concerns about whether any such modelling has been carried out.

In the remainder of this document, we will focus on the scientific (i.e. verifiable or falsifiable) evidence available in relation to the reopening of schools, with a consideration of international comparative policy. This does not mean that political questions should be ignored, but we consider them beyond the scope of our expertise. Consideration of a full range of stakeholder views (teachers, pupils, unions, and parents) must of course be considered. The focus of this document is on England.

¹ ‘DfE chief scientific adviser admits he hasn’t assessed school reopening guidance’, Schools Week, May 13, 2020: <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/dfe-chief-scientific-adviser-admits-he-hasnt-assessed-school-reopening-guidance/>
Record of House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee session of 13 May 2020: <https://parliamentlive.tv/Event/Index/db4b4a5a-cb30-4fe0-bfac-bda0d149d2d0>

2. The Current Situation

2.1 UK Government's announcement and subsequent reactions

On 11 May it was announced that the next phase of the easing of the lockdown will include the reopening of schools starting no earlier than 1 June². There was some surprise that although it was claimed that science would be at the heart of these decisions, and in particular they would be dependent on a reduction in the R value, the timetable for schools opening was less than 3 weeks from the date of announcement, while there is an expected lag of around 2-3 weeks before any change in the value of R. This has led to criticism of the government policy suggesting that it is motivated by political factors rather than the science alone.

2.2 Test, track and trace (TTT)

There is currently insufficient test, track and trace provision in the UK. An effective test and trace system regarded as being the key to being able to exit from lockdown, without a resurgence in the virus before a vaccine is available. The Prime Minister (PM) announced on 20 May that the government's long awaited 'world beating' test, trace and track scheme would be fully working by 1 June. Even if this comes to pass, it would surely be prudent to allow for this system to be widely tested ahead of a return to school, rather than having the two happen concurrently.

On 21 May, BBC Radio 4 reported having seen some of the draft documents relating to the TTT scheme. It claims that ten council areas have been earmarked to run a trial, with the government monitoring the situation locally. Whilst a 'pilot' approach seems pertinent, the implications of these documents reported on by the BBC remain unclear.

2.3 SAGE Advice

Documents published on 22 May 2020 by the SAGE³⁴ show that that research groups, along with Public Health England (PHE) modelled seven scenarios of children returning to school compared against the baseline of either schools being fully shut or schools being fully open. These scenarios were selected by the (DfE).

² PM statement on coronavirus: 11 May: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-coronavirus-11-may-2020>

³Interdisciplinary Task and Finish Group on the Role of Children in Transmission: Modelling and behavioural science responses to scenarios for relaxing school closures, document for SAGE meeting 1 May 2020, published May 22, 2020: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/887014/s0300-tfc-modelling-behavioural-science-relaxing-school-closures-sage31.pdf

⁴SPI-M & SPI-B: Modelling and behavioural science responses to scenarios for relaxing school closures, document for SAGE meeting 30 April 2020, published May 22, 2020:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/886994/s0257-sage-sub-group-modelling-behavioural-science-relaxing-school-closures-sage30.pdf

It is shown in these comparisons that opening nurseries and reception classes (early years) would have a smaller effect on the spread of the virus than fully opening primary schools, which would in turn have a smaller effect than opening secondary schools.

It is also shown that pupils returning to school on alternating weeks (dividing the class in two and each half having one week on and one week off), may be a 'good way to stop extensive transmission chains' in schools. **However, it stresses that more modelling is needed.**

Interestingly, the potential effect of social distancing and other measures within schools are not included in the modelling, and the government's plan does not specifically follow any of the seven scenarios, instead opting for a combination of these seven. As such, the evidence appears to demonstrate that that government's planned scenario has not been modelled for.

With the R value between 0.7 and 1 at the time of writing, it is clear that any return to school scenario would increase R, and therefore potentially push it above the threshold of 1 (either locally or nationally).

Overall, the SAGE models indicate a high level of uncertainty, with the relative susceptibility and infectivity of children still largely unknown. SAGE says that the choice of scenario is less important than maintaining other measures such as good hygiene and social distancing.

One of the documents reviewed by SAGE claims the analysis highlights 'the future importance of clear, consistent, scientifically informed communication to children, teachers and parents'. It does not appear that this has occurred, either.

2.4 Independent SAGE

The Independent SAGE committee, on 22 May 2020 published a discussion document specifically addressing the question 'Should schools reopen?'⁵ A key finding presented in the report is that new modelling shows the risk to children will be halved if they return to school two weeks later than the Government's proposed date and that delaying until September would further reduce the risk.

The Report contains findings on:

- Transmission risk
- Education risk
- Infection control in schools and communities
- How to plan for opening schools safely with optimal educational support?
- Preserving education in the summer and if schools stay closed

Sir David King, the chair of the Independent SAGE committee, was reported in the Guardian⁶ as saying, "It is clear from the evidence we have collected that 1 June is simply too early to go back. By going ahead with this dangerous decision, the government is further risking the health of our communities and the likelihood of a second spike."

⁵ The Independent SAGE Report 2, Should Schools Reopen?, Interim Findings and Concerns, Draft Document for Public Discussion, May 22, 2020: <http://www.independentsage.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Independent-Sage-Brief-Report-on-Schools.pdf>

⁶ 'Scientists warn 1 June is too early for schools to reopen in England', the Guardian, May 22, 2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/may/22/scientists-warn-1-june-too-early-schools-reopen-england-coronavirus-track-trace>

2.5 Trade Unions' perspectives

Trade unions have voiced concerns about the government's plans to open schools in England from the beginning of March. 85% of teachers surveyed by the NASUWT Teachers' Union have said that they do not think that schools will be safe for students or staff on 1 June⁷.

This caution regarding returning to work from the teacher's unions has been backed up by the British Medical Association⁸, which has also highlighted that reopening schools could distract from essential testing and contact tracing, which is still not in place. However, there is no suggestion at present that trade unions will instruct their members to go on 'wildcat' strikes rather than teach if ordered to by the government.

The National Education Union (NEU) outlines five tests that must be met before schools reopen, including

1. significantly lower numbers of COVID-19 cases,
2. a national plan for social distancing,
3. comprehensive access to regular testing for children and staff,
4. whole school protocols to be put in place for when a case is detected, and
5. protection for vulnerable staff and staff who live with vulnerable people.

The NEU ran a petition based on these tests to ensure that schools are only opened when they have been met, that had over 420,000 signatories.

NASUWT require:

1. safety and welfare of pupils and staff to be a paramount principle,
2. no increase in student numbers until full rollout of a national test and trace scheme,
3. a national COVID-19 taskforce to agree statutory guidance for safe reopening,
4. consideration of the needs of vulnerable students and staff facing economic disadvantage,
5. additional resourced for enhanced cleaning, PPE and risk assessments, and
6. local autonomy to close schools where resting indicated clusters of new COVID-19 cases.

A survey of almost 30,000 NASUWT members (who as a group have called for the government to step back from the 1 June date), showed that only 5% believed it was safe for more children to return to schools in England from 1 June.

Almost nine in ten teachers believed that PPE was essential to protect against transmission. **Government guidance remains that PPE will not be routinely needed in most schools.** 70% indicated that plans to keep children separate in small groups at all times are unworkable. This is consistent with the guidance provided by schools themselves, which acknowledges that while efforts will be made to keep children

⁷ 'Call to publish scientific evidence on reopening', NASUWT, May 19, 2020: <https://www.nasuwt.org.uk/article-listing/government-must-provide-answers.html>

⁸ 'BMA backs teaching unions' opposition to schools reopening', the Guardian, May 15, 2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/15/bma-backs-teaching-unions-in-opposing-reopening-of-schools>
BMA letter to NEU: <https://twitter.com/TheBMA/status/1261281483106508801>

separate, young children are often impulsive and there may be instances where adherence cannot be guaranteed.

