

4th June 2020

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am writing as chair of 'Leeds Keep Our NHS Public' with regard to schools taking in further pupils following the relaxing of lockdown at the start of this week.

While recognising that being at school is extremely important for children's development and wellbeing, KONP nationally (<https://keepournhspublic.com/>) has taken the view that now is not the time for some of those children who have been at home to return to the classroom. We fully endorse the five tests put forward by the National Education Union, and agree with the conclusions as set out in the review on schools by the Independent SAGE committee (<https://www.independentsage.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Advisory-note-for-the-Independent-SAGE-school-report.pdf>).

Our concern is not so much that children will become unwell in school, although without adequate preparation for social distancing and hygiene measures put in place, this remains a risk. It is rather that asymptomatic infected children will share the virus and schools will act as a multiplier posing a threat to staff (particularly those from BAME backgrounds or with additional risk factors), vulnerable pupils, other family members and the local neighbourhood. For example, as care homes have become reservoirs for the virus, we are now seeing spread of infection back into the community.

Whereas all schools should be carrying out risk assessments with regard to the school, staff, pupils, parents and family environment, there are two hugely important criteria that need to be met before opening up to more pupils. The first is a low level of infection in the local community, and the second, a 'test, track and trace system' that is not only up and running but also showing itself to be working. Currently England is still seeing over 5,000 new cases of coronavirus each day (Office for National Statistics), and yesterday there were 359 deaths, more than the total number in all EU states combined on the same day. The Association of Directors of Public Health has said that new rules allowing up to 6 people to meet were "not supported by science". Dido Harding (in charge of contact tracing nationally) has said track and trace will not be running properly until the end of June (and many consider this to be an optimistic assessment). In addition, Anne Longfield, the Children's Commissioner, has said that before schools reopen there should be rigorous testing of teachers, children and families. This too is not the case at present.

In fact local knowledge of Covid-19 prevalence and incidence and discussion in conjunction with the Leeds Director of Public Health will also be crucial in making decisions about school intakes in Leeds. It is positive that the City Council has allowed schools some flexibility and it is the view of Leeds KONP that robust 'test, track, trace and support' structures must be in place and working well, together with easy access to testing, and completed risk assessments before a return to school can be considered safe. Clearly teachers, other staff and parents also have a key role to play in terms of deciding when it is appropriate for children to go back.

I hope that all faith schools will recognise the importance of only expanding pupil intake when to do so would be safe for the wider community.