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Rt Hon Greg Clark MP
Chair, Science and Technology Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

19th May 2020

Dear Greg,

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss a range of important issues with the Science and Technology Committee and for the Committee's input on these matters. I am writing to provide additional information and some clarifications, and address them in the order that they arose in the session.

PPE

You and Aaron Bell MP asked about what evidence the department has considered on the need for PPE as well as where this evidence is from.

We have worked closely with Public Health England (PHE) and other stakeholders to devise our approach and guidance throughout the department's response to coronavirus (Covid-19). In particular, DfE have engaged with PHE to devise a 'hierarchy of controls' which, when implemented, will create an inherently safer system where the risk of transmission of the infection is substantially reduced. These include measures such as minimising contact with those who are unwell, good hygiene and altering the physical environment to minimise contact. Our published guidance clearly sets out the limited circumstances in which PPE will be required in educational and childcare settings and we worked closely with PHE in finalising that guidance.



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Under 18 deaths from coronavirus

You asked how many coronavirus deaths there had been among under 18s. The most recent data from PHE shows that at 5pm on 12 May, across all settings in England, for those with lab-confirmed Covid-19, there had been 14 deaths among 10-19 year olds, fewer than 5 deaths among 5-9 year olds, and fewer than 5 deaths among under 5s.

Death figures for under 5s and 5-9 year olds are suppressed in line with PHE policy for reporting numbers less than 5 and to reduce the risk of individuals being identified. The published PHE figures can be found here:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/885150/COVID19_Weekly_Report_13_May.pdf

Revision of guidance

I explained that guidance would be reissued. In fact, DfE issued full guidance to the sector on the steps they should put in place to prepare for wider opening on Monday 11 May. As is the case for all our Covid-19 guidance and has been the case since March, this guidance will be updated, and additional clarifications provided when needed or in response to requests from schools and other education settings.

Transmissibility of children and transmission within schools

In response to Carol Monaghan MP's question about transmission in schools, I said schools could "possibly" bring together hundreds of potential vectors of transmission However, I was referring to a hypothetical worst-case scenario, which will be prevented by the approach the Government is taking.



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First, the risk of transmission will be affected by overall cases in the population. The lower the number of cases in the community the less likely it is that any individual person is a vector.

That is why the Government has made clear that schools will only be opened more widely when the five key tests set by Government justify the changes at the time, including that the rate of infection is decreasing.

Second, the Government is taking a cautious approach with a phased return that limits the number of children in education settings and how much they mix with each other, so as to control any potential transmission in schools. As outlined above, the range of protective measures in place will create an inherently safer system where the risk of transmission is substantially reduced.

Exploration of impact of proposed policies

You, as Chair, asked whether the Department for Education had made any assessment of the impact of the proposed policies. I responded that the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) had conducted modelling and that myself and policy colleagues attended the meetings. Policy colleagues in the DfE and I liaised with the SAGE Children's Task and Finish Working Group to ensure that they were able to understand and account for practical issues surrounding education settings when conducting their modelling work on scenarios involving education settings opening to more children. In line with the government's commitment to transparency, the papers detailing the results of modelling school opening scenarios will be published by SAGE in due course.

Modelling of the transmission of the virus was all done by scientific and medical experts feeding into SAGE. PHE and the Chief Medical Officer advised on the protective measures to be implemented in schools.



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Further, because the decision to reopen schools more widely is part of a package of measures in the Government's Recovery Strategy, it is for the Cabinet to consider the full suite of measures across Government.

Yours sincerely,

Osama Rahman

Chief Scientific Adviser