

# Education Secretary sets out school contingency plans for England

With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement regarding our plans for bringing children back to school this academic term.

Dealing with this pandemic has always been an exercise in managing risk. Throughout, we have been adamant that the education of children is an absolute priority, and that keeping schools open is uppermost in our plans.

The magnificent efforts of all the leaders, teachers and staff in all of our schools, colleges have ensured that settings are as safe and COVID-19 secure as possible but we must always act swiftly when circumstances change. The evidence about the new Covid variant and rising infection rates have required some immediate adjustment to our plans for the new term.

This is of course a rapidly shifting situation but some things remain constant: we continue to act to preserve lives and the NHS and we continue to protect education by putting children first. Above all our response is proportionate to the risk at hand and makes every use of the contingency framework that we put in place earlier this year.

The latest study we have from Public Health England is that Covid infections among children are triggered by changes in the community rate.

The study also says that the wider impact of school closures on children's development would be significant. I am quite clear that we must continue to do all we can to keep children in school.

Taking all these factors into account means we have had to make a number of changes for the new term in order to help with breaking chains of transmission and to assist with keeping our all of our children and all of our education settings as safe as we can.

The fact that we have managed to do this so successfully throughout the entire pandemic is due to the incredible dedication of all our teachers, leaders and support staff and I know that the House will join me once more in thanking them for everything they continue to do to keep children learning as safely as possible.

Accordingly, we will be opening the majority of primary schools, as planned, on Monday 4th January.

We know how vitally important it is for younger children to be in school for their education, well-being and wider development. In a small number of areas, where the infection rates are highest, we will implement our existing contingency framework such that only vulnerable children and children of critical workers will attend face to face. We will publish this list of areas today on the gov.uk website.

I would like to emphasise that this is being used only as a last resort – this is not all tier 4 areas – and that the overwhelming majority of primary schools will open as planned on Monday. The areas will also be reviewed regularly so that schools can reopen at the very earliest moment.

Ongoing testing for primary school staff will follow later in January, and we will be working to establish an ambitious testing programme helping to break chains of transmission and reducing the need for self-isolation where students and staff test negative for the virus.

We have already announced our intention for a staggered return to education this term for secondary-age pupils and those in colleges.

Because the Covid infection rate is particularly high among this age group, we are going to allow more time so that every school and college is able to fully roll out mass testing of all pupils and students. I would like to thank school leaders and staff for all their ongoing work in preparing for this.

This kind of mass testing will help protect not just children and young people, it will benefit everyone in the community because it will break the chains of transmission that are making infection rates shoot up. This in turn will make it safer for more children to physically return to school.

All pupils in exam years are to return during the week beginning the 11th January, with all secondary schools and college students returning full time on the 18th January.

During the first week of term – on or after the 4th of January – secondary schools and colleges will prepare to test as many staff and students as possible, and will only be open to vulnerable children or the children of key workers.

The 1,500 military personnel committed to supporting schools and colleges will remain on task, providing virtual training and advice on establishing the testing process, with teams on standby to provide in-person support if required by schools. Testing will then begin the following week in earnest, with those who are in exam years at the head of the queue. This is in preparation for the full return of all year groups on the 18th of January in most areas.

To allow this focus on establishing testing, throughout the first week of term, exam year groups will continue to have lessons remotely in line with what they would receive in class, and only vulnerable children and children of critical workers will have face-to-face teaching.

As with primary schools, we will be applying our existing contingency framework for education in areas of the country with very high rates of Covid infection or transmission of the virus. This will require secondary schools and colleges to offer face-to-face education to only exam years, vulnerable children and the children of critical workers, with remote education being given to all other students if they are in one of those contingency frame areas.

We are also asking universities to reduce the number of students who return to campus at the start of January, prioritising student who require practical learning to gain their professional qualifications. All university students should be offered two rapid tests when they return in order to reduce the chance of spreading Covid. To support remote education and online learning during this period, the government expects to deliver more than 50,000 devices to schools across the country on 4 January alone, and over 100,000 altogether during the first week of term. This is in addition to the 560,000 devices we have already delivered as we continue aiming for a target of a total of one million devices to be distributed for children who need them the most. This programme is now being extended to include students aged 16-19 in colleges and schools.

So often Mr Speaker we have had to close things down to try and beat this awful disease but with schools our best line of attack is to keep them open using the mass-testing tools that we now have available so that we can ensure all children benefit from a first class education. As we continue to hear more encouraging news about the vaccine roll out, I am more determined than ever that children will not have to pay the price for beating Covid.

Mr Speaker I have spoken many times of my determination that we cannot let Covid damage the life chances of an entire year of children and students. With these plans which allow for rapid testing and a controlled return to schools, I am confident that we can minimise the latest health risks posed by the virus and I commend this statement to the House.