

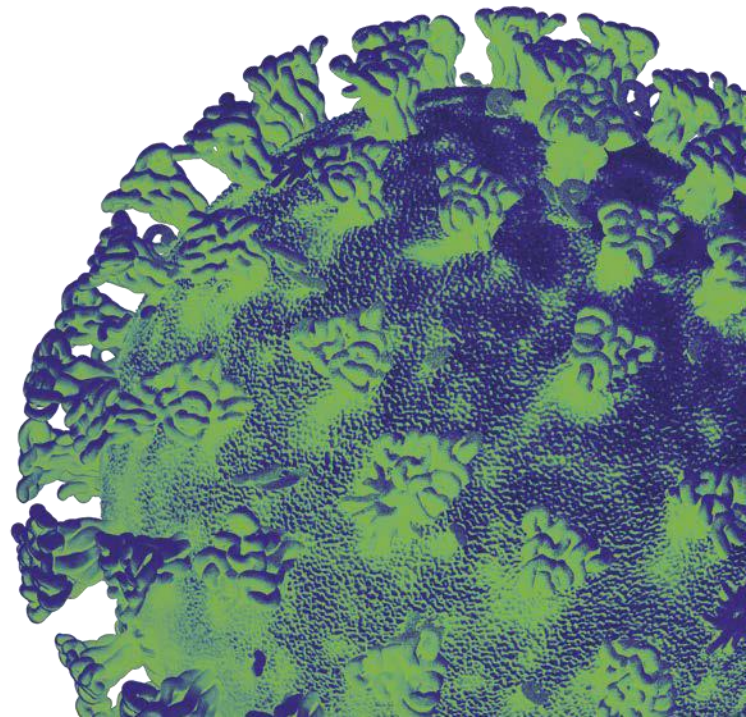
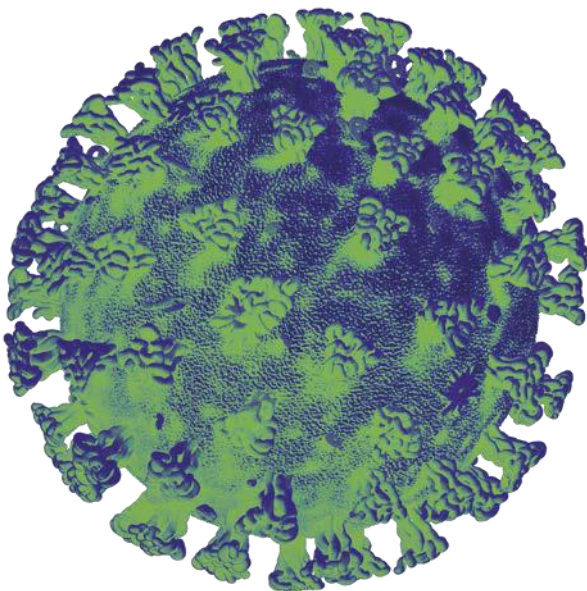
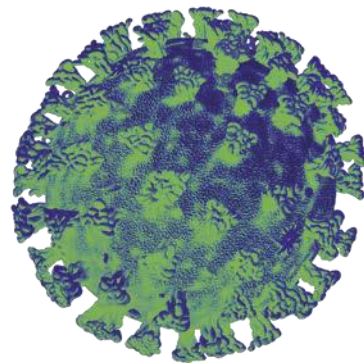


Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

# Technical Advisory Group

## Advice from Children and Education subgroup

7 July 2020



## **Technical Advisory Group - Advice on return to school**

### **Proposed by Children and Education subgroup 7<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

#### **Recommendation:**

The Welsh Technical Advisory Group recommends that schools in Wales plan to open in September with 100% of pupils physically present on school sites, subject to a continuing, steady decline in the presence of COVID-19 in the community, and appropriate measures to protect staff and children, including:

- Contact tracing programme to be aiming to trace an estimated 80% of contacts, at least 35% of which to be traced within 24 hours<sup>1</sup>.
- Every school should be “Covid Secure”, having carried out an assessment of the risks and mitigated them with a combination of controls such as distancing, hand and surface hygiene, one-way systems and so forth, according to the hierarchy of hazard controls and best practice guidance.
- If early warning information shows a local incident or outbreak then nearby schools should implement appropriate restriction measures.
- Preparations should always be in place to teach up to 100% of children remotely if needed.

#### **Considerations:**

It is essential to review the balance of benefit and burden about return to school for children’s overall wellbeing to inform decisions about which relaxation measures are the greatest priority.

