Katherine Cowell

Regional Schools Commissioner, North

Bishopsgate House

Feethams

Darlington

DL1 5QE

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Dear John

Thank you for your letter this morning in which you expressed concern about re-opening primary schools in Cumbria on 4 January.

I want to start by thanking you for the tireless work that Cumbria County Council has done to support schools and communities during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The government has made it a national priority that education and childcare settings should continue to operate as normally as possible during the coronavirus outbreak and local authorities have been critical in helping to support our efforts to ensure that young people remain safe and healthy and are able to continue accessing education.

We are implementing a staggered start for all secondary schools nationally while they establish rapid testing for pupils and staff. This will help minimise the spread of the virus and help deliver the national priority of keeping as many pupils and teachers as possible in school beyond the start of term.

In response to concerning data about the spread of coronavirus we have implemented the [contingency framework](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-contingency-framework-for-education-and-childcare-settings/contingency-framework-education-and-childcare-settings-excluding-universities) for education in some areas of the country requiring primary schools to provide remote learning to all but vulnerable and critical worker children and exam years. At the current time the contingency framework does not apply to Cumbria and schools should continue to prepare to open as planned at the start of term.

The implementation of the contingency framework in some areas and not others has been taken balancing the objective to safeguard children’s education during this national crisis with recognition that in these unprecedented times we need to respond quickly to the evolving public health position. Decisions on which areas are subject to the contingency framework are based on close work with PHE, the NHS, the Joint Biosecurity Centre and across government to monitor the number of new infections, rate of increase, positivity rates, and pressures on the NHS.

Any decision to move an area into the contingency framework will be reviewed regularly and contingency arrangements in individual areas will be in place for the shortest period possible. This means we can keep school closures exceptional and stand by the principle that they should be ‘last to close, and first to open’ when the situation allows it. I have set out information on how areas will be regularly reviewed in an annex.

In light of your letter and the information you have shared we will help convene a meeting of partners early next week as set out in the process described below.

Yours sincerely

Katherine Cowell

Contingency Framework process

Local Authorities can request restrictions on education settings be considered under the contingency framework.  This process will be running this week with decisions taken as early as possible during the week.

To do this, Local Authorities must follow the [contingency framework](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-contingency-framework-for-education-and-childcare-settings/contingency-framework-education-and-childcare-settings-excluding-universities)’s decision making process, as set out when this was published in November.

Local Authorities should work with their Regional Partnership Teams (RPTs) to discuss the latest epidemiological data along with qualitative information. Representatives from DfE should be invited to the RPT meeting.

If the RPT agrees it is appropriate to further consider education restrictions in the area, the decision should be escalated through the Government’s Local Action Committee command structure. This will include engagement with the Department for Health and Social Care, the Chief Medical Officer, Public Health England, NHS Test and Trace and other government departments. The government’s [Contain framework articulates the command structure’s roles and responsibilities in more detail here](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/containing-and-managing-local-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreaks/covid-19-contain-framework-a-guide-for-local-decision-makers).

Educations restrictions will be considered through the weekly cycle of this set of meetings.

At each point, the full range of evidence will be considered in determining the case for additional restrictions in any area. These are complex decisions that must be made according to the best clinical advice, and the criteria set out in the Covid-19 Winter Plan. These are:

* 1. Case detection rates in all age groups;
  2. Case detection rates in the over 60s;
  3. The rate at which cases are rising or falling;
  4. Positivity rate (the number of positive cases detected as a percentage of tests taken); and
  5. Pressure on the NHS.

The DfE’s regional teams will stay in contact with Local Authorities throughout the process. Once finalised, decisions on education restrictions will be communicated immediately in writing along with clear guidance.