

To Somerset Primary Headteachers

3 January 2021

Dear Colleagues

You will have seen press reports of the rapidly changing context for primary schools nationally. Trade Unions and some local authority areas have taken the view that there is a heightened risk from primary schools re-opening and are advocating school closures.

**To be clear there is no current scientific evidence that school transmission between children of the new variant is happening in Primary Schools, the risk remains the transmission between and from adults. The current rates of infection in Somerset do not as yet require this last resort measure.**

You will of course be aware of the harm that school closures, and the other COVID-19 measures are having on our children's futures and the future of Somerset. In addition, there is immediate impact on families when primary schools close.

Clearly, we are keeping the situation under regular review at this time, I would **strongly urge schools to remain open.**

Only in limited selected Tier 4 areas are primary schools delaying their opening following decisions by the DfE and the DHSC. Schools in other rural areas are remaining open in Suffolk, Cambridgeshire, and Norfolk, much closer to the epicentre of the new version of the virus.

Leaving aside the politics and the last-minute communication, Government is rightly trying to avoid school closures where it possibly can. It has the difficult task in consultation with others of balancing the risks to health, the economy and the well-being of children in our communities.

There is of course confusion in the media about what 'closure' actually means, as even in those areas where closure has been agreed, vulnerable and key worker children will be attending school. This means in reality for some schools they will see very little difference.

There is, obviously the potential for schools to encounter pressures on staffing in the coming days, either because of staff sickness or staff refusing to attend their place of work based on the recent advice from trade unions. We will provide detailed advice to local authority schools on the trade union situation as early as possible in the coming week. Should any school have concerns about their ability to opening safely due to reduced staffing, we would urge them to notify their link officer as a priority and we will support them to assess the situation. Where possible, remaining open for key worker and vulnerable children is the priority and full closure should be a last resort.

We fully recognise the anxiety that staff feel in the current context. While the risk for children remains low, adults are subject to greater risk of disease and transmission. Somerset schools have done an excellent job in creating safe environments throughout the pandemic and I have every confidence that they will continue to do so.

However, it is obviously important to re-double efforts to **maintain COVID-secure environments as we are now in Tier 4**, including excellent hygiene practice, social distancing and masks at key times such as pick up and drop off, and small and consistent bubbles. **If there is any further support you need or action you consider appropriate that you would like to consult us on, please contact your link worker.**

This is a challenging time for everyone in education. All the leadership of Somerset County Council are grateful for everything that you do for the children of the County.

Kind regards

Julian Wooster  
Director of Children's Services