

1<sup>st</sup> June 2020

Dear all,

Wigan Council understands that this is an extremely challenging time for all who live in our borough but recognises fully the many acts of kindness which local residents have undertaken to support each other typifying the spirit of the Deal. We would like to pay especial tribute to the work of headteachers, staff, school governors and childcare providers for their fantastic work in supporting children and families during this and your brilliant contribution to the borough's response to Covid 19.

Following the government's recent announcements relating to the easing of national lockdown arrangements, we have taken time to consider our position as a Council and in order to support the increase of numbers of children in schools and childcare settings, we need to be confident of our local position against the government's five tests set out on 19<sup>th</sup> April 2020 especially as the current national alert level as advised by the Joint Biosecurity Centre remains at 4 which means there continues to be "a high or rising level of transmission – enforced social distancing".

Whilst nationally, the government is requesting that schools and childcare settings start to increase the numbers of pupils attending over the coming weeks, we do not feel assured that locally the government's five tests can be met and more time is needed firstly for schools and childcare settings to undertake and complete individual risk assessments with appropriate support, and secondly for the national and local elements of the Test, Track Trace, Isolate and Support systems which was only partially launched on Thurs 28<sup>th</sup> May to be properly operational and able to effectively identify, manage and contain any local outbreaks of Covid 19 and also for us to properly assess the impact that other easing of lockdown measures has on rates of transmission. Members of SAGE (Scientific Advisory Group on Emergencies) and Independent SAGE and the Association of Directors of Public Health have all over recent days advised caution and concern about the too rapid easing of lockdown and the increased risk of a second pandemic wave. For these reasons, I am strongly advising all schools and childcare settings to delay wider reopening until at least June 15<sup>th</sup> in order to allow for a full 14 day cycle of the Test and Trace systems and for us to assess the impact on community transmission through our new local surveillance system and better intelligence from the national system. My reasoning for this position is shown in the attached Appendix.

All settings will continue to remain open for vulnerable children and the children of key workers as they have been since the start of the national lockdown.

I remain concerned that the easing of lockdown in England is proceeding too quickly and that we should only seek to increase the numbers of children in schools and childcare settings when I'm confident that we have all the right systems in place nationally and locally, these are shown to be working effectively and taken together with the individual school risk assessments, it is as safe as is possible for children and staff.

I will continue to monitor what is a fast-evolving situation very closely and keep my advice to you under constant review.

Yours,



Professor Kate Ardern MBChB MSc FFPH  
Director of Public Health  
Wigan Council

## Appendix to schools' letter:

In coming to this conclusion on wider reopening, I've set out below the reasons for why I do not consider all five government tests to be currently met.

### *Test 1: Protect the NHS' ability to cope*

We know the NHS in Wigan is coping with current Covid workload and hospital admissions are steadily decreasing.

### *Test 2: See a sustained and consistent fall in daily death rates from Covid 19 so we are confident that we have moved beyond the peak.*

Currently the total number of confirmed cases in Wigan is 1199 with a rate of 368 per 100,000 population (higher than GM at 350 per 100,000 and NW at 348). This reflects the increase in testing in the borough over the last few weeks but means there is no room for complacency. Whilst the trend is generally downward, Wigan remains at having the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest rate in GM.

We have however seen a welcome and steady decline in the numbers of deaths both in hospital and across other settings over the last two weeks which would suggest we have moved beyond the peak we experienced in late April.

Whilst I am confident currently the first two tests are being met ...with my caveat on there being no room for complacency, it is the remaining three tests which I cannot be assured are being met locally.

### *Test 3: Having reliable data that shows the rate of infection is decreasing to manageable levels.*

As Director of Public Health, I must advise you that we do not currently have access to data and trends over time about community transmission of Covid 19 at a local level although we are rapidly implementing the development of a local surveillance system with PHE NW as part of Greater Manchester's component of the Test, Track and Trace system. However in order for this to be robust and reliable, we need access to all of the data being collected by the national parts of the system which are outside our control and to have reliable and timely flows of this data into our local systems for us to be confident about the rates of transmission and spread of Covid 19 at a community level. In addition, the R or Reproductive number, which is based on the number of people someone who is a confirmed case of Covid 19 might infect, needs to be kept consistently below 1 in order for the numbers of cases to reduce. At present, as of 22<sup>nd</sup> May, the national R number is between **0.7 to 1.0** and estimated at **0.73** in the NW (R cannot reliably be calculated below a NW level) meaning that there is little room for manoeuvre and any easing of lockdown measures (individual and collective) increase the risk of transmission and R going back above 1.

### *Test 4: Be confident that the range of operational challenges including testing capacity and PPE availability are in hand with supply able to meet future demand.*

At this point in the pandemic, as Professor Jonathan Van-Tam pointed out at the UK Gov press briefing on 30<sup>th</sup> May, meeting Test 4 is crucial nationally and locally. Whilst in relation to PPE, I am confident that due to the excellent work of the Council with local suppliers and manufacturers and

the sterling work on the establishment of a GM PPE procurement and supply chain by the Greater Manchester Combined Authority that PPE supplies are significantly more resilient. However, with the Track and Trace national programme having only partially launched on Thurs 28<sup>th</sup> May and continuing issues to resolve the coordination and intelligence flows between the various national testing programmes, I cannot be assured that Test, Track and Trace is sufficiently well established, robust or reliable enough at this point to allow us to effectively manage local outbreaks where timeliness of communication and speed of referral from the national first point of contact into our rapidly developing and mobilising Greater Manchester contract tracing staff and systems is absolutely vital in order to effectively trace, isolate and support contacts of confirmed cases especially in complex settings such as schools. The national programme is welcome and I'm co-leading the work on the Greater Manchester system which went live in its first phase 1<sup>st</sup> June but these systems need time to bed down and operations working smoothly and efficiently before we start to rely on them.

*Test 5: Be confident that any adjustments to the current measures will not risk a second peak of infections which overwhelms the NHS*

See my comments on the R number above and the position statement from the Association of Directors of Public Health published today [www.ADPH.org.uk/2020/05/adph-presidential-blog-a-time-for-steady-leadership-careful-preparation-and-measured-steps](http://www.ADPH.org.uk/2020/05/adph-presidential-blog-a-time-for-steady-leadership-careful-preparation-and-measured-steps) .