There is limited room for relaxing social distancing /grouping measures overall given current transmission and incidence rates. There is a real risk that school and societal restrictions might need to be imposed again. Prioritisation is needed now to ensure that the viability and safety of school re-opening in September is protected.

Monitoring of the next few weeks of schools opening to identify potential uptick or problems will help September planning. This offers opportunity to build confidence/demonstrate processes in place.

#### **Summary of evidence:**

1. Children under the age of 18 make up 22-25% of the population, but consistently make up <2% of the total Covid-19 caseload in every country<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> SAGE subgroup SPI-M-O paper Comments on Social Distancing Measures 22 June 2020

<sup>2</sup> [www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099\(20\)30371-6/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099(20)30371-6/fulltext)

2. Infection with SARS-CoV-2 appears to take a milder course in children than in adults: most infected children present with mild symptoms or are asymptomatic, and very few develop severe or life threatening disease<sup>3</sup>.
3. There remains some on-going uncertainty in transmissibility of the disease by children, but real world observation of school opening in England and other countries has shown little transmission by children<sup>4</sup>.
4. Sero-prevalence studies in Spain<sup>5</sup> have shown that children seem to have an antibody response lower than adults in a population (<3.1% for children under 10, compared to 5% average for adults). However, emerging evidence shows limited child-to-child transmission, and it is suggested that the majority of children's cases are transmitted from adults within the same household<sup>6</sup>. This appears to be borne out by the paucity of children as index cases.
5. Transmissibility in children under the age of 12 seems to be particularly low, and this leads us to feel able to recommend that these children can be Covid Secure using more flexible controls than the 2m distance, such as seating facing in the same direction. The hierarchy of controls especially hand and surface hygiene remain key measures.
6. Maintaining some distancing remains important in secondary age children who are likely to need to reduce overall daily contacts by 40-60% to maintain Covid-19 security<sup>7</sup>. This could be achieved by 2m social distancing and/ or maintaining class/year 'Covid Secure groups' with avoidance of mixing to reduce overall daily close contacts (face to face conversation of at least 3 words, or physical contact) by half. Research indicates<sup>8</sup> that in this 11-20 age group, there are on average approx. 20 daily contacts, so a 50% reduction would mean a reduction of all daily close contacts to approx. 10.
7. Relaxation of measures should be lifted in a logical way as this provides a stronger public narrative of health societal and children's education benefits. In addition, it is difficult to reverse changes<sup>9</sup>.
8. It is vital to engage and co-produce policy with parents/ children and teachers as well as other stakeholders. Children and young people can assist in disseminating narratives and supporting interventions.
9. It is essential to have advance plans for school openings and a contingency plan for closures in case of need, and plans for managing any new outbreak.

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<sup>3</sup> [link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00431-020-03683-8](https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00431-020-03683-8)

<sup>4</sup> RCPCH Evidence summary 30 June 2020 <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/covid-19-research-evidence-summaries#transmission>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)31483-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)31483-5/fulltext)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.rivm.nl/en/novel-coronavirus-covid-19/children-and-covid-19>

<sup>7</sup> SAGE subgroups SPI-B and SPI-M considerations

<sup>8</sup> Klepac et al [Contacts in context: large-scale setting-specific social mixing matrices from the BBC Pandemic project](#) March 2020

<sup>9</sup> SPI-B advice to SAGE 29 Jun 2020

## UK Context

- DfE policy is for schools to open fully to all years in September 2020<sup>10</sup> with continuing use of physical control measures including social distancing wherever possible, with an emphasis on 'Covid safe' class groupings in order to reduce the number of daily contacts. Controls are described as 'prevention' and 'response'. No evidence paper has yet been published to identify numbers recommended for class groupings.
- Scotland will be reopening schools in August 2020 in line with their usual term times. Plans and supporting evidence<sup>11</sup> initially envisaged a combination of in- school and home learning, and covid secure environments including 2m social distancing between individuals or small cohorts with limited contacts<sup>12</sup>. A subsequent Ministerial announcement<sup>13</sup> indicated that full return to school with no social distancing required for under 12s/junior school age children would be expected from August 2020, assuming low infection rates in the community, TTP, and protections/risk assessments for those at higher risk, including staff. No evidence paper has yet been published to support this change.
- Northern Ireland schools will start on 24 August 2020 for Primary 7, years 12 and 14, all vulnerable children, with all other children returning on usual September term start dates. A blended learning approach is envisaged with at least 40% face-to-face time in primary and 30% face-to-face post primary. Pre-school children will not be expected to social distance, all children up to year 14 will observe 1m social distance, with 'protective bubbles' where possible, although no maximum size has been stated. Adults will observe 2m between adults or children. It is assumed measures will be supported by testing and monitoring of symptoms. A supportive evidence paper is included<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> DfE 2 July 2020 [Guidance for full opening: schools - GOV.UK](#)