It remains to be seen whether the unions' concerns can be addressed by 1 June, but this seems highly unlikely. The current plans are not acceptable to the unions. Neither NASUWT nor NEU are prepared to support a return to work before regular testing, with NEU highlighting regular testing for children and staff, and NASUWT also emphasising full rollout of a national test and trace scheme.

2.6 Guidelines for reopening schools

The current government guidance on 'Implementing protective measures in education and childcare settings'⁹ sets out some of the measures expected to be included when planning for reopening. These include:

1. All schools required to undertake a risk assessment before opening
2. Frequent hand cleaning and good hygiene practices
3. Regular cleaning of settings - including surfaces, toys, books, desks, chairs, doors, sinks, toilets, light switches, bannisters, more regularly than normal using products such as detergent or bleach.
4. Ensuring good respiratory hygiene by promoting the 'catch it, bin it, kill it' approach
5. Minimising contact and mixing by altering, as much as possible, the environment (such as classroom layout) and timetables (such as staggered break times)
6. Creating smaller and consistent groups that do not mix
7. Remove hard to clean or unnecessary items from classrooms and other learning environments e.g. soft furnishings and toys
8. Shared spaces such as halls and dining areas used in half capacity, with a one-way circulation in the rest of the building.

It is not recommended that face masks are worn, either by children or their teachers, even if social distancing cannot be maintained. Regular temperature checks have also been ruled out as an unreliable method for identifying coronavirus, though other countries are persisting with them.

It is important to probe who will bear the brunt of reorganisation of classrooms, extra time spent teaching children the rules around distancing, handwashing etc, and the extra cleaning needed throughout the day. It is likely that most of this will fall to teachers. Additional costs of increased cleaning and providing hygiene equipment will also be a further burden on already stretched school budgets.

2.7 Evaluation of the above

The government's guidelines for reopening schools say 'early years and primary age children cannot be expected to remain 2 metres apart from each other and staff'⁹. Insufficient detailed guidance is available.

⁹ Government guidance, Coronavirus (COVID-19): implementing protective measures in education and childcare settings, updated May 12, 2020: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-implementing-protective-measures-in-education-and-childcare-settings/coronavirus-covid-19-implementing-protective-measures-in-education-and-childcare-settings>

We consider that schools need:

1. Schools need protocols for social distancing (e.g. reduced class sizes and cancelling large gatherings).
2. Staff and students need accessible hygiene information, written for all ages and translated into other languages (including braille).
3. Contact with local health authorities should be given to school administrators and leaders.
4. Staff, students and parents should be aware of procedures for further outbreaks of COVID-19 and monitoring for cases is essential.
5. High-risk staff and students should have flexible health absences accorded to them, and similarly for teacher substitution.
6. Immediate financial support for equipment and supplies. Schools should use this for antibacterial and disinfectant supplies, handwashing stations, safe water and provisions to manage menstrual hygiene. Extra consideration should be made for both students and teachers with disabilities.
7. Teachers and staff need training on hygiene practice, and cleaning staff need disinfection training and PPE equipment.
8. Training is needed for teachers to improve their delivery of remote learning before schools reopen, and investment is needed for remote learning to prepare for any future closures.
9. New academic calendars may also need to be developed before reopening, if holiday timings are to be changed.
10. Non-essential exams should be waived, allowing essential examination to have appropriate safety measures.
11. Teachers should be trained and equipped to identify students in need of learning recovery.
12. Programmes should be developed to bridge academic gaps, particularly for basic literacy and numeracy in primary school children who have not received sufficient home support.
13. Details for emergency contacts need to be updated.

For mental health and wellbeing, teachers' salaries must not be threatened, particularly for "precarious contracts", regardless of the school's status. Assessment must review teachers' risk levels to plan staggered returns to teaching, and monitor teachers' health (both mental and physical). Returning schools need to re-establish essential services they usually provide (school meals, vaccination, and health services), or at least have referral systems to supplement these services.

To support marginalised groups, funding should be provided for schools to give money to vulnerable students, and any school fees (e.g. uniforms) should be waived.

2.7 International guidelines on reopening schools

The United Nations International Childrens' Emergency Fund (UNICEF), World Health Organisation (WHO) and International Federation of Red Cross/Crescent Societies (IFRC) have jointly published guidance on

safe operation (and hence safe return to) schools¹⁰. These guidelines offer the following suggestions for school administrators and staff:

1. Any community meetings that usually take place in schools must be cancelled
2. Schools should not be used for other services e.g. shelters or treatment units
3. Desks for students should be at least one metre apart
4. Protocols should be enacted to separate sick and healthy people in schools without creating a stigma
5. Incentives for good attendance should be removed to facilitate flexibility
6. Critical jobs should be identified, and cross-training programmes created to train other staff in key skills, in case critical staff need to be isolated
7. Data regarding respiratory illnesses and absentee statistics should be shared with local health authorities
8. Remote learning strategies are suggested: online/e-learning; assigning exercises to complete at home; regular remote sessions between students and teachers; and/or using academic content from radio, podcasts, and television
9. Coordination should occur between health and social workers to identify and support visibly distressed students and staff
10. Children's mental health and psychosocial needs must be addressed - encouraging and reassuring children in discussing their concerns, providing honest and age-appropriate information, and guiding students on how to support each other
11. Addressing mental health and psychosocial needs for teachers – providing them with resources for mental health support
12. Providing specific support for girls who are more likely to face increased risks of infection from tasks such as responsibility for caring for sick relatives (*this may be more true in developing nations, but should still be considered in the UK*)

The report also has checklists and advice tailored for students and home carers. **Too few of these issues have been comprehensively addressed by the government. As such, we remain concerned that insufficient safety measures are not in place.**

2.8 How many children are currently going to school?

Since Monday 23 March the government have been gathering data on attendance of pupils in educational settings in England. Since this date nurseries, schools, and colleges have remained open only to a priority group of children and young people. This includes children who have a parent who is a critical worker and vulnerable children.

The latest report from 15 May¹¹ shows that 2.4% of pupils were in attendance on 14 May. These pupils are spread over the 80% of educational settings which were open in some respect. The number of children

¹⁰ Key Messages and Actions for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in Schools, unicef, WHO, IFRC, March 2020: https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/key-messages-and-actions-for-covid-19-prevention-and-control-in-schools-march-2020.pdf?sfvrsn=baf81d52_4

¹¹ Coronavirus (COVID-19): attendance in education and early years settings in England: 15 May 2020 summary, updated May 19, 2020: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/886118/COVID19_attendance_in_education_settings_data.pdf

attending an educational setting who are classed as vulnerable was 73,000, up from 69,000 the week before.

2.9 How many children would be going back to school under the current plans?

According to the current plan, only reception, year 1 and year 6 children will be returning to school full time, starting on 1 June, with year 10 and year 12 pupils expected to have a limited amount of face to face teaching. The UK school years are defined as follows:

- Reception and Years 1 to 2 - for pupils aged between 4 and 7 years old
- Years 3 to 6 - for pupils aged between 7 and 11 years old
- Years 7 to 9 - for pupils aged between 11 and 14 years old,
- Years 10 to 11 - for pupils aged between 14 and 16 years old, and
- Years 12 to 13 - for pupils aged between 16 and 18 years old.

It is difficult to ascertain the exact number of pupils these changes will affect as the government's school census collects numbers of pupils by age rather than year group.

The latest data on primary schools¹² (which will be expected to go back to full time teaching for selected years) are below.

In state funded primary schools, attendance by age is broken down in Table 1.

