

Written evidence submitted by Parents

From : Don't Burst Our Bubble

We represent a group of parents whose two schools had planned, after Gavin Williamson's announcement and within the guidelines released by the Department for Education on 15th June 2020, to have children from additional year groups in school for the last three weeks of term. Our local authority actively prohibited the schools from re opening with 2 days notice.

We have over a hundred signatures from parents in a letter sent to Mr Jeremy Quin MP, over the lessons learnt from this experience and plans for moving forward.

There was a significant lack of contingency planning in regards to the guidance from the DfE, for the re opening of schools following shutdown. The guidance was open to interpretation, and thus had a negative impact on our schools and the community.

Our school communities have been deeply affected by DfE's decision to endorse WSCC's interpretation of its non-statutory guidance on wider school reopening. We include evidence of other local authorities who interpreted the guidance as our headteachers did.

In privileging full-time attendance of Y1 and Y6 over part-time attendance of all year groups, DfE and WSCC have denied children in Y2-Y5 this opportunity, with unknown consequences for their emotional wellbeing. The impact of this decision was compounded by WSCC's late intervention to block reopening just days before the planned return to school. Many children have been confused and upset by their much-anticipated return to school being withdrawn at the last minute. Already overstretched parents have had to manage work commitments made with the understanding that their children would be at school part-time for the last three weeks of term. Parents also feel a sense of outrage on behalf of our children's teachers, whose professionalism and hard work in meticulously preparing for the children's return were undermined by the actions of WSCC and DfE.

Our communities' anger about the derailment of our schools' reopening plans is amplified by the fact that DfE has not blocked many maintained schools and academies around the country from providing part-time provision to all primary year groups without offering full-time provision for Y1 and Y6.

1. The key principle underpinning the opening of schools during the pandemic should be for schools to have face-to-face contact with as many children as is safely possible:

- While provision for vulnerable children and those whose parents are key workers is the top priority, providing **part-time provision for all children should be prioritised over blanket full-time provision for particular year groups.**
- In addition to the academic importance of children having time in school, it is critical for **children's emotional wellbeing** that they have face-to-face contact with their peers and teachers.
- While schools have prioritised supporting children known to be vulnerable during the pandemic, maximising the number of children with whom schools have face-to-face contact will help them to effectively undertake their **safeguarding** functions.

○ The WHO on 12th March 2020, state **evidence is very weak** that national **school closures** have an **effect on a virus** such as COVID-19 because of its high rate of transmissibility, and apparent low clinical effect on children. This same data however also shows that school closures can have profound economic and social consequences. *'Education is one of the strongest predictors of the health and the wealth of a country's future workers, and the impact of long-term school closure on educational outcomes, future earnings, the health of young people and future national productivity has not been quantified.'*²

1. **DfE guidance needs to avoid ambiguity** and statements that could be interpreted in contradictory ways to avoid disagreements between school leaders and LEAs about the intended meaning of guidance.
2. **DfE should work to ensure consistent application of its guidance.** While our children's schools were prevented from reopening to more year groups without offering full-time provision to Y1 and Y6, many maintained schools and academies around the country have done exactly this³.
3. **DfE should empower heads** to make the operational decisions about how best to deliver the government's strategic objectives for schooling during the pandemic.

Local impact on our school communities, within West Sussex County Council.

1. WSCC should set out the strategic principles within which it will interpret DfE guidance during the pandemic:

- WSCC should **publicly acknowledge** its role in interpreting non-statutory DfE guidance on behalf of its schools and set out the strategic principles that guide their interpretation.
- The following principles should form the central tenets of this strategy:
 - i. **Providing as many children as possible with some face-to-face contact time** at school. This is the best way to support children's emotional wellbeing and academic progress, as well as ensure that schools' safeguarding functions are effectively undertaken.
 - ii. Providing **equitable access to school for all year groups** even if this means part-time rather than full-time attendance.
 - iii. Using the most current scientific evidence relating to COVID-19 and children in order to make informed decisions about the risks of children being at school versus the individual and societal costs of keeping them out of the classroom. This should be considered within the context of West Sussex's current COVID-19 infection rate and patterns of transmission.

