

22 May 2020

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Dear Parents and Carers

Opening of Newcastle schools to more children after half-term

On Sunday 10 May the Prime Minister announced his ambition that more children would be able to return to schools from 1 June.

As you will know, schools in Newcastle have been open throughout lockdown to support vulnerable children and the children of key workers. Over 90% of Newcastle schools supported these children during the Easter holiday, compared to around 60% nationally.

The Prime Minister is due to speak about the government's 'five tests' next week. These five tests are

1. Making sure the NHS can cope
2. A sustained and consistent fall in the daily death rate from coronavirus
3. Rate of infection decreasing to manageable levels
4. Ensuring supply of tests and PPE can meet future demand
5. Being confident that any adjustments will not risk a second peak of infections that would overwhelm the NHS.

If these five tests are met then our primary, first and middle schools are being asked to admit children in nursery, reception, Year 1 and Year 6 from Monday 1 June.

For older students in Year 10 and Year 12, our schools are being asked to continue work with their students with a mixture of home learning and some face-to-face contact in small groups.

For children and young people in our special schools, schools are being asked to manage a phased return for more children where their individual risk assessment says this is the right thing to do.

Newcastle schools are taking a **cautious** and **measured approach** to plans for welcoming larger numbers of children back after half-term.

The Council is working closely with schools, unions and external partners such as Nexus on the risk assessments each school must produce. These risk assessments will say what the unique risks are for each school, and how each school will arrange things so that these risks are minimised as far as possible.

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

- social distancing must be maintained, 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
- 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.

As a parent or carer, we understand that you may have very real concerns about your child returning to school. 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 next half term, we believe it is important for you to have as much clear information as possible. Much of the scientific evidence about the impact of large groups of children returning to schools on the infection rate, the so-called R, is not clear at present. Understandably, many of you, many of our school staff and many of our children are a bit worried about this. We are working hard with our Public Health team here in the Council to be able to present to you the latest scientific information. We will do this in a way that is clear and we will update this information regularly.

We also know that you will want to understand how your child's experience of school will be different to the time before the lockdown started in March. Your child may not have the same teacher or have the support from staff that they are used to. They may also not be taught alongside all of their friends that they are used to. The school day may also look very different in layout to adhere to social distancing, with different start and finish times.

Whilst schools have been asked to plan for more children coming back on 1 June, we must be clear with you that we do not expect this will be possible for Newcastle schools. This is because our first priority is to ensure that schools have the time to plan and get organised in such a way that children and staff are as safe as they can be when they come back to school. It is likely that some schools will be ready to welcome some groups of children from Monday 8 June.

We hope that you will understand and support our **safety first, cautious** approach to this complicated situation. Our message is clear – if schools decide they are unable to reopen to additional pupils, we will support them.

We hope you find this letter helpful in explaining the current situation with Newcastle schools as we head into the traditional half-term holiday. Individual schools will be in touch with their parents and carers after half-term to confirm arrangements.

Yours sincerely



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Director of Children, Education and Skills



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