Age Group	Number of pupils
Total under 5	907,646
5	636,664
6	654,290
7	651,331
8	639,723
9	617,060
10	618,673
Total 5 to 10	3,817,742

For the wider opening of schools, the numbers in state-funded primary schools are 4.73 million pupils, for state-funded secondaries are 3.33 million, 580,000 pupils in independent schools and 130,000 pupils in special schools.

2.10 Who has authority over school openings, and what sanctions can be put in place for non-compliance?

Currently it is the PM's office setting the agenda for when schools across England should open. **In Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, education is a devolved matter.** Nonetheless, the steer of the

¹² Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2019, National Statistics, updated August 20, 2019: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2019>

Westminster government is likely to have some impact on public policy in the devolved administrations, for example through influencing the views of parents and trade unions.

In England, the role of Local Education Authorities in determining (or assisting with) the return to school is significant, as they are a controlling authority. Up to 1,500 primary schools are likely to stay closed on 1 June, after a rebellion of at least 18 councils against the government timelines.¹³ The government has been forced to say that it would not sanction either schools or councils that went against the plans.

The DfE has also stressed that there will be no penalties for parents who keep children off even when schools are reopened this academic year. The prime minister's spokesman told reporters: "We are continuing to work closely with teachers, schools and the unions, as we have done for the past eight weeks, and remain keen to hear any concerns they may have."

At present, the guidance to open schools does not appear to be a legal imperative. Therefore, schools may be entitled to make their own decision about whether to reopen, but theoretically could face future ramifications from their local authority.

Decisions will be open to scrutiny, so schools should have reasonable grounds for not opening e.g. through a risk assessment. There is currently no expectation for schools to provide teaching for those who decide not to return to class when the school is open, though some teachers may feel obliged to do this, creating a further burden on them.

2.11 Different schools' approaches

There is some reasonable evidence that private schools will find social distancing measures easier to enforce as they usually have smaller class sizes, and larger facilities. However, some private schools will not be returning until September.

Local authorities do not have control over academies and academy trusts, who can independently decide whether or not to open their schools. Many academy chains have therefore decided to open with appropriate safety measures in place.

Most pupils in England now attend academies or free schools, however this is skewed towards secondary schools, with primary schools more likely to be under the local authority.

¹³ 'No 10 retreats as rebellion over schools gathers pace', the Guardian, May 19, 2020: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/19/up-to-1500-english-primary-schools-to-defy-1-june-reopening-plan>

3. Comparative Policy in this area

3.1 International Approaches – see also Annex A

In most EU countries, the opening of schools is well under way. Increases in R appear manageable; however, the situation is being reassessed daily and constantly monitored. This is complicated by the long incubation period of the virus. It should also be noted where there have been new COVID-19 cases found, (such as several incidents in **France**), schools have been closed immediately.

Outside of the EU, **New Zealand** has incorporated its policy on opening schools into their alert level system. In its current alert level (Level 2), schools have reopened but the government has stated: “On the advice of public health officials, any educational facilities connected to a confirmed or probable case of COVID-19 must close on an individual or group basis to allow contact tracing, and then potentially for a further 14 days”.

Singapore has planned phased reopening of preschools and early intervention centres as well as older year groups, starting from 2 June. Guidelines (“COVID-Safe ABCs”) are the central guidance to the reopening.

Additionally, measures have been put place in some nations to mitigate the risk of outbreaks within school, in combination with the ability to isolate groups if individuals and groups had become infected.

Some countries such as **Denmark** and **Germany** have reopened schools, whilst separating classes, and staggering times to enter and leave the premises to prevent hotspots forming during opening and closing. Measures to suppress the risk the virus poses to schools as they reopen include:

1. Temperature checks of students taking place as they walk onto the school premises (complying with the advice from the WHO for temperature checks each day)
2. In Scandinavian countries, to hold classes outside whenever possible
3. Children are required to wash their hands every hour and wear facemasks
4. Staggered arrival times and pick-up times
5. Classes divided into sub-groups during the school day, and children only interacting with classmates in their assigned group
6. Schools reserving rooms to isolate unwell students
7. Staff in a “at risk group” asked to stay at home
8. Equipment in schools are regularly disinfected
9. Regular testing of students

In summary, it seems that countries are generally planning and rolling out a phased return to schools. This ensures an artificially accelerated easing of school lockdown measures does not take place, meaning that steps can easily be taken to roll back the plans if required.

Many countries have been lenient in allowing parents to decide whether to send their children back to school. Such a decision might come about for a variety of reasons, for example the presence of a high-risk shielding individual in the pupil’s household who cannot be subjected to an increased risk of infection.

Overall, the international response has been to re-open schools at a manageable pace with mitigations put in place to limit outbreaks, and rapidly control any outbreaks through track and trace measures should they occur. **It is our judgement that most countries have adopted a more cautious approach than the UK, and if the UK's situation is 'special', the reasons for this should be made clear.**

3.2 The Devolved Regions of the UK

Wales

The Welsh government has made it clear that they will not be opening schools on 1 June¹⁴. Instead, schools will remain closed until the R value is consistently below 1, and scientific advisors to the Welsh government inform them that the opening of schools is unlikely to cause the R value to increase substantially.

However the Welsh government is considering continuing online education through the summer in order to make up for lost hours, and has said that they hope to expand the capacity of schools which have remained open for children of key workers to include more children from at risk households.

Scotland

Scotland closed schools slightly before schools were closed in England. Since then, the only schools which have been open have been “hub” schools for children of essential workers, though there have been concerns that they have not been used by enough essential workers. The Scottish government on 21 May announced the road map for Scotland as a four-phase approach.

It is the intention for schools to open in phase 3. The actual date of the start of phase 3 has not been set but an indicative school reopening across Scotland is set for 11 August¹⁵. There appears to be an intention to provide country wide teaching through resources from Education Scotland for those pupils learning away from physical school¹⁶.

Further discussion of Scottish education policy during this pandemic can be found in our COVID-19 and Scotland report: www.scientistsforlabour.org.uk.

Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland has also said that they will not open schools until community transmission low enough to ensure that R does not increase. As such they have not set a firm date but have suggested that epidemiological models show that COVID-19 will have mellowed sufficiently in Northern Ireland for schools to reopen in September.¹⁷

Isle of Man

¹⁴ Written statement: COVID-19 Recovery Phase Planning: operation of schools, Minister for Education for Wales, April 28, 2020: <https://gov.wales/written-statement-covid-19-recovery-phase-planning-operation-schools>

¹⁵ 'Coronavirus: Scottish schools to reopen in August', BBC, May 21, 2020: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-52754812>

¹⁶ Coronavirus (COVID-19): strategic framework for reopening schools, early learning and childcare provision, Deputy First Minister for Scotland, May 21, 2020: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/excellent-equity-during-covid-19-pandemic-strategic-framework-reopening-schools-early-learning-childcare-provision-scotland/>

¹⁷ 'Coronavirus: September target for re-opening of NI schools', BBC, May 7, 2020: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-52572814>

The Isle of Man has suggested that schools will reopen for years 2, 6, 10, and 12 in mid-June, and plan to reopen schools for all years at the end of the summer holidays, though social distancing measures will be implemented when schools reopen.¹⁸ How these social distancing measures will be implemented or enforced is not clear, and trade unions on the island have voiced concerns.