<sup>11</sup> Scottish Government 26 May 2020 [Microsoft Word - Scientific Evidence Schools and ELC](#)

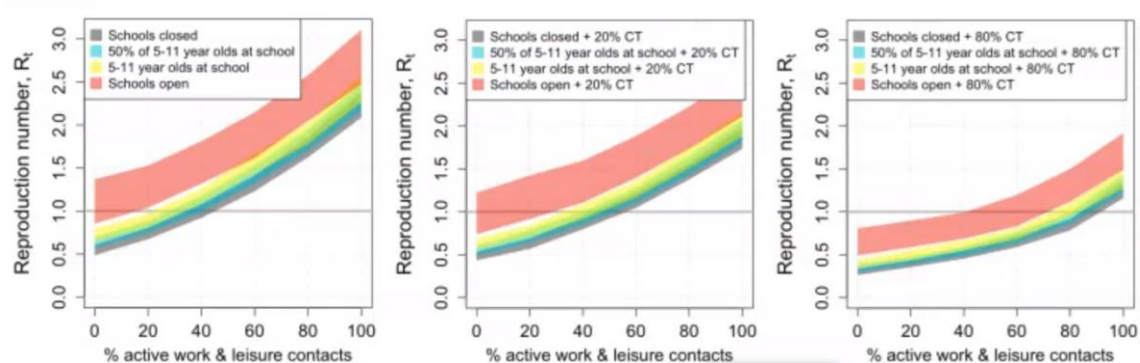
<sup>12</sup> Scottish Government 28 May 2020 [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): strategic framework for reopening schools, early learning and childcare provision - gov.scot](#)

<sup>13</sup> Scottish Government 23 June 2020 [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): statement by the Deputy First Minister on re-opening of schools - gov.scot](#)

<sup>14</sup> N Ireland Government 24 June 2020 [Education Restart - Paper summarising the scientific evidence on Coronav...\\_0.pdf](#)

## Annex A - Items discussed by SAGE advisory group on Schools:

- We should be moving away from looking purely at the isolated impact of schools opening on R, infections and deaths, and towards taking a more holistic view across the package of interventions and 'R currency'. Decisions about schools reopening should be taken in conjunction with those on relaxing wider social distancing measures. Decisions need to be made around which are the priority measures to relax and it will be important to consider what room will be left to open schools in September as other social distancing measures are being relaxed now.
- We know that when relaxing different BSIs, the cumulative impact on R means that there is little room to stop R going above 1. This is highlighted in the risk curves (examples below – these have now been updated separately to include environment factors and revisions are not included here).



- Members cautioned that as other measures are being lifted the immediate risk is that we run out of wiggle room given the anticipated effects of the June/July relaxation. This would mean that there is little or no 'space' by September to keep R under 1 with schools fully re-opening. While the impact of school openings on R might not be large, it may be enough to be significant.
- A decision should be taken now that when schools are re-opened, they will not be reclosed as part of a re-imposing of restrictive measures. This will limit the notion of 'last in, first out'. The narrative should focus on 'we have set the scene to allow schools to return full time from now on'.
- These decisions will need to be taken now in order to protect this space and when considering the lag in data. This could mean that other interventions would need to be reversed in order to allow space for schools to reopen. This would not be easily accepted by the public and by the relevant sectors (for example the hospitality sector) and adherence could be lower than before relaxation begun. There needs to be a logical ordering of relaxations.
- Therefore, there is a need to change the narrative on reopening schools and align this with other relaxations. Members suggested reflecting the scenarios in qualitative way providing a conditional decision on full opening based on what happens on the next two months or use an alternative view that government as a whole will have to prioritise schools opening over relaxation of other measures so that by September there is scope to open schools.

**1. Importance of surveillance and pre-preparedness for cases/ outbreaks is vital and should be planned for now**

- Strategies for re-closing schools in the event of outbreaks need to be considered at this stage too, specifying how this will be done and communicated clearly to parents/schools and other relevant stakeholders.
- Good surveillance and TTP will be needed to pick up emerging cases and outbreaks. These will need to be responded to swiftly. The response to individual cases (i.e. closing classes and testing the school) will be different to outbreaks (i.e. closing schools and looking at homes and workplaces connected to the schools). This has to be developing in conjunction with local Public Health services and Joint Biosecurity Committee/circuit breakers.

