

Independent SAGE: Learning the lessons from Reopening Schools in Scotland: A six-point plan of action

A. Purpose of this brief report

This report is an addendum to the [Independent SAGE report on Schools](#) and should be read in conjunction with that report. It is an update that responds to issues arising out of the reopening of schools. Schools in Scotland opened in the week of August 11th 2020. There has therefore been time to analyse the impact and to learn lessons that are applicable both in Scotland itself and elsewhere that will help protect the well-being of students, staff and the wider community. In this document we (a) summarise the situation in Scotland, (b) highlight issues that need to be addressed, and (c) propose measures to deal with these issues, outlining the steps for action first.

B. Six points of action

In the light of the Scottish experience, Independent SAGE proposes that the following steps be implemented as a matter of priority:

1. **Drive community transmission down:** The most important step for reopening schools, keeping schools open and keeping all pupils and staff safe is to take all reasonable measures to drive community transmission rates down. This includes encouraging home-working where possible; ensuring all workplaces and public spaces are inspected and certified as COVID Safe before re-opening ([see the Independent SAGE report on safe reopening of workplaces](#)), closing high-risk enclosed indoor public spaces such as indoor bars and cinemas where local infection rates are high (greater than 10 new daily cases per 100k population).
2. **A widespread information campaign:** stressing the limits on household gatherings and the need for vigorous protective measures such as hand washing, not touching eyes, nose and mouth, and maintaining distancing in the home where possible. Masks should be considered as a protective measure in all secondary school spaces (including staffrooms and classrooms), especially when distancing and ventilation are absent and local infection rates are high.
3. **Government should provide the practical support necessary.** These include
 - employing additional teachers and additional spaces so that schools can operate smaller classes to enable physical distancing.
 - systematic monitoring of ventilation, particularly as the weather gets colder and opening windows will be impractical.
4. **Government should provide resources necessary to study at home** (i.e., computers, WiFi, study spaces) so that, if secondary school students have to self-isolate or if schools have to close due to spikes in infection, *all* students are able to continue their education.
5. **Clear and consistent guidance** as to when staff and pupils should seek tests and when they should be asked to self-isolate should be provided.
6. **Testing facilities and capacity must be expanded** and organised such that all pupils, staff, and parents can access a local testing site, obtain a test without delay and receive test results within 24 hours.

C. The situation in Scotland

In overall terms, the reopening of schools has not led to a major increase in infections. At the same time, there have been a number of infections and of clusters in schools which require careful monitoring and point to the need for continued caution. More specifically:

- Testing of children aged 2-17 tripled from the week ending August 16th to the week ending August 23rd. However, the number of positive test results only rose from 47 to 49 indicating that [the level of infection in children is low and not rising](#).
- At the end of the second week of the return there were infections in 53 schools involving 102 people, [mostly teachers](#). There were a number of clusters - [for instance in Kingspark Special Needs school in Dundee](#) - where, by 25th August, there were 27 positive cases (21 members of staff, 2 pupils, 4 community contacts).
- As of 25th August, the evidence suggested that these cases were brought into the schools from the community rather than indicating transmission in schools. However, as of 2nd September, [two cases of pupil-to-pupil transmission have been identified in Glasgow schools](#).
- Overall, [infection rates in Scotland are rising](#). Over two days, 31st August and 1st December there were 314 new cases of which 135 were in the Greater Glasgow and Clyde areas. This led to the imposition of new restrictions in Glasgow, East Renfrewshire and West Dunbartonshire. The major cause of these high rates is thought to be small gatherings in households.

D. Problems and issues

The overall incidence of infections in children remains very low and, as yet, there is little evidence that reopening schools has contributed to an overall increase in infection. For now, schools are safe for pupils and it is right that pupils remain in schools.

On the other hand, schools are impacted by rising infection rates in the community and the emergent evidence of pupil-to-pupil transmission shows the potential for school infections to feed back into the community not only through pupils but also through staff. This makes the need for effective mitigation measures in schools all the more important.

In addition to the general need for vigilance, a number of other issues have been highlighted by the Scottish experience so far:

- While the number of infections in schools is relatively low, the number of staff and pupils who have had to self-isolate is high and growing. At the end of the first week back, 5,857 pupils were self-isolating. By the end of the second week, [the number had more than tripled to 19,533](#). This will lead to yet more disruption of these children's education and – in the [light of reports that poor students are far less likely to be able to maintain learning at home](#) – is likely to further exacerbate educational inequalities.
- Anecdotal evidence suggests that, despite [extensive guidance from Public Health Scotland](#) and strenuous efforts by schools, practical constraints have led to very limited mitigations in classrooms and also staff rooms. Many of these rooms have windows that don't open, many more have very limited opening while social distancing is often not possible. Thus, there appears to be little possibility of distancing and ventilation.
- [The testing system has been severely strained](#) by the number of children with possible COVID symptoms (due to seasonal colds) being required by schools to obtain a negative test before being allowed into school. In the 7 days to August 11th a total of 31,477 people of all ages were tested in Scotland (yielding 362 cases, a 1.2% positivity rate). In the week to August 25th the number rose to 49,345 (yielding 514 cases, a 1.1% positivity rate). [Many people were unable to get a test](#). Many had to travel a considerable distance. In many cases results took 48 hours or longer to come back.