Channel Islands

The first schools to reopen on the Channel Islands were in Sark, a small island that did not have any COVID-19 cases and has limited traffic between itself and the other islands, and the British mainland.¹⁹ Guernsey announced on 22 May 2020 that State-run schools will re-open to all students five days a week from Monday 8th June.²⁰ Jersey has not set out a firm date for reopening schools and has suggested that it will wait until the R value is low enough that any easing of restrictions would not pose a significant risk of R increasing to 1.²¹

¹⁸ 'Coronavirus: Isle of Man's schools 'could reopen from 17 June'', BBC, May 18, 2020: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-isle-of-man-52712482>

¹⁹ 'Sark school is first to reopen in Channel Islands', ITV, May 4, 2020: <https://www.itv.com/news/channel/2020-05-04/sark-school-reopens/>

²⁰ States of Guernsey government education guidance, updated May 22, 2020: <https://covid19.gov.gg/guidance/education>

²¹ 'Jersey parents and teachers promised 'as much notice as possible' before schools reopen', ITV, May 15, 2020: <https://www.itv.com/news/channel/2020-05-15/jersey-parents-and-teachers-promised-as-much-notice-as-possible-before-schools-reopen/>

4. The latest scientific research

4.1 Children and COVID-19

Government advice²² suggests that both the severity and susceptibility to the virus is lower in children than in adults. The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health has an excellent [website](#) summarizing the key evidence regarding COVID-19 in children and young people, of which the following points are particularly relevant.

- COVID-19 has been found in people of all ages, including children and infants, even from birth.
- The current research shows that the disease appears to take a milder course in children than in adults. In fact, most infected children present with mild symptoms or are asymptomatic,^{23,24} and very few develop severe or life-threatening disease.
- This may have some negative clinical outcomes as the virus is difficult to identify in children,²⁵ and they may remain as likely to transmit as adults (see below).
- In a study of 100 Italian children with confirmed COVID-19, 21% of the patients were asymptomatic, 58% had mild disease, and none died.²⁶
- Deaths of children from COVID-19 remain very rare, with a similar mortality to seasonal influenza²⁵.
- Data²⁷ from the Office of National Statistics (ONS) shows that in England and Wales, for the week ending 8 May 2020, there was 1 death from COVID-19 in the under-19 age group.
- Investigations are currently underway to assess the link between COVID-19 in children and a newly reported hyperinflammatory response syndrome, resembling Kawasaki shock. There appear to have been cases in the UK²⁸, France²⁹ and Italy³⁰, amongst other countries.

4.2 Transmission of COVID-19 in children

²² Overview of scientific advice and information on coronavirus (COVID-19), Department for Education, May 2020: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/885631/Overview_of_scientific_advice_and_information_on_coronavirus_COVID19.pdf

²³ Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Cheongju, Korea (2020), Coronavirus Disease-19: The First 7,755 Cases in the Republic of Korea, *Osong Public Health Res Perspect*, 11(2), 85-90

²⁴ Bi et al (2020 Apr), Epidemiology and transmission of COVID-19 in 391 cases and 1286 of their close contacts in Shenzhen, China: a retrospective cohort study, *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099\(20\)30287-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099(20)30287-5/fulltext)

²⁵ Qui et al (2020 Mar), Clinical and epidemiological features of 36 children with coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in Zhejiang, China: an observational cohort study, *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*

²⁶ Parri et al (2020 May), Children with Covid-19 in Pediatric Emergency Departments in Italy, *The New England Journal of Medicine*

²⁷ Deaths registered weekly in England and Wales, provisional: week ending 8 May 2020, release date May 19, 2020: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsregisteredweeklyinenglandandwalesprovisional/weekending8may2020>

²⁸ Riphagen et al (2020 May), Hyperinflammatory shock in children during COVID-19 pandemic, *The Lancet*, 395(10237), 1607-1608

²⁹ Toubiana et al (2020 May), Outbreak of Kawasaki disease in children during COVID-19 pandemic: a prospective observational study in Paris, France, *medRxiv* (preprint)

³⁰ Verdoni et al (2020 May), An outbreak of severe Kawasaki-like disease at the Italian epicentre of the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic: an observational cohort study, *The Lancet*

It is clear at this point that the impact of COVID-19 is correlated with age, with infected children either displaying no symptoms or very mild symptoms. but the role children play in passing on the virus to other children and to adults is not clear.

When making decisions, policymakers need to be aware of the uncertainties in the current understanding so they can weigh up the risks of reopening schools (which might include children passing the virus to their parents, and wider family, and generally increasing R in the community) against the benefits.

A recent German study³¹ (not yet peer reviewed) advocates caution regarding when schools should reopen. In an analysis of over 3,700 COVID-19 patients, they found that viral loads in children were now lower than those in adults. As such, a lower infectivity should not be assumed. *The conclusions of this study (especially on the topic of reported viral loads) have been questioned, most recently by Prof. David Spiegelhalter on BBC Radio 4's More or Less, on 22 May.*

The same study also highlights that making detailed estimates of the risk of infection from children is challenging, as they are unlikely to have brought the infection into their households when schools were closed, and most early outbreaks in Europe were due to adult travellers visiting China. An overview in *The Lancet*³² notes that testing rates in children are also lower, and systematic studies of non-hospitalised children are lacking.

There are reasons to believe that the transmissivity may be lower in children. If a child is asymptomatic, they will not spread the virus through repeated coughing. Even if transmissivity is lower in children, this may be offset through the more physical nature of social interactions in children, so care should be taken when making assumptions to ensure a comprehensive picture of COVID-19 in children is considered.

A further review³³ notes that there is no evidence that children cannot act as reservoirs for the virus. On 22 May, the SAGE published advice³⁴ which reviewed the science around susceptibility and transmission in children (as of 30 April), and concluded:

- The scientific evidence remains inconclusive on both the susceptibility and transmissibility of children, but balance of evidence shows they both may be lower
- Serological studies are starting to be available on child infection history with some suggesting low rates of infection
- Any studies must be interpreted with caution based on exposure history (e.g. school closure) in the area they are drawn from. There are some suggestions that mild infections (more common in children) may be less likely to generate antibodies.

³¹ Drosten et al (2020), An analysis of SARS-CoV-2 viral load by patient age, *Research Network Zoonotic Infectious Diseases website*: https://zoonosen.charite.de/fileadmin/user_upload/microsites/m_cc05/virologie-ccm/dateien_upload/Weitere_Dateien/analysis-of-SARS-CoV-2-viral-load-by-patient-age.pdf

³² Kelvin and Halperin (2020 Mar), COVID-19 in children: the link in the transmission chain, *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*

³³ Zimmermann and Curtis (2020 May), Coronavirus Infections in Children Including COVID-19, *The Pediatric Infectious Disease Journal*, 39(5), 355-368

³⁴ Susceptibility and transmission in children: updates from the last few weeks, document for SAGE meeting 30 April 2020, published May 22, 2020: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/886995/s0258-viner-eggo-susceptibility-transmission-in-children-updates-250420-sage30.pdf

- There is limited evidence about transmission from children, with some leaning towards lower transmission from children.

4.3 How many children have COVID-19 in the UK?

The government’s daily testing data³⁵ gives a breakdown of positive results by age (Table 2).

As of 20 May, the total number of lab confirmed cases of COVID-19 in England by age and sex are shown below. This is out of a total of 145,808 lab confirmed cases to date in England.

Table 2: Coronavirus cases by age and gender in children

Age group	Male cases	Female cases	Total for this age group
0 to 4	401	313	714
5 to 9	186	151	337
10 to 14	201	204	405
15 to 19	346	563	909
Total	1,134	1,231	2,365 (1.62% of total cases across all ages)

A commitment to testing children over five in the community was made by the government on 18 May. Prior to this, cases were only likely to be identified in hospitals, or through testing for the families of key workers. This means that the above figures are not likely to paint a true picture of child infection. The number of negative cases (and hence the fraction of cases testing positive) are unclear.