2. WSCC must fully support school leaders to develop and implement individual plans within the context of WSCC's strategic framework:

- WSCC should use its strategic principles to provide schools with **clear and timely interpretations** of non-statutory DfE guidance, with red lines for schools made explicit⁴.
- School leaders should be given **maximum autonomy** to make operational decisions about how to interpret WSCC's strategic steer on DfE guidance. School leaders are uniquely placed to understand

the individual context of their sites and staffing situation and know how to best meet the needs of their school communities.

- **Senior officers** should personally review and provide quick and definitive decisions on heads' proposals for how their individual schools will enact WSCC's interpretation of DfE guidance.
- Once approval has been given, it is essential that **WSCC publicly supports its own school leaders** and the decisions they have made in partnership with the Council.

⁴ [Essex County Council's guidance \(see below\)](#) is an exemplar of best practice, clearly setting out the LEA's interpretation of DfE guidance with worked examples of how school leaders should approach wider reopening.

- WSCC should play a central role in **facilitating collaboration between schools and sharing examples** of the innovation and creativity demonstrated by some West Sussex school leaders during the pandemic as best practice to which all the county's schools should aspire. WSCC should proactively facilitate best practice sharing and problem solving **sufficiently early in the planning and implementation phases** so that schools can fully benefit from this.

3. WSCC's interpretation of DfE guidance should be consistently implemented by all schools across the county.

- WSCC should **proactively seek to have oversight of the plans all schools are implementing** (prior to those being communicated to parents and implemented) and ensure that its interpretation of DfE guidance is being **consistently adhered to by all schools**. Many other schools in Horsham and West Sussex whose provision contravened WSCC's interpretation of DfE guidelines were not prevented from wider reopening in the way that Kingslea and Heron Way were, creating inequality in children's access to classrooms at a time when it is so critical for their wellbeing.

² *School closure and management practices during coronavirus outbreaks including COVID-19: a rapid systematic review.*

Prof Russel M Viner, Simon J Russell, PhD, Helen Croker, PhD, Jessica Packer MEpi, Joseph Ward, MBBS, Claire Stansfield, PhD, et al. *The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health*, Volume 4, Issue 5, P397-404 May 1, 2020. <https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/home> ³ See for example [Essex County Council's guidance](#) to its schools on wider reopening 16/6/20.

Essex County Council School reopening guidance.

Wider Opening – Guidance for Scaling Up Onsite Provision

Primary Schools

16th June 2020

Context

The DfE have provided school leaders with the flexibility to invite additional pupils back to schools, where they have capacity to do so. It is up to schools to decide which pupils to prioritise, based on their knowledge of their children and communities. It is important to note that there is no expectation on primary schools to welcome back additional children where they do not have capacity to do so.

We are aware that Headteachers will have already been working with their leadership teams, thinking about how they might widen their onsite offer to more children during the last four weeks of term. We hope this document will provide you with some additional information to support your decision making, some key points to consider and enable you to progress with your preparations.

Key points of [DfE Guidance](#):

- Any wider opening is on top of the offer for existing eligible children
 - Reception, years 1 and 6
 - Critical worker and vulnerable children
- The offer for currently eligible children should be full time
- Children should remain in small consistent groups – no larger than 15
- The protective measures must remain in place
- Your risk assessment should be updated and inform any decisions you make about expanding your on-site offer
- Additional funding, staff or classrooms should not be required.

Our Suggested Guidance on Key Areas

All settings and school communities have different demands and complexities and so you remain best placed to make the decisions about your approach to any wider onsite school offer, driven by your risk assessment. The following are our thoughts and suggestions in response to key questions raised by schools when planning to widen their offer:

<p>Part time or full time</p>	<p>In order to safely respond to increased numbers onsite, some schools to date have implemented a part time offer for those prioritised year groups, driven by their risk assessments and capacity.</p> <p>We appreciate that the DfE guidance indicates you should offer reception, years 1 and 6 a full time offer. However, if you want to continue with a part time offer in order to facilitate the return of more children, we are not suggesting that you need to move from a part time to a full time offer at this time. We would encourage you to support as many children as possible to return to school, for some</p>
--------------------------------------	--