**2. Strengthening the confidence around the role of children in transmission will be important. As well as how we communicate this to parents/ pupils/teachers/ unions and other actors.**

- A lot of the modelling uses conservative assumptions; that children transmit at the same rate as adults. There is increasing confidence that children do not do this. We did not see an increase in cases driven by schools being open in March and there are fewer cases now. Evidence on other countries experience can help with this understanding.
- DfE asked for further clarification of this position and for this to be reflected in SAGE consensus statements to help build the evidence base for policy understanding of the position.
- There is potentially a greater risk of transmission between adults at school gates than by children and on a broader point on adults generally (workforce, parents/ carers) – care will be needed around school access as well as within schools.
- There would be strong merit in talking in terms of risk levels when contextualising the different opening scenarios -converting R incidence into risk which can then be applied across interventions. The comparative risk of a child ending up in hospital with COVID from returning to schools is small (vs. being struck by lightning). The greater risk of schools reopening is the increased networking that this enables.
- The basis of using risk is that the question of opening schools is not about the risk to children, but more about the risk to the country of having to go back into more restrictive measures. Members were keen that this was emphasised.
- Bubbles /Limited groups are not straightforward in Secondary Schools (vs. Primary schools where they are relatively straightforward operationally) -given the movement between different classes and behaviour associated with this cohort. SAGE have previously used bubbles to describe households, so it is not helpful to use it in school contexts.
- Use of the summer given better use of outdoor space while the weather is fine should be considered.

### **3. *What can we learn anything from schools opening from June?***

- A month is not enough time to look at impact in much detail however it should allow us to demonstrate that children might not be as large a factor in transmission. Caution on how the role of children is framed however -it is challenging as school openings will help to understand the role of children in transmission to a great extent -it should be presented at this rather than framing it as a 'demonstration'.
- We also need to recognise how schools are implementing the guidance differently and what impact this has on parents/ pupils and teacher's confidence - all of the school buildings/environments bring their own challenges. Would it be possible to at least give a description of what a C-19 Safe School opening could/should look like (e.g. staggered drop-offs, one-way systems, social distancing (by age group) but not for Early Years, class/bubble size (as constrained by size of building), masks or not, hand washing, etc.).
- WG have developed a circuit breaker methodology to monitor the impact of schools reopening on transmission and this is being developed.
- The ONS study could offer further learnings in the time-scales provided as well as potentially the PHE study taking place in East London.
- International comparisons -lack of school related outbreaks in countries that are now open corroborates the position on children's role in transmission. Link up with the WHO.

### **4. *Include actors where possible in delivery***

- Importance of providing a national online learning platform alongside any scenario to plug gaps in education and provide reassurance -especially when thinking about reactive school closures and vulnerable pupils or workforce. Blended learning could help sustain flexibility in the schooling received. This also has the added benefit of enabling staff who might need to shield or stay off of work because of family members who are shielding to engage in a clearly defined context.
- Importance of early and comprehensive communication strategies and involving parents/children and teachers and other stakeholders such as unions in co-production of plans. Engaging with parents/ carers and children and teachers/ school leaders could provide convincing evidence to use in discussions with the unions. Unions are perhaps important, but perhaps further downstream and as advice has been developed.
- Parents' and teachers' assessment or perception of risk at schools will be critical to the success of wider opening scenarios. Local variation in implementation will also affect confidence/norms.
- How an individual perceives and responds to risk amongst the general population vs. risk to their own family i.e. grandparents seeing grandchildren. The group noted that this becomes a question on what people value the most and how they will respond to the guidance provided -although some might not have a choice in how they respond given childcare/ working arrangements. There is much more focus on the former but the latter is also of significance.
- Reassurance can also be built by planning for school settings re-closing -what would this look like and how does testing play a role in this.

**Additional points addressed**

- Universities -issue with accommodation and movement. Large differences in how universities plan to organise teaching.
- The FE sector, particularly for the post-19, has many different courses and teaching types. Also, much of the teaching is practical.
- Early year's sector -keen to co-produce given different incentive to re-open than others.
- How do we feed in transport to/from school and impacts on infection? Question becomes whether this needs adaptation for children going to/ from school. Links importantly to 'signals' about risk.
- Do not link school return with "experiments" or trials.

**Follow up**

- DfE analysts have used the principles set out in this discussion, and further feedback received from SAGE subgroups, to formulate a range of research questions that, if answered, could build our understanding and help policy makers. These were submitted as a SAGE commission on 2 July 2020.