4.4 How well can children comply with hygiene and social distancing measures?

There is developmental evidence that suggests young children may find hygiene and social distancing measures more difficult to abide by than students in middle childhood and older. There is an important developmental shift between the ages of six and eight due to executive function development such as inhibitory control (the ability to inhibit actions) and sustained attention³⁶.

These cognitive processes are associated with the prefrontal cortex, an area of the brain that experiences greatest developmental change over the first 8 years of life and continues to develop into early adulthood.

After the age of eight, these developmentally sensitive cognitive processes remain relatively stable until adolescence³⁷. This may indicate that developmentally, children aged eight and over may be more able to comply with hygiene and social distancing measures that draw on their ability to exercise a level of cognitive control in relation to executive functions. As such, measures to pilot a return to school with

³⁵ Coronavirus (COVID-19) in the UK, accessed May 20, 2020: <https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk>

³⁶ Lewis, FC et al. (2017). Sustained attention to a predictable, unengaging Go/No-Go task shows ongoing development between 6 and 11 years. *Attention, Perception, & Psychophysics*, 79, 1726-1741.

³⁷ Best, J. R., & Miller, P. H. (2010). A Developmental Perspective on Executive Function. *Child Development*. 81(6), 1641-1660

Reception and Year 1 may have overestimated the degree of control which such children have over social distancing measures.

4.5 Gender specific risks

Whilst men are more likely to experience severe COVID-19, women make up 86% of classroom teachers in nursery and primary settings in England³⁸. It is also recognised that women account for the majority of the workforce who take support roles in schools, particularly in early years or primary settings, including teaching assistants, lunchtime supervisors and cleaning staff³⁹.

As women predominantly take the role of unpaid care givers⁴⁰ – for both children and elders within their families or communities – risks associated with transmission from their work in school settings also becomes more complex and potentially wide-reaching.

4.6 How can schools be made safe workspaces?

A lot of emphasis is being placed on the importance of maintaining social distancing as a part of reopening schools, partly because children naturally tend to mix in close proximity, especially when they are playing together. **However, the issue of transmitting the virus through touching surfaces is also important and this will be difficult to avoid throughout the school day.**

Human coronaviruses can remain infectious on inanimate surfaces for up to nine days⁴¹. However, it is noted that in temperatures of 30 °C or more, the duration of persistence is shorter. The viral load which is transmitted by touching surfaces is dependent on how long the contact is maintained, and the cleanliness of the hands in contact with them.

For context, an observational study on medical students showed that they touched their face with their own hands on average 23 times per hour, with contact mostly to the skin (56%), followed by mouth (36%), nose (31%) and eyes (31%)⁴². It can reasonably be assumed that children are more likely to touch their faces.

Probably the easiest part of school life for maintaining distances is during lessons, when tables could be placed apart from one another, if there are sufficient tables and if there is space for this. It is possible that other parts of the school day will present more difficult challenges, such as when children are arriving or leaving school, when they are moving between lessons, and at lunch and break times.

³⁸ School workforce in England: November 2018, National Statistics, updated October 9, 2019: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/school-workforce-in-england-november-2018>

³⁹ School workforce in England: November 2013, National Statistics/ Department for Education, published April 10, 2014: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/335413/sfr11_2014_updated_july.pdf

⁴⁰ '10 facts about women and caring in the UK on International Women's Day', Carers UK website: <https://www.carersuk.org/news-and-campaigns/features/10-facts-about-women-and-caring-in-the-uk-on-international-women-s-day>

⁴¹ Kampf et al (2020). Persistence of coronavirus on inanimate surfaces and their inactivation with biocidal agents. *Journal of Hospital Infection*, 104, 246-251

⁴² Kwok, Gralton, McLaws (2017). Face touching: A frequent habit that has implications for hand hygiene. *American Journal of Infection Control*, 43, 112-114

The safest school model would involve children staying at their desks in a single room all day, without any breaks and eating packed lunches at their desks, with teachers moving to take different classes. Arrival and departure times could be staggered according to year group or by different classes. However, this would be an experience very different to what most children are used to.

4.7 Reliance on public transport to return to school

The National Travel Survey 2018⁴³ showed that 13% of all trips to or from school for 5 to 16 year olds were via public transport. This increased to 21% of black children in the same age bracket who took a local bus to or from school, highlighting that not all demographics are equally affected by return-to-school measures.

This may, however, indicate preference rather than reliance, and parents who are working from home may be more available to take children to school through other modes of transport, such as cycling or driving. Although primary school children are generally understood to be less reliant on public transport, the question of how children get to school may become more pertinent as further years are reintroduced.

Included in the advice on implementing protective measures⁴⁴ ahead of the reopening of schools, teachers are asked to try and reduce any unnecessary travel on coaches, buses or public transport where possible. However, there is no guidance on how this could or should be done.

4.8 What other modelling has been done?

It is important to note that since the reopening of schools could lead to an increase in the local R value, the impacts of school openings could have impacts well beyond students and teachers. Whilst some modelling has been produced and discussed by the SAGE, the actual scheme the government intends to implement has not been included in any of these models.

However, prior to the decision to close schools, modelling from UCL⁴⁵ suggested that the closure of schools would actually have little impact on transmission, with other social distancing interventions being much more effective.

As mention in Sec. 1, it has been reported¹ that the Chief Scientific Advisor for the DfE, Osama Rahman, admitted in front of the Science and Technology select committee that the DfE had done no modelling on the impact on transmission rates of schools reopening. However, he did state that, "One of the SAGE groups has done various bits of modelling for different scenarios on what years you can bring back. My understanding is those will be published in due course." He also said that the decision to reopen schools was made by the cabinet, not the DfE.

⁴³ Travel to School, data from the National Travel Survey 2018, published January 30, 2020: <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/culture-and-community/transport/travel-to-school/latest>

⁴⁴ Government guidance, Coronavirus (COVID-19): implementing protective measures in education and childcare settings, updated May 12, 2020: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-implementing-protective-measures-in-education-and-childcare-settings>

⁴⁵ Viner et al (2020). School closure and management practices during coronavirus outbreaks including COVID-19: a rapid systematic review. *The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health*, 4(3), 397-404

5. Social, emotional and educational considerations

5.1 Do families want to send their children back to school?

An extract from an Institute for Fiscal Studies parental survey report states ‘fewer than half of parents say they would send their child back to school if they had the choice. Higher-income parents report being more willing for their child to go back to school. This risks a situation where the children struggling the most to cope with home learning remain at home while their better-off classmates are back in the classroom’⁴⁶. Such a situation would only further already apparent educational disadvantages.

5.2 Do children want to go back to school?

One report published 21 May⁴⁷, using data from over 2,000 children and adolescents representing all school years (but predominately secondary school) noted that over a third of respondents said that their biggest concern about returning to school was either catching COVID-19, or passing it on to a family member. Of relevance to current discussions, several Year 6 children reported on their worries about transition to secondary school without first returning to their current schools.

5.3 What concerns are there for Early Years/Y1 children returning to school?

Social Distancing and removal of resources, and the opportunity for learning.

DfE guidance recommends removing ‘soft furnishings, soft toys and toys that are hard to clean’ - for early years and Year 1 children, their classroom resources will thus decrease substantially. It will be more difficult to offer a full early years programme of learning for reception children, who are not developmentally ready to spend large periods of time at a desk or on the carpet. Irvin et al⁴⁸ demonstrate a heat map of movement in a classroom for just two early years children, showing significant motion around the classroom.

Unstructured play is important for many school-relevant outcomes. Opportunity for outside play, where it is possible, will allow children opportunity to explore and be creative but again space is likely to be an issue. When children have unstructured play, they are also learning problem-solving, social skills and self-regulation⁴⁹.