	<p>time. If this means you continue with a part time offer, your decision will be guided by your risk assessment.</p> <p>If you are already providing a full time offer for Reception, years 1 and/or 6, we are not suggesting that you reduce this to part time to allow more children on site, or stop the provision for any of the prioritised year groups 3-4 weeks ahead of the end of term. We feel this would be potentially more difficult for schools, children and parents to manage. If you can add to this offer to support as many children as possible to return to school, for some time, then we would encourage you to do so.</p> <p>The onsite offer for vulnerable children and those of critical workers should remain a full time offer.</p>
<p>No capacity to widen the onsite offer</p>	<p>If you are not able to invite more children to return to school, you may be able to consider some face to face meetings for other year groups instead. You could use these to check in on pupils and support transition and re-integration before September.</p> <p>We would encourage you to have some face to face time with as many of your children as possible before the end of term.</p> <p>If your current full time offer for reception, years 1 and/or 6 means you have no capacity to for additional children to return to school at all, you could consider ending the term 5 days early for those year group/s that have had onsite provision. This would potentially allow you to have some face to face time with other year groups during that last 5 days. You must be guided by your risk assessment and ensure protective measures are in place should you choose to implement this.</p> <p>If your current provision is over 4 days e.g. the school being closed for a day for cleaning with staff working from home and PPA time you may be able to think creatively about how to use this 5th day and arrange the enhanced cleaning for another time to invite additional children back alongside the your key worker bubbles which should be offered a full week onsite provision. For example: each Wednesday for the rest of term inviting one group from each additional year, to have some face to face time with their teacher. If this was for half a day there may still be ample cleaning time for those classrooms in use and the</p>

	offer for R, 1 and 6 may not be impacted.
Remote learning	The remote learning offer and welfare checks remain key, and so any decision that you make should take into account the staffing capacity needed to maintain this activity.

Model Examples

Please see below some examples to help inform your planning, with key considerations for each. You could choose to implement one or more of these options, as informed by your risk assessment, staffing levels, building capacity and knowledge of your school community.

<p>All children return for some face to face time before the end of term</p>	<p>This model allows all children to have some time face to face time onsite, should they/their parents wish them to.</p> <p>Key considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Likely that children would get less time on-site with this model, but it would be available for more children • Children could spend some time with their existing teacher and be introduced to their teacher for next year – if appropriate • Protective measures must still be in place (small groups, cleaning etc) • Capacity issues – consider creating capacity by finishing the eligible year group/s 5 days before the end of term to enable pupils in years 2/3/4 and 5 to have some face to face time before the end of term. • Logistically more children accessing the site means more space would be needed
<p>Maximising existing bubbles</p>	<p>This model would enable schools to 'give away' vacant spaces in existing bubbles to children in other year groups.</p> <p>Key considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The parents currently eligible would not be able to change their mind once their space is given away • Space will be limited and it could be on a first come first served basis • Consider adding year 5 children into a year 6 bubble and year 2 children into a year 1 bubble – if appropriate and space allows • Makes use of any 'unallocated' staffing and building

	<p>space</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Combining two smaller bubbles to free up space – however, not to go over 15 in a classroom <p>See guidance on bubbles for more information.</p>
<p>Key transition year groups or year groups with exams next year</p>	<p>This model allows children who will be making a transition next year (e.g. year 2 infant school pupils) and/or those who have SATS next year (year 5s) to have some face to face learning time.</p> <p>Key considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children who are transitioning could potentially spend some time with current and future teachers – if appropriate Space within existing or new bubbles to enable year 5 children to return ahead of exams next year Views of parents whose children do not fall into this category Does not assist some parents with childcare issues Primary and secondary schools could consider whether space is available at the secondary school to have a bubble of children for a period of time – if appropriate and doesn't impact on their own provision. This is a suggestion of the DfE and we are aware this may not be practical to implement with the time remaining this term.
<p>Children of working parents/ siblings to those already accessing provision</p>	<p>This model would provide childcare for those parents struggling to return to work.</p> <p>Key considerations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Purely to support parents to return to work May not have sufficient spaces – so would be on a first come first served basis Limited rationale for some children being able to return over others, may be seen negatively by some parents Could offer siblings spaces within existing bubbles if numbers allow

