



Professor Chris Whitty
Chief Medical Officer
Department of Health & Social Care
39 Victoria Street
London
SW1H 0EU

Rt. Hon. Robert Halfon MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Sent by email: Professor Chris Whitty:
Rt. Hon. Robert Halfon:
Select Committee Clerk: educom@parliament.uk

CC by email:

22 January 2021

Dear Professor Whitty & Rt. Hon. Robert Halfon

We are writing to express our concern at the evidence that Dr Jenny Harries gave to the Education Committee of the House of Commons on Tuesday 19th January.

In response to this question from the Chair (Q1153), "Chair: Do you have evidence that the new variant is a different means to increase transmission in schools, given you have said in the past that they didn't?" Dr Harries replied, "I think what we should say overall is that schoolchildren definitely can transmit infection in schools. They can transmit it in any environment, but it is not a significant driver as yet, as far as we can see, of largescale community infections. Rather it is the other way round, that if there is a rise in community rates you will see a rise in children as well."

This evidence seems to contradict the Children's Task and Finish Group: update to 4th Nov 2020 paper on children, schools and transmission, 17 December 2020. The group found that,

"Overall, accumulating evidence is consistent with increased transmission occurring amongst school children when schools are open, particularly in children of secondary school age (high confidence): multiple data sources show a reduction in transmission in children following schools closing for half term, and transmission rates increasing again following the post-half term return to school (medium confidence)."

And further on in their report:

"Young people (aged 2 to 16) are much more likely than those aged 17+ to be the first case in their household. In particular, those aged 12 to 16 are nearly 7 times as likely to be the first case in their household, compared to those 17+... The analysis shows that 2 to 16 year-olds are more than twice

as likely to pass on the virus within their household compared to people aged 17+... Children aged 16 or under are less likely to get the virus from someone within their household compared to people aged 17+.”

In response to David Simmonds, who asked (Q1167), “When the likes of the NEU are telling head teachers that schools need to close because teachers are at a particularly marked risk of Covid, can we be confident that they are wrong in rebutting that? Especially in respect of these studies, is there in prospect some wider publication of that data to address the understandable anxieties that some people feel?”

Dr Harries replied, “But I think the really important one for unions is the ONS data and there is a very clear review—and that is done fairly routinely—that at the moment there is no evident increased risk to the teaching profession or educational staff in schools.”

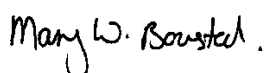
The ONS data that Dr Harries is referring to has only been reported once on 6th November as part of the Coronavirus Infection Survey, “Analysis of the number of school workers, key workers and other professions in England who had COVID-19”. The analysis was amended on 26th November following a complaint to the UK Statistics Authority and the amended version addressed some concerns; however, it did not address the main concern that the period covered ran from 2nd September to 16th October. Since the 16th of October, the rate of infection has risen enormously particularly amongst school age children and no further publication has been made, so we cannot understand why Dr Harries is claiming that routine reporting. If you or Dr Harries has such data available to you, we would be very grateful if you could share it with us.

We have repeatedly asked the Department for Education for data on coronavirus cases, hospitalisations, and deaths amongst school staff. We asked for this information in: -

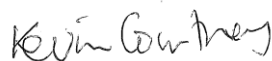
- Our letter to the Secretary of State for Education dated 14 October 2020,
- Our letter to the Minister of State for Schools dated 27 November 2020,
- Our letter to the Secretary of State for Education dated 17 December 2020, and
- Our letter to the Prime Minister dated 28 December 2020.

We were forced to complain to the UK Statistics Authority (by letter dated 23 November 2020) before the Department would release data on staff absences last term. That data raises great concerns with us about the very high rate of absences for staff with confirmed cases of coronavirus. We have still not received any data on the infection rate, hospitalisation, or deaths amongst England’s state school staff, even though the Department must be collecting this information if they are to despatch their duty of care.

Yours sincerely



Mary Boustead
Joint General Secretary



Kevin Courtney
Joint General Secretary