⁴⁶ Andrew, A., Cattan, S., Costa-Dias, M., Farquharson, C., Kraftman, L., Krutikova, S., Phimister, A., & Sevilla, A. (2020, May). *Learning during the lockdown: real-time data on children's experiences during home learning*. IFS Briefing Note BN288. <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/BN288-Learning-during-the-lockdown-1.pdf>

⁴⁷ Phoenix Education Consultancy (2020) Thinking about school survey report: https://b8ccd561-4063-4e7a-91f3-e70ded17121c.filesusr.com/ugd/bbe3de_6603b30b435b4c47bb3fd988ad85093f.pdf

⁴⁸ Irvin et al (2018). An automated approach to measuring child movement and location in the early childhood classroom. *Behaviour Research Methods*, 50, 890-901. Link to useful figure: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.3758/s13428-017-0912-8/figures/4>

⁴⁹ Burdette HL & Whitaker RC (2005). Resurrecting Free Play in Young Children: Looking Beyond Fitness and Fatness to Attention, Affiliation, and Affect. *Archives Pediatric & Adolescent Medicine*, 159, 46–50.

Managing 'regression' of personal, social and emotional skills

There is a concern that some children who have been at home may have lost some skills. Teachers and teaching assistants are likely to need to manage toilet accidents, which is more likely when children are anxious or in unfamiliar surroundings (such as those who are not their own classroom space).

Teachers are skilled at managing the personal needs of their children, but not under conditions of social distancing. There is also a question about how restrictive (i.e. physical) interventions, which are sometimes necessary as a safety measure, will work in schools educating children with special educational needs and disabilities. The necessity for such interventions is likely to be increased, at least temporarily, following a return to school.

5.4 What challenges might there be for Year 6 pupils?

For older children there may be fewer concerns about managing social distancing – but managing space in classrooms and on small school sites remain problematic. In a three-form entry primary (three classes per year) it may be possible to spread a Year 6 cohort of 90 children across multiple classrooms that are vacated by other year groups. But for single form (or sub-single form) primary schools there is limited space available that would be suitable or appropriate for children to use. Similar concerns apply to outside space and shared spaces such as dining rooms. Space is at premium in many primary schools, especially when we consider that the average Key Stage 2 primary school class size is 27 pupils⁵⁰.

5.5 Why Year 6?

DfE guidance outlines the potential for secondary school induction through virtual meetings, giving report attainment data and other information to secondary schools, and focus on 'academic readiness' for secondary schools, particularly in English and mathematics. There is a question of whether this needs to be done on site or could be conducted remotely through current online systems and platforms that schools have established. However, evidence suggests that transition from primary to secondary school can have negative impacts on pupils' attainment, as well as their social and emotional wellbeing⁵¹.

Transitioning is not simply a process of moving from one school to the next; significant disruption occurs in terms of relationships with new peer groups and teachers, adjusting to a new, larger physical environment, establishing new ways of learning, and adjusting to different academic and social expectations⁵².

The pattern of this disruption is also mixed. Burgess et al.⁵³ indicate that poor pupils seem to be further disadvantaged in their transition to secondary schools than their wealthier peers. Opportunity for

⁵⁰https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/812539/Schools_Pupils_and_their_Characteristics_2019_Main_Text.pdf accessed 22 May 2020

⁵¹ Hanewald, R. (2013) Transition between primary and secondary school: What is important and how it can be supported. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 38(1), 62–74.

⁵² Hopwood, B., Hay, I. & Dymant, J. (2017). Students' reading achievement during the transition from primary to secondary school. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 40(1), 46–58.

⁵³ Burgess, S., Johnston, R., Key, T., Propper, C. & Wilson, D. (2008). The transition of pupils from primary to secondary school in England. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 33(3), 388–403.

transition work with familiar teachers in a familiar school setting prior to beginning secondary school in September may be beneficial, but even more so for disadvantaged pupils. **Hence, the government's plan to include Year 6 pupils in an early stage of the return to school program may be pertinent.**

5.6 Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

Where it is deemed safe to do so, all schools have continued to offer in-school education for those with SEND. Under temporary changes to legislation, local councils have no legal obligation to provide the education and health care provision set out in education, health and care plans (in place until 31 May). However, we do not yet know whether this temporary change to legislation likely to be extended.

Children with SEND will only be allowed to return to school if it is considered safe enough for them to do so. They may need extra support with the transition, and with managing social distancing. Schools may need extra staff to provide support for some children, and guidance about maintaining physical distance from a child in distress is not yet clear.

5.6 Socio-emotional and Mental Health Consequences

We know little about the mental health of children and adolescents out of school during lockdown at present, and very little about how children have fared away from school in previous pandemics.

However, it is not insensible to suggest that prolonged periods of time away from school, spent largely in the home, will be related to less favourable physical and mental health outcomes. Evidence suggests that when children are out of school (e.g. weekends and summer holidays) they are physically less active, have much longer screen time, irregular sleep patterns, and less favourable diets, resulting in weight gain and a loss of cardiorespiratory fitness. Such negative effects on health are likely to be much worse when children are confined to their homes without outdoor activities or interaction with same-aged friends during the outbreak.

These differences in mental and physical health over the summer holidays are magnified for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and one of the most important drivers in mental health outcome is loneliness⁵⁴. We might expect to see a similar picture during pandemic school closures.

Children and adolescents with existing mental health difficulties may be at particular risk from not being able to attend school⁵⁵. A recent Young Minds study reported that over 50% of young people with existing mental health difficulties said that their mental health had become a bit or much worse since social restrictions started to take place⁵⁶.

⁵⁴ Morgan, K. et al. (2019). Socio-economic inequalities in adolescent summer holiday experiences, and mental wellbeing on return to school: analysis of the school health research network/health behaviour in school-aged children survey in Wales. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 16, 1107.

⁵⁵ Lee, J. (2020). Mental health effects of school closures during COVID-19. *The Lancet. Child & Adolescent Health*, 4(6), 421.

⁵⁶ Young Minds: Coronavirus: Impact on Young People with Mental Health Needs, published March 2020: https://youngminds.org.uk/media/3708/coronavirus-report_march2020.pdf

5.7 Disadvantage and Inequality

Many educational providers have presented social equality arguments as reasons for supporting the 1 June date to increase pupils attending school. The head of the Oasis multi-academy trust, who run 52 academies, said '*opposition to reopening fails to recognise the harm to disadvantaged children from missing school*'⁵⁷. The Chief Education Officer for the Church of England, who are responsible for the education of 1 million children across the country, said '*we are particularly concerned about the impact on children from the most disadvantaged families and the potential this has for a widening in the attainment gap.*'⁵⁸ This sentiment was also expressed by the Childrens Commissioner.⁵⁹

Current data collected from parents and teachers, reported by the Sutton Trust and the Institute for Fiscal Studies, point to a potential widening of the attainment gap due to inequality. The Sutton Trust used polling data from a variety of sources, including TeacherTap (a feedback app for teachers). Response rates varied between 3,000 and 9,000 respondents, depending on the questions.

Much of the data included in the Sutton Trust report were collected in the first few weeks of school closure. However, the Institution for Fiscal Studies conducted a survey of 4,000 parents in England more recently, between the 29 April and the 12 May (see Table 3).

