

Written evidence submitted by Mrs Katherine Atkinson

**The Impact of Covid 19 on Education and Children's Services
Call for Evidence
June 2020**

My name is Katherine Atkinson. I am a mother of two secondary school age children (aged 12 and 14) and live with my husband and family in Guildford. My children are in years 7 and 9 at our local, large, comprehensive school.

I work part time in two roles: one as CEO of a small charity (I am currently furloughed from this role) and one as a Non Executive Director of an NHS organisation (a Clinical Commissioning Group). I am a volunteer Trustee of two other local charities.

I am submitting this evidence in a personal capacity as there are two key points that I do not believe are being heard in the current and ongoing debate about children returning to school and the impact of home schooling, particularly on secondary school age children and their families.

I should like to make the following two points to the inquiry.

- 1. Teenagers are not maintaining social distances and pretending otherwise is creating a false barrier to their return to school. Efforts should be made to implement other infection control measures at school rather than expecting teenage children to stay 2m apart for the foreseeable future.**

I should like the Government to hear about the reality of life for secondary school children right now, and the fallacy of requiring social distancing protocols to determine when secondary schools can reopen more fully.

I support the lockdown restrictions and we have adhered to them as a family. My children did not see any of their friends until outdoor 1:1 meetings were allowed. Social contact has increased further with the 6 people rule.

But the government needs to be realistic about the behaviour of teenagers. Unless they are kept at home 24/7 most parents have limitations on the control they have over what their children do when they meet together. We can teach them the values we hold and we can educate them on the rules relating to Covid, and I am sure the vast majority of parents have done this. I live in a relatively wealthy borough where levels of education amongst parents are high and expectations of both behaviour and attainment for their teenagers are too.

But the fact is that teenagers, once allowed out to socialise with their friends, cannot and will not maintain a 2m distance. My children know the rules, and they understand the need for the rules. Yet outdoors, all over Guildford borough, you can see at any time of the day - because teenagers have more free time on their hands right now - small (and sometimes large) gatherings of young people NOT maintaining this distance. I am not blaming the children. I understand completely that they are frustrated, bored, under challenged and

desperate to have their lives back again. But the clear fact is that this horse has well and truly bolted and the plan to return to school needs to reflect this. Teenagers are not socially distancing and they have not been doing so for several weeks. We all need to wake up to this fact, and plan for school return accordingly.

So whilst it is certainly possible for teachers to maintain a distance between themselves and their students, secondary schools are wasting their time constructing elaborate social distancing protocols for student interactions. Maintain handwashing practices, take temperatures and continue with other infection control measures such as deep cleaning, but recognise it is too late to maintain that physical distance, child to child.

2. The negative impact on whole families of long term home schooling is not just felt by the more vulnerable children and families, but by all of us, including through damaged family relationships and parental mental ill health.

A whole generation of secondary children is suffering by being out of school for so long, and this does not just apply to the more vulnerable families. I welcome the focus on protecting vulnerable children, but no one is talking about the impact on family relationships more widely, and right across the socio economic spectrum.

The job of home schooling my nearly 14 year old son who needs the structure of school has all but destroyed our relationship. We seem to be in a constant battle over school work and the use of free time. My children are at an age at which they are too young to be left completely to their own devices to do their work, but too old for me to feel relaxed about them falling a bit behind. Year 9 children do not have much time to make up for lost schooling.

Many weeks of home schooling, through set activities rather than real time face to face lessons, has affected stress levels right across our family and is damaging my mental health as a parent. Many of us do not have the right skills to be effective teachers, myself included. Life in our family right now, frankly, is miserable, with friction between all of us, and it is deteriorating weekly.

So whilst we must of course protect vulnerable children and their families, please don't forget that even middle class families and children are damaged through this period, albeit differently.

I would urge policy makers and teachers to recognise that social distancing is no longer realistic for secondary school children, and to focus on other infection control measures to enable our children to get back to school, full time, as soon as possible before irreparable damage is done not only to their education but to family relationships and mental health right across our society.

Katherine Atkinson

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