

Dear Geoff Raw,

I am submitting the following letter under Council Procedure Rule 23.3 to be included on the agenda for the Children, Young People and Skills Committee meeting of 15th June 2020

I want to express how glad I am that Brighton and Hove is among the many councils who have supported their schools to take a safety-first approach and to plan for more pupils to return to school in a realistic timeframe, with plans based on their own risk-assessments, staffing levels, and available classroom and outdoor space.

Now I want us to ensure that we also look forward, beyond this focus on getting schools open, and commit to supporting our schools to create a sustainable model of education to take them through the whole course of this virus.

I also want to add that this is a fast-moving situation, and government guidance changes almost by the day, so there may be elements of this letter which are out of date by the time I get to read it. However our responsibility to support our schools through this will not change, and this is what I want to address.

Of course we all want to get our children safely back to school without unnecessary delay. We understand how important their education is, and that for vulnerable and disadvantaged children every week they are out of school widens the attainment gap. We know that children who are completing an important or transitional year would ideally return to the classroom before the end of this term.

A safe 'full' school return

However we also have a commitment to the safety, health and wellbeing of all school pupils, their families and carers. While some studies do show that children are less likely to catch and spread Covid-19 than adults, others show the opposite, with the ONS finding "no evidence" of differences between age groups in the proportions of those testing positive, and a recent German study concluding that children carry as great a viral load as adults, and can be assumed to be just as infectious. We have to be aware of the possible impact of bringing large numbers of children back into schools while the R number is still close to one, and the "highly effective track, trace and isolate system" which the government's own deputy chief scientific advisor stated was a prerequisite for schools to reopen, is not yet running and proven.

Social distancing

Social distancing in schools remains a huge problem, and will prove the sticking point in any attempt to open schools to more than selected year groups. At the time of writing this the government's aim was to return all primary year groups to school this term, without allowing schools to use a rota system. Sitting alongside instructions to split classes into groups of 15 with one member of staff per group, a straightforward sum tells us that teaching in half-classes would need twice the staff and twice the classroom space; something that most of our schools simply do not have.

Managing return

Schools will need our continued support to reject such guidance and find realistic, individual solutions to these problems. Either some year groups will stay at home, or schools will have to adopt rota systems, with home learning and in-school learning running alongside each other for the rest of this term. Perhaps instead of concentrating on year groups schools could prioritise inviting back those children who are struggling most to learn at home.

Future issues

Looking forward to September we don't know how Covid-19 may intrude itself into the next school year. Some epidemiologists predict a second wave in the autumn, or there may be more localised outbreaks necessitating temporary school or class closures. We may just have individual pupils involved in 14-day isolations, or kept off school due to shielding in their family. We may or may not still need social distancing. It seems likely that our schools will need our support to create flexible plans for the next academic year in which home learning and in-school learning can run alongside one another in varying proportions, and our help to address the problems of digital exclusion, the attainment gap and the needs of working parents which this will inevitably exacerbate. Of course we hope that all children will be back in school full time in September, but in case that is simply not possible, or the term is interrupted by a second wave, more work must be done to develop and improve the home learning which some families are currently struggling to access or complete.

Proposals

As a result, we request that this committee:

- in liaison with local schools, can support the development and funding of resources required to facilitate any future 'distance learning' needs;
- can work collaboratively to offer training and support to teaching staff adapting to new modes of education; as well as offer further training to parents and young people on online safety;
- can continue to address digital exclusion; and the provision of other equipment that enables a wide range of educational attainment should a 'lockdown' situation occur, such as – provision of musical instruments, arts and crafts supplies and access to the internet
- can support children to continue to access 'pastoral care,' and mental health support at this time;
- identify changes to school policy and procedure that could better allow for flexible approaches to public health crisis, via a 'long term plan,' that works with teaching staff and parents to identify different responses to different lockdown scenarios (following Government indication that the country will be subject to restrictions governed by differing lockdown 'phases.')
- and further, how our council and local schools can appropriately identify and support variations of 'home schooling,' where pupil, or family health, may prevent a safe return to school

The government's aim is to get all children back into school. Our aim should be more Covid-proof: to continue to support our schools to prioritise safety and plan realistically so they can avoid transmission of the virus while providing the best possible education for all our children whichever way the course of this pandemic takes us. Since we don't know how long Covid will be our new normal we need to commit to support our schools to navigate with flexibility and open-mindedness through a changed landscape which may stretch well beyond this summer term.

Councillor Sarah Nield