Both studies conclude that school closures will widen the inequality gap in academic attainment⁶⁰, citing differences in access to resources, amount of time spent on home learning, level of confidence from parents in their ability to direct learning, and the quality and amount of work submitted (see table below for percentage differences based on socioeconomic status). **Although this disproportionately disadvantages children from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds, it is clear *all* pupils are receiving less home learning than they would in school, with only 23% of all children taking part in daily online lessons at the beginning of school closures.**

⁵⁷ Quote from Steve Chalk, founder of the Oasis Charitable Trust, 'Coronavirus: 'Stop squabbling' demand over opening schools', BBC, May 16, 2020: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-52685220>

⁵⁸ Church of England statement 'Supporting schools to reopen at the right time', published on May 18, 2020: <https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/news/supporting-schools-reopen-right-time>

⁵⁹ Children's Commissioner website 'Tackling the disadvantage gap during the Covid-19 crisis' published April 22, 2020: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/tackling-the-disadvantage-gap-during-the-covid-19-crisis/>

⁶⁰ Cullinane, C. & Montacute, R., (2020, April) *COVID-19 and Social Mobility Impact Brief #1: School Shutdown*. Sutton Trust: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/tackling-the-disadvantage-gap-during-the-covid-19-crisis/>

Andrew, A., Cattan, S., Costa-Dias, M., Farquharson, C., Kraftman, L., Krutikova, S., Phimister, A., & Sevilla, A. (2020, May). *Learning during the lockdown: real-time data on children's experiences during home learning*. IFS Briefing Note BN288. <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/BN288-Learning-during-the-lockdown-1.pdf>

Table 3: data on provision of home schooling support by school category

	Independent schools	Most advantaged state schools	Least advantaged state schools
Percentage of students accessing online classrooms everyday	54*	30	16
Percentage of teachers who reported that more than a third of their students would not have adequate access to an electronic device		2	15
Percentage of teachers who report that more than a third of their students would not have adequate internet access			12
Percentage of teachers who report they are receiving more than three quarters of work set back	50	27	8
Percentage of teachers who report that work their students submit is of a much lower quality than normal		6	15
	Postgraduate	Undergraduate	A Levels/GCSE
Percentage of parents who reported feeling confident in directing their child's learning split by parental level of education.	75	60	>50
		Middle-class	Working-class
Percentage of parents that reported that their child(ren) spending more than 4 hours per day on home learning split by economic status.		44	33

*Average across primary and secondary, state school data was not separated by school level. Percentages based on the Sutton Trust report 'COVID-19 and Social Mobility Impact Brief #1: School Shutdown'

5.9 Hours spent on learning activities

The estimated additional time spent on educational activities in better-off households as compared to more deprived ones was 1.25 hours per day. The Institute for Fiscal Studies suggests this additional time would amount to an extra week of learning by the 1 June, and an additional 3 weeks of learning by the beginning of September. Whilst this is not an insignificant amount of time, it could quite reasonably be made up over the following academic years (especially for students in reception and Year 1) without resorting to unsafe reopening policies.

A number of suggestions were made to compensate for this loss, including catch-up sessions during the summer holidays or at the beginning of the next school year. When asked by the Sutton Trust what would reduce the inequalities faced by children in this situation, teachers indicated that the three most important factors considered were **providing additional food, sending stationery to families and government funding for laptops**. Less than a third of teachers felt that a staggered return to school would be the most beneficial approach.

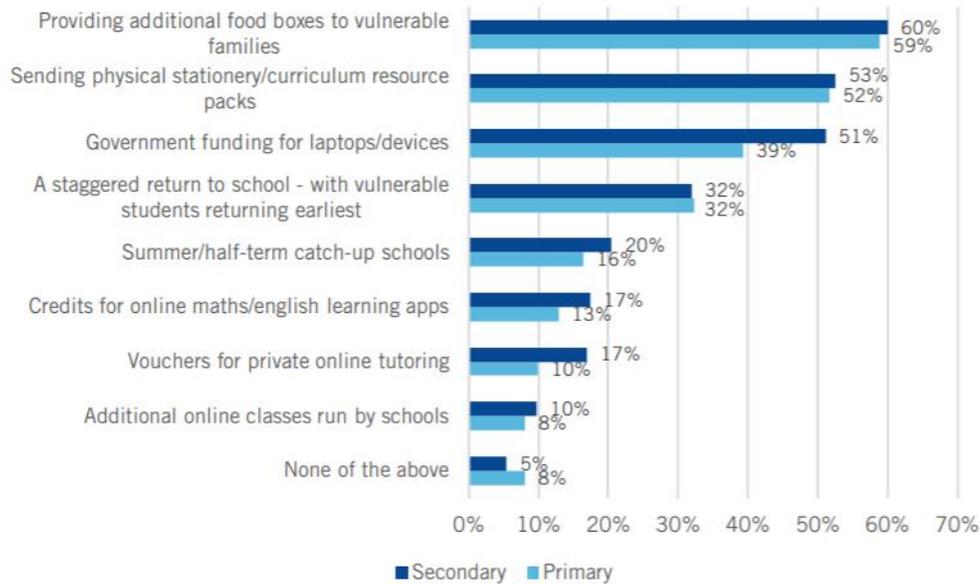


Figure 1: Teacher support for interventions for vulnerable pupils to stop them from falling behind in their schoolwork (up to three chosen), by phase of education. Figure taken from the Sutton Trust’s report ‘COVID-19 and Social Mobility Impact Brief #1: School Shutdown’ p. 10.

5.10 Regional Disparities

Although educational achievement gaps due to socioeconomic factors exist across all local authorities in England, it is important to note that the gap is wider in rural and coastal towns⁶¹ where the impact of the virus may be lower.

According to the recently published ONS data, the London Borough of Newham has the highest mortality rate per 100,000 people in the country⁶². However, according to The Education Policy Institute⁶³, by the end of primary school, the gap in achievement between the most and least well-off children in Newham is ordinarily less than a single month of extra tuition.

This can be contrasted with Hartlepool, which according to the same ONS data has one of the lowest mortality rates from COVID-19 in the country; but has a nearly eight-month achievement gap between the most and least well-off children by the end of primary school. This increases to a 23-month gap by the end of secondary school.

It may be important to look at both inequality in education, socioeconomic status and mortality and infection rates linked to the pandemic from a local level in order to determine where the risk of reopening

⁶¹ Article based on DfE data.

‘Poorer pupils in coastal areas end up three grades behind at GCSE’, Schoolsweek, published Jun 14, 2019: <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/disadvantaged-pupils-rural-areas-worse-cities/>

⁶² ONS statistical bulletin

Campbell, A., & Caul, S. (2020, April). Deaths involving COVID-19, England and Wales: deaths occurring in March 2020. ONS.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsinvolvingcovid19englandandwales/deathsoccurringinmarch2020>

⁶³ Education Policy Institute Online Disadvantage Gap data: <https://epi.org.uk/education-gap-data/>

is low in comparison to the risk of infection, particularly in areas where educational inequality gaps are historically lower as well.

5.11 Family Support

The attainment gap is not uniformly felt across the nation. A number of factors are attributed to explaining the attainment gap; however, the school environment is thought **not** to be the most important. An extract from the British Psychological Society's publication 'The Psychologist'⁶⁴ follows.

'In fact, it has been consistently shown that there is a strong negative correlation between most measures of social disadvantage and school achievement, with the effects of disadvantage being cumulative. In spite of extra resources for schools in areas of high need, findings have generally shown that family circumstances, parental interest in and attitude to education, accounted for significantly more of the variation in children's school achievement than school factors (Mortimore & Whitty, 2000). Therefore encouraging attendance without changing some of the other characteristics of social disadvantage may not result in significantly improved attainment.'

Under the current policy, vulnerable children are permitted to attend school, but only 5% of those are currently in attendance⁶⁵. The previously mentioned parental survey published by the Institute for Fiscal Studies reports that despite 60% of parents saying that they struggle with home learning, as of 12 May less than half of all parents said they would be happy to send their child back to school. Lower income parents were also less willing for their child to attend school. Not only is the attainment gap not best ameliorated through school attendance in and of itself, but as the government policy does not mandate attendance from 1 June a high number of children, especially from low socioeconomic groups, may not attend anyway.

