

Pupils start returning to schools in England

Hundreds of thousands of children and young people across England will reunite with their teachers and friends as schools and colleges start to open their gates from today (Tuesday 1 September).

After months of hard work and dedication from school staff across the country to implement protective measures first set out in July, pupils will begin to be welcomed back into classrooms for the autumn term.

Pupils will return to school environments with a 'system of controls' in place to keep all pupils, teachers and staff safe by minimising direct contacts and maintaining social distancing wherever possible.

The new school term follows the unanimous backing for a full return from the Chief Medical Officers across the four nations of the UK in their recent consensus statement, highlighting that the health risk posed by Covid-19 to children is extremely low and noting the significant risk to young people's wellbeing if they are not back in school. A British Medical Journal study also said that the risk of severe illness due to Covid for children was 'vanishingly small'.

Last week the National Association of Head Teachers published survey findings that highlighted 97 per cent of schools plan to welcome all pupils full-time from the start of the autumn term and will have the range of recommended safety measures in place. The remaining 3 per cent have outlined that they will phase students back or using transition periods to reopen more widely.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

For many, today marks the first day of a new school year, with thousands of children set to walk through their school gates again as schools across the country begin to reopen for full-time education for all pupils.

I do not underestimate how challenging the last few months have been but I do know how important it is for children to be back in school, not only for their education but for their development and wellbeing too.

But it is down to the sheer hard work of so many teachers and school staff that from today pupils will be able to learn in their classrooms together again. It has not been easy for parents nor schools, but we could not have got to this point without your support and I cannot say thank you enough for this.

Today's return for pupils follows the reopening of schools in Leicestershire

last week, with the Prime Minister visiting to see first-hand the practical steps being taken to ensure the risk of transmission is reduced.

The Education Secretary and Schools Minister have both been visiting schools ahead of the new term and have praised some of the innovative ways schools will be looking after children including the use of cleaning stations, and staggered breaks, keeping pupils in 'bubbles', social distancing and safety on transport.

School term start dates will vary across the country, with approximately 40 per cent schools expected to start term today, and bringing teachers and pupils back to school over the coming days.

It remains the Government's priority to continue to support schools, nurseries and colleges through the next few months, continually guided by the best possible science and medical advice.

Consistent with the latest Public Health England advice, strict hygiene and cleaning protocols will be in place along with a one-off PPE supply boost being distributed to schools for use in the small number of instances where it is necessary.

All children will stay in groups or bubbles to reduce the risk of spreading infection, and older children in particular will be expected to follow social distancing guidelines. Face coverings should also be worn in communal areas in secondary schools in any areas with local lockdowns in place.

As the shielding advice for all adults and children was paused on 1 August, even the small number of pupils who remain on the shielded patient list can also return to school, as can those who have family members who were shielding.

Pupils are encouraged to walk, cycle or scoot to school but the Government is also providing an additional £40 million to local authorities to increase home to school transport and ease pressure on public transport.