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8th June 2020

Dear Parent/Carer & School Staff

Opening of County Durham schools to more children

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for all that you are doing at this challenging time. I realise that many parents / carers are thinking carefully about whether your child/children return to their childcare setting or school. For many this is a difficult decision and we want to reassure you that we understand how difficult this is.

Since the start of the pandemic, our schools across County Durham have done an excellent job with schools remaining open where possible throughout lockdown to support vulnerable children and the children of key workers. I would like to express my sincere thanks and appreciation to all school staff.

Sadly, in County Durham we have had over 500 deaths since the start of the pandemic. While these have all been in our older residents it is still incredibly sad, and you and your family may have been personally affected.

County Durham schools are taking a cautious and measured approach to plans for welcoming larger numbers of children back to school and our priority is to make sure children and staff are as safe as possible at all times.

The decision to re-open a school, or to increase pupil numbers is based on the risk assessment each school undertakes. We are working closely with schools to identify the unique risks for each school, and how each school will arrange things so that these risks are minimised as far as possible. Schools will be supported to welcome children back as soon as is safe should their parents wish to do so.

Some of the factors that our schools are having to consider carefully are:

- Social distancing, outside school as well as inside, including on transport
- Space issues inside and outside buildings, such as sizes of classrooms, corridors, toilet arrangements and so on

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- How to ensure that regular cleaning takes place throughout the school day
- How to ensure lunchtime arrangements mean children and staff are safe and socially distancing
- Staff availability
- Confidence of staff and community that it is safe for more children to return to school

Along with schools, we all have our part to play in keeping infection rates as low as possible and to slow the transmission of the virus from person to person. That is why we ask that everyone to follow the current national guidance as it will help protect you and your family.

- Do not gather outdoors in groups of more than six people with people you do not live with
- Do not visit friends or family inside their home or any other indoor place
- Do not stay away from your own home overnight, except for in a limited set of circumstances, such as for work purposes

From the beginning of the pandemic we have been working closely with Public Health England for any queries about COVID-19 cases in County Durham and we will continue to work with them as Test and Trace is implemented. This will allow us to take quick actions to control and reduce the spread of the infection in our schools and communities.

Anyone developing symptoms of coronavirus can be tested to find out if they have the virus. If they receive a positive test result, they will be contacted by the test and trace team and we can help trace recent close contacts and if necessary, notify them that they must self-isolate to help stop the spread of the virus.

Testing for anyone *with symptoms* can be accessed at:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-getting-tested> or by ringing 119.

If a child is unwell with suspected covid-19, particularly those under 5, it is essential that in addition to a covid-test they also access appropriate healthcare and clinical assessment. This can be through ringing 111, calling your GP or going to hospital if required.

It is also really important that children and young people still have access healthcare when they need it, this includes having routine immunisations. If your child is ill and needs help, please seek help whether this is through your GP, NHS 111, the walk in centre, specialist services or the Emergency Department.

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As a parent /carer or staff member, I understand that you may have very real concerns and worries about children returning to school. Supporting the mental health and wellbeing of parent / carers, children and teachers is extremely important as we adapt to the change. Information, advice and support is available on health and wellbeing and other important issues relating to Coronavirus on our local website <http://www.durham.gov.uk/coronavirus>.

The government have said clearly that parents and carers will not be fined if they choose not to send their children to school at this time.

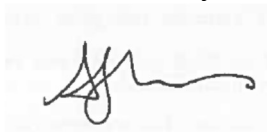
In making your decision about whether to send your child back to school, it is important for you to have as much clear information as possible. Over recent weeks you will have seen lots of information shared in the media about the safety and risks of children returning to school. We know across the world that there is a great deal of research taking place to better understand Covid-19, but conclusions that are being drawn at this early stage should be treated with a level of caution. However, what we do know is that the infection rate in County Durham is now reducing.

I will never be able to guarantee that there is no risk, but by working constructively and collaboratively with parents and teachers, I believe that we can do this as safely as possible that minimises the risk whilst ensuring that children and young people begin to benefit once more from education, learning and quality childcare.

The message to reduce the risk of COVID-19 remains the same and would like to take this opportunity to remind everyone that and it is really important that you continue to take proactive measures including hand washing with soap and hot water for a minimum of 20 seconds, use 'catch it, bin it, kill it' when sneezing and coughing and maintaining social distancing whenever possible.

I hope you find this letter helpful in explaining the current situation with County Durham schools. Individual schools will continue to be in touch with their parents and carers to confirm arrangements.

Yours sincerely,



Amanda Healy, FFPH
Director of Public Health
Chair of North East DPH Network

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