⁶⁴ Article retrieved on 21/05/2020 'Raising school attendance', the Psychologist, published June 2010: <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-23/edition-6/raising-school-attendance>

⁶⁵ Coronavirus (COVID-19) attendance in educational and early years settings in England- summary of returns to 17 April 2020, Department of Education, April 2020: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/883173/COVID-19_attendance_in_education_settings_170420.pdf

6. Questions

5.1 Fundamental Science

1. How quickly and through what mechanisms will the government reassess its advice in light of any new research about the transmission and susceptibility within young populations, given that this is fast-evolving?
2. What is the government's estimation of how much the R value will increase once schools are opened under the proposed scenario, given it was not one modelled by the SAGE?
3. Can the government explain why none of the models reviewed by the SAGE considered the exact scenario being undertaken for lockdown lifting?
4. What consideration of asymptomatic carriers has been made in these models, and how does this parameterisation vary between teachers and pupils?
5. Has the government considered localised policy implementation based upon local R value and additional demographic and educational risk factors?
6. If transmissibility is indeed lower in children, what evidence has the government found to decide at what age the transmissibility matches those of adults (and does this occur in secondary school or sixth form)?

5.2 Testing, Tracking and Tracing

1. What steps will be taken to isolate outbreaks in schools, and how quickly will these be taken?
2. What is the likelihood that an outbreak can be contained to within a specific classroom or group, given the time lag between an outbreak occurring and being detected?
3. Which body will be given authority for the re-closing of school should a local outbreak occur, either within the school or the surrounding community?
4. How will the testing guidelines be updated (if at all) to reflect the high-risk nature of the teaching profession?
5. How will contact tracing be carried out in a school environment, given that children do not routinely carry mobile phones in classrooms?
6. What guidelines are in place for the tracking of contacts in a school environment, given that there are some common areas which multiple groups of students must visit in a given day (e.g. dining halls, front doors, at which widespread interactions will occur)?

5.3 Pupil Safety and Wellbeing

1. How will the government ensure that there are sufficient resources to deal with the regular and thorough sterilisation of common spaces?
2. How did the government balance the contributing factors (listed in Sec. 1) to arrive at its conclusions about which pupils would return first?
3. What resources will schools be given to support the mental health of returning students, especially in relation to potential bereavement?

4. How will vulnerable students, who do not return to school, be kept up to date with teaching and eventually re-integrated into class?
5. What measures are in place to assist the most disadvantaged pupils (who also tend to have higher levels of obesity) with staying active at school, whilst socially distanced?

5.4 Staff Safety

1. What further advice will be given to staff members, (and indeed students) who are part of an at-risk group before reopening occurs?
2. What advice will be given to staff to assist in dealing with the non-compliance of pupils with social distancing (either accidental or deliberate)?
3. Has consideration been given to the increased risk to women, who make up the vast majority of the workforce that will be affected in this first phase of school return (and how will this be offset against the fact that men are more susceptible to severe COVID-19)?
4. What support and extra advice will be given to staff for dealing with situations which usually require more than one staff member or adult in close contact? (e.g. a medical emergency, or significant behavioural issue)

7. ANNEX

7.1 International Policies on School Opening

We are grateful to the team at the Cumming School of Medicine at the University of Calgary for the provision of this highly detailed information. It has been adapted from their briefing and does not contain original research from Scientists for Labour.

European countries

The evidence from across Europe on whether reopening schools is leading to increases in virus prevalence is unclear.

- EU education ministers were told via video conference on Monday “There has been no significant increase in coronavirus infections after schools in 22 EU countries were reopened”, with Croatia’s minister telling reporters in Brussels most of the schools had only been open for a fortnight and stating “we haven’t heard anything negative about the reopening of schools”, whilst also saying it’s “probably too early to have final confusions about that”.
- Seventeen EU countries have allowed children to return to kindergarten, primary schools and the last years of secondary schools. However, in such countries, there was very close cooperation with health ministries, epidemiological services, teachers and parents and class sizes were much smaller.
- In twenty countries they have allowed children to take exams in alternative ways.
- In France however, after one week, there was closure of about 70 schools where new COVID-19 cases were found and additionally any schools with COVID-19 cases were to be closed immediately, it has also allowed parents to keep children at home if they wish to.
- However, any conclusions from the results that have been seen, should be treated with caution, especially due to the incubation period being up to 14 days.

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/05/18/no-coronavirus-spike-found-re-opening-schools-22-eu-countries/>

New Zealand

- As of Monday 18 May (correct to 16:00, 21/05), *“all schools and early learning services can open on-site under Alert Level 2.”*
- Under Alert Level 2, it states *“On the advice of public health officials, any educational facilities connected to a confirmed or probable case of COVID-19 must close on an individual or group basis to allow contact tracing, and then potentially for a further 14 days.”*
- It also stresses the importance of *“ability to contact trace will be a priority at Alert Level 2.”*

<http://www.education.govt.nz/covid-19/>

<https://covid19.govt.nz/alert-system/alert-level-2/>

Norway

- All primary and secondary schools have opened from the 11th May
 - Made clear that students that they shall belong to the same assigned groups as much as possible and what distance requirements are expected of them where it is not possible to have fixed groups.
 - If not all students can be at school at the same time, the school shall ensure that every student at all year levels receives regular and weekly offers of tuition at school and home tuition will be given in addition to activities at school, if it is necessary for ensuring that the students as a whole receive the education they are expected to have.
 - Pupils of years 1 to 4 shall (as much as possible) receive a full-time offer of tuition at a school and the school shall provide services to pupils whose parents have been categorised as a key worker and/or who have special needs.

Singapore

- There will be a phased reopening of preschools and early intervention centres as well as older year groups, starting to reopen from 2nd June 2020.
- “COVID-Safe ABCs” is a measure which individuals involved with Preschools and Early Intervention (EI) centres are instructed to adhere to safe management measures referred to as “COVID-Safe ABCs”:
 - **Access-** Restricting entry of individuals who may pose a higher risk of transmission
 - Measures include: restricting entry of visitors and strict temperature/health checks for all staff and children multiple times a day
 - **Behaviours-** Instilling good practice in terms of habits adopt COVID-Safe behaviours and norms
 - Measures include: Ensuring individuals aged 2 years and older wearing masks, increased handwashing and cleaning and disinfection of premises and equipment
 - **Classrooms-** To restrict interaction between children and staff from different classes as well as reducing the risk of transmission across classes
 - Measures include: Staggering drop-off and pick-up, staggering use of common areas and facilities and suspending cross-class activities for children and staff

Canada

Education is a matter devolved in Canada to the provinces. Two (of nine) are detailed here, to illustrate the potential variation in sub-national strategies which can be supported if needed through sound management.

Quebec

- Gives safety measures for workers and children in elementary schools and daycare services during COVID-19
 - <https://www.quebec.ca/en/education/preschool-elementary-and-secondary-schools/etablisements-scolaires-prescolaires-primaires-et-secondaires-dans-le->

[contexte-de-la-covid-19/safety-measures-for-workers-and-children-in-elementary-schools-and-daycare-services-during-covid-19/](#)

- Return to day-care is option for parents
- Steps being taken by services include adoption of safe behaviours and habits, measures to ensure hygiene and individuals needing to self-isolate who have symptoms of COVID-19

British Columbia

- The current plan is such that the date of opening is set to the 1st June, where all students would return to school to some degree, which is optional return for parents of students.
- British Columbia Education restart plan putting steps in place to prepare students and staff for return to full-time classes, from September (if safe to do so):
 - <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/administration/kindergarten-to-grade-12/safe-caring-orderly/k-12-education-restart-plan.pdf>