

Date: 1st March 2020

Dear Special School Parent/Carer,

The Government has announced that, in England, pupils will return to face-to-face education in school and further education from the 8th March. This means that from this date, attendance at school will be mandatory once again. However, there will still be some children and young people that are Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) that will continue to stay at home based on medical advice until the shielding restrictions are lifted or reviewed on the 31st March. This is part of the Governments wider [four step plan](#) to ease lockdown restrictions in England.

This will bring an end to the national restrictions on school attendance that have been in place since January. We know that these restrictions have been incredibly tough on everyone, particularly for parents/carers that have been supporting their children to access remote education on top of the other social restrictions that you as a family have had to deal with. We want to thank you for everything that you have done to support your child/children through each phase of the pandemic, and we are hopeful that we can now have a positive transition back into our schools. We wanted to write to you ahead of the return to face-to-face education to ensure you have access to all the information you need, and to provide some reassurance should you have concerns.

How safe is it for children to return to face-to-face education?

Whilst the UK's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) advised in December 2020 that the opening of schools is likely to have an impact on transmission, it also recognised that the Government would also need to take into account the risks to children's mental health, wellbeing, development, educational attainment and health outcomes from school closure. There are no risk-free options available. Whilst the decision to return to face-to-face education is a decision made by our national Government, we would like to tell you about the situation in Wigan and explain why we believe it is safe for our schools to return to face-to-face education from the 8th March.

The rates of COVID-19 in Wigan have reduced significantly from when schools returned after Christmas holidays. In the 7 days prior to the 8th January, there were 1,396 cases of COVID-19 amongst residents, a rate of 424.8 per 100,000 people, which at the time, was the highest in Greater Manchester. In the 7 days prior to 24th February, there were 573 cases in Wigan, a rate of 174.3 per 100,000 people, which is the fifth-lowest in Greater Manchester. The risk of acquiring COVID-19 within the borough is therefore, at present, significantly lower than at the beginning of January.

The roll out of the vaccination programme has also, nationally, been a huge success. The COVID-19 vaccine ensures that we can keep safe our most elderly or vulnerable residents who are most at risk of serious illness or death from COVID-19. By the 21st February, there had been 55,000 vaccines administered to priority residents in Wigan, and a further 16,500 vaccines given to our front-line health and social care staff that are working with our elderly or vulnerable residents. 94% of over 70s and 75% of our clinically extremely vulnerable residents have received their vaccine.

Our schools in Wigan have also been open and providing face-to-face education throughout the COVID-19 pandemic for our vulnerable children and those of critical workers. Our attendance levels have consistently been amongst the highest in Greater Manchester during this period. Our schools are therefore experienced in assessing risk and putting into place control measures to prevent the spread of infection. Our Health Protection Team works closely with schools to ensure they are aware of the latest advice and best practice, and where there have been cases in schools, to support the rapid isolation of contacts and to prevent further spread.

Face Coverings and Expansion of Testing

Since January, schools have also been able to test their staff and pupils regularly on site. This has been helpful in further identifying those who have COVID-19 but do not have symptoms.

The Government has also announced the introduction of more safety measures for specialist school pupils from the 8th March, such as more usage of face coverings, and increasing the available testing to allow staff and pupils to be able to test from their home.

For pupils in year 7 and above (which would be pupils and students who were aged 11 or over on 31 August 2020), the Government is recommending that face coverings should now be worn in classrooms or during activities, unless social distancing can be maintained. This does not apply in situations where wearing a face covering would make it difficult to take part in exercise or strenuous activity, for example in PE lessons.

This is in addition to the previous recommendations to wear a face covering when in school corridors and communal areas where social distancing cannot easily be maintained. This measure will be in place until Easter at first and then will be reviewed. As before, some individuals are exempt from wearing face coverings, which may be the case for a number of our pupils in special schools. We appreciate that this may cause some concern for some parents/carers and pupils and we would therefore encourage you to discuss this with your school.

To be realistic within Hope School and College provision whilst students still remain in bubbles for safety reasons for most of them having to wear a face mask would be very distressing, uncomfortable and impractical considering their own vast array of differentiating needs and abilities. Therefore we will work with and for each individual student and their families in ensuring a safe as possible full return to school and college life.

If pupil's and/or their families wish to wear a face mask at all times then we will try to assist them to, however if it causes too much distress etc we will equally work with them in protecting them. Our main aim is that everyone feels safe, well protected and happy to be back at school / college and that between both school and home we will continue to work together on a united front for the benefit of us all the time ensuring we minimise any possible means of passing on infections in continuing to adhere to all our stringent guidelines.

All Year 7 and above pupil's families have previously filled in consent forms if they wanted their son/daughter to be tested. Having now been given the go-ahead to proceed with Home Testing we will be getting back in touch with the relevant families with instructions on how to use the Home Testing kits

All pupils (Year 7 and above) will have access to home test kits and will be asked to regularly test themselves twice a week at home and report their results to NHS Test and Trace, as well as to their school. The home test kits will include instructions for testing and reporting results. Some schools may retain their own small testing sites so that pupils who are unable to test themselves at home can still participate.

Testing will be voluntary, and your child will not be tested unless they (if they are aged 16 or over) or you (or another parent or carer) have given informed consent. Your child will still be able to return to face-to-face education if you or they choose not to be tested.

As there will be a range of children and young people in special schools, it is likely that different approaches to testing will be needed. The Government has given special schools the flexibility to be able to work with pupils and their families to agree the most appropriate way of them participating in twice-weekly testing. For further information on your school's plan for testing, and to discuss the most appropriate approach for your child, please contact your school.

It is really important that parents understand that a single 'clear' test result does not necessarily mean that your child does not have COVID-19, and therefore you must continue to follow the safety measures that outside of school we are all being asked to follow.

It is vital for these additional safety measures to be followed as doing so will help to keep our residents and communities in Wigan safer. We would therefore strongly encourage your child to take part. If you have any questions or need additional support to be able to follow these measures, please contact your school.

It is also essential that, until other restrictions are lifted, you ensure your child is following the safety measures outside of school and that they are not mixing in groups in the evening. We want this to be the last time that schools have to restrict attendance and therefore we all need to continue to play our part in doing this by continuing to follow the rules.

It is also important that we all understand that that the current measures in school will continue. You must continue to report if your child has or has been in contact with someone that is symptomatic or has tested positive. Isolation for individual pupils and bubbles will continue but we hope that this will be less disruptive with the additional measures in place.

For more information on these changes and other things you may need to know about the return to school, you may wish to visit [the GOV.UK website](https://www.gov.uk).

We hope that this letter has helped to reassure you about your child's return to face-to-face education and we thank you for your continued support of our schools in these challenging times.

Yours sincerely,



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Director of Public Health



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