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29<sup>th</sup> May 2020

Dear Colleague,

In the light of the Prime Minister's statement on Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> May, outlining his assessment that the five tests set for whether it is possible to begin easing lock-down arrangements have been met, this briefing provides public health advice about the current situation in Cumbria in order to inform schools' decision making about opening to more pupils from 1 June.

### **Public Health impact of ongoing closure**

In reaching decisions on the next steps, it is crucial to be aware that of course there are public health impacts from maintaining school closures. Attending school is a public health benefit, both because of the profound impact of improved education and because of the benefits of social interaction (even while physically distancing). These benefits are particularly important for more vulnerable children, for whom there are many other benefits as well. It is therefore very important that we do ultimately begin to get children back to school in a safe and measured way.

### **Evidence regarding safety and transmission of Covid-19**

In terms of the evidence about safety and transmission of the Covid-19 virus in schools, the following points are particularly important:

- We are confident that the risk to children is much lower than the general population. While it is not zero, it is extremely rare for Covid-19 to cause serious harm to children.
- In terms of the risk to parents, while of course there are individual factors that need to be considered, the majority of parents of primary school children are also in an age group that is not at significantly greater risk of harm from Covid-19.
- A high proportion of teachers are also in a low-risk age group. However individual raised risks need to be considered.
- There is some evidence that children are less likely to spread the virus than adults – however this evidence is not conclusive.
- A range of models have been considered nationally that have looked at the impact on the transmission of the virus of opening schools more widely. It is clear that a full re-opening could have a significant impact, which is why this is not being recommended at this time. However the limited re-opening proposed, with appropriate social distancing in place as far as possible, is felt to be manageable while keeping transmission rates low.

In summary, while it is obvious that any reduction in social/physical distancing has the potential to increase transmission of the virus in the community, the risks associated with the limited re-opening of schools that is being proposed are generally felt to be small, if individual vulnerabilities are taken into account. These risks have to be balanced against the potential harm caused to children, particularly the most vulnerable children, by an extended absence from school.

### **Infection, hospital admission and mortality rates in Cumbria**

Cumbria's rate of infection has appeared to be high throughout this epidemic, particularly in the south of the County. However much of this rate has been associated with a very high rate of staff and family testing by Morecambe Bay Trust from a very early stage. While it is possible that the true rate has been higher than average, the daily rate of infection has been on a downwards trajectory since mid-April.

Many schools have been concerned about whether there are local "hotspots" of virus transmission. Data that help answer this question are both challenging to come by and often difficult to interpret clearly. Particularly at a small area level, the rate of infection is very heavily influenced by random variation. However the latest data from Public Health England indicate that in the week 18-25 May there were no parts of Cumbria that were in the top 5% of areas for infection rates in the Cumbria and Lancashire sub-region.

In terms of hospital admissions and mortality rates, Cumbria has very much been on a downward trend since mid-April. Numbers of people in hospital with Covid-19 are lower now than at any time since the end of March, and critical care bed use remains well within normal levels, with the surge capacity still available. Mortality peaked in mid-April, fell until the beginning of May then rose somewhat to a lower second peak in early May associated with outbreaks in care homes, but has now been falling again for almost three weeks. Overall mortality rates in Cumbria are now approaching normal levels for the time of year.

### **Testing, contact tracing and outbreak control**

Contact tracing is an essential component of being able to release any lock-down measures safely. Nationally the Test and Trace service launched on 28 May. While there is still a degree of uncertainty about how that will impact at a local level in the short term, we have also launched a local testing and contact tracing system that will be operational by Friday and accessible to schools from Monday morning. Further details of how to access this service will be released to schools later. Schools will have access to a central contact point locally where they can notify the public health team about suspected or confirmed cases, instigate testing and contact tracing for staff and pupils as necessary, and access advice and support around infection prevention and control measures. Where necessary, this will also trigger a local outbreak control team to work directly with schools.

### **The school environment**

In beginning to open up further, all schools will have to work in a "Covid Secure" manner, in line with guidance on maintaining good physical distancing. This will clearly be more challenging in some environments than in others. Schools will therefore already be reaching their own judgement on whether they are individually able to be "Covid Secure" through the risk assessment process that I know has been underway already.

### Overall Public Health Advice

It is clearly important, particularly for more vulnerable groups, for children to begin having access to school in the near future. This needs to be done in a gradual manner to reduce the risk of spread of the virus and to enable local outbreak control systems to build up their response capability. However assuming that schools build up their pupil numbers gradually and can maintain physical distancing in a "Covid-Secure" environment, the local systems are now in place to monitor and respond to any individual cases and outbreaks associated with schools.

Given that the national guidance is permissive rather than directive – i.e. schools *may*, not *must*, now begin gradually to bring more pupils back, there is no reason for the Public Health advice in Cumbria to diverge from the national guidance. I have been working closely with John Readman - Executive Director, People (Director of Children's services) and Dan Barton - Assistant Director of Education Skills over the last fortnight to ensure that the local approach is consistent with public health advice, and the three of us will continue to work together in the weeks ahead to support schools with their decision making and practical implementation through what will undoubtedly be some challenging times ahead.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Colin Cox".

Colin Cox  
Director – Public Health