Disadvantaged children or those struggling with remote learning

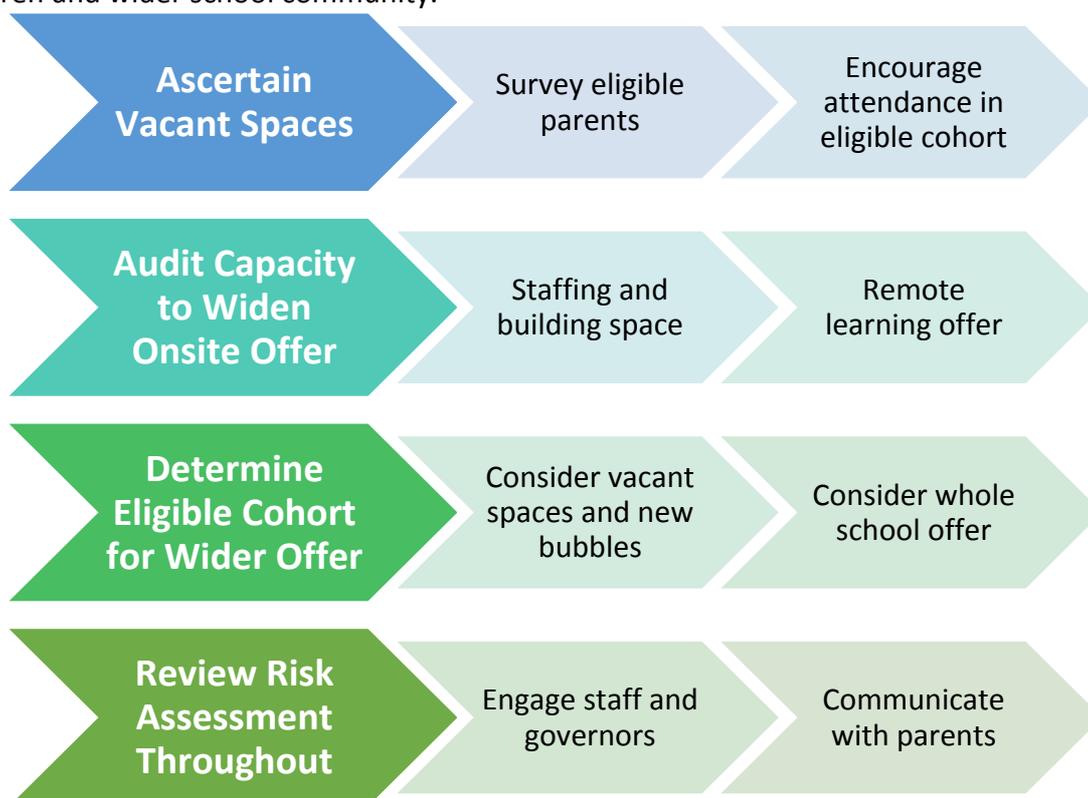
This model would enable those children for whom you have concerns about, but have not yet been able to return to school, to have some face to face time before the end of term.

Key considerations:

- Views of parents not offered provision – will this be seen as fair?
- Does not assist some parents with childcare issues
- Disadvantaged children supported more effectively onsite than remotely.

Planning Process

Your risk assessment remains a fluid document and will guide your decision making as to whether or not you have capacity to widen your onsite offer to any additional children. Which cohorts of children you prioritise will be informed by your knowledge of your children and wider school community.



Communicating with Parents

Whatever decisions you make as a result of your preparations and risk assessment processes, you must communicate clearly with your parent community. Your communication should include:

- The process for parents currently eligible to request a school place and when this needs to be requested by, if you are considering 'giving away' any vacant spaces
- The rationale for any widened offer to new cohorts of children, when it will come in to place and how it will work
- The process for responding to the offer of a school place to new cohorts of children
- All information regarding the protective measures in place and expectations around minimising any risk

You may want to share a copy of your updated risk assessment on your website if you have done so before, but there is no obligation to publish this on top of clear communications to parents.

July 2020