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The Independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE)

The Independent SAGE Report 26

An Urgent Plan for Safer Schools

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Submitted to The UK Government and the People of Great Britain
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UK Government, Chair of Independent SAGE

An Urgent Plan for Safer Schools

Executive summary, key points for action, and identification of responsibilities

This guidance note, a collaboration between Independent SAGE and the [EAGLE research group for education](#), is published to tackle shortcomings in Government advice and strategy regarding schools.¹ It was written following consultations with headteachers, teachers, local authority officials, representatives of academy trusts, and parents. Its particular focus is England, but it may have some wider relevance where infection is high. It does not aim to provide a comprehensive set of advice but concentrates on key problems.

While cases have increased rapidly in the general population, this has been particularly acute among school-aged children and young people. There has been a 50-fold increase since the start of September for 11-16 year olds, and infections are now higher for this age group than any other.² Infections for primary school children continue to rise. This is already causing severe disruption to children's education: currently more than 1 in 5 secondary school pupils are absent from school.³

It is now clear that secondary school students can be infected and infect each other and adults, and this is at last acknowledged by the government's official advisers in SAGE.⁴ Children and young people at school tend to have a wide transmission circle which can endanger parents and grandparents.⁵ Whilst wishing to minimise disruption to children's education, stricter guidelines are urgently needed for reducing opportunities for infection.

Many schools have been steered to respond minimally to positive cases by only sending home the closest contacts. Despite this, the nature of the virus and contradictory advice has resulted in some classes having to be sent home repeatedly.

The risks from casual contact on school transport, breaks and lunchtimes have not been adequately recognised. Misleading information has been given on health risks to teachers.⁶ Action is urgently needed, to make schools safe for staff and students and to reduce infections in the community.

Independent SAGE has long argued that control of the virus requires an excellent test, track and trace system. The government made a serious mistake by establishing a privately run testing and tracing operation, rather than strengthening public health nationally and local authority teams. Undue delays,

¹ www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools

² Coronavirus Infection Survey, Office of National Statistics [ons_infection_survey_by_age_20201113.xlsx](#)
It is not possible to show separate statistics for older secondary students (Years 12 and 13) as they are included in the same age group as college and university students and other young people up to age 24.

³ www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-55057125

⁴ www.gov.uk/government/publications/sage-65-minutes-coronavirus-covid-19-response-4-november-2020

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/20/opinion/sunday/covid-bubble-thanksgiving-family.html>

⁶ <https://www.tes.com/news/coronavirus-schools-urgent-warning-over-misleading-teacher-covid-data>

difficulties in getting tested, and inadequate contact tracing have all impacted on infection control for school staff, students and families.

Young people growing up in poverty have been severely damaged by combinations of lockdown in cramped housing, food shortages, inadequate warm clothing in cold classrooms, poor quality face coverings, worries about medically vulnerable parents, neighbourhoods with high infection rates, a lack of books and IT, and the variable ability of parents to help with school work.

Headteachers and staff have carried heavy responsibilities, whilst frequently being denied key information and resources, and constrained by incoherent advice from central government.

Department for Education telephone advice has proved seriously inadequate, and no organisation has been charged with systematically monitoring the steps taken.

The present situation in many of the worst affected schools and communities is characterised by confusion, secrecy, mistrust, fear, demoralisation and exhaustion. The pressures have now been exacerbated by a government ban on schools rearranging holidays or switching to a mixture of on-site and home-based learning.⁷ There is a danger that apathy will follow, if people feel they are unable to act intelligently and effectively. The situation is clearly not sustainable.

This report invites schools to assess and call for the resources they need to operate safely, and for a strengthening of established public health services including the local level. It calls on government to provide adequate support, whilst recognising the need for flexibility at a local and school level in response to fast changing situations.

Key conclusions, action points and responsibilities:

Measures

1. *Distancing:* Smaller classes are needed in primary schools to make distancing more successful. Secondary schools should reorganise to minimise contact between different classes, and prevent opportunities for infection outside the classroom such as school transport, lunchtimes, and gatherings to enter rooms. Many secondary schools in areas with high levels of infection will need to introduce a blend between on-site and home-based learning. [page 3 and appendix A]
2. *Ventilation:* Good levels of ventilation are necessary, through opening windows or ventilation / heating systems using entirely new air. Students should be encouraged to wear warm outdoor clothing, regardless of normal uniform requirements, with warm clothing supplied to children in need. [page 4]

⁷ www.tes.com/news/exclusive-covid-hotspot-school-attendance-down-65

3. *Face coverings:* Schools should make sure that children have face coverings of good quality. Secondary school students should be encouraged to wear them in classrooms and elsewhere in the school. [page 5]
4. *Bubbles:* Consistent self-contained groups are essential for reducing infections and tracing possible contacts. In secondary schools, these should be much smaller than the entire year group. [page 6]
5. *Self-isolation:* In the case of infections, the bubble should form the basis for isolating contacts. Self-isolation must not be restricted to children sitting next to each other or in sustained contact. [page 6]
6. *Testing:* All staff and students within a bubble should be tested where they are positive cases, regardless of whether they are showing symptoms. [page 7]
7. *Learning resources:* Home-based learning should be supported with textbooks and other books, as well as IT. Sufficient funding and resourcing must be provided for young people in low-income families. [page 7]
8. *Examinations:* Schools need to focus on learning and wellbeing, without sources of stress. Standardised tests and exams can't run fairly when some schools have been affected worse than others. Primary school tests should be cancelled, and secondary school exams replaced with assessment by teachers, with suitable moderation. [page 8]
9. *Wellbeing:* Creative thinking is needed to ensure that young people are able to socialise safely. The threat of removal from school rolls or fines for non-attendance should be removed where there are medically vulnerable people in a family. [pages 8-9]
10. *Transparency:* Clear information should be provided to all stakeholders and organisations to aid intelligent response to infections. [page 9]
11. *Advice and support:* Local public health teams should become the primary source of advice and support for schools. [page 9]
12. *Staff:* The welfare and morale of teaching and other staff is vital to sustainable provision. Those who are clinically vulnerable should be enabled to work from home where possible. [page 9]

Responsibilities

In order to implement this plan of action, Central Government, Ofsted, local authorities, academy trusts, and headteachers and governors, should adopt responsibilities as below:

Central government must:

- recognise and fund local public health teams as the first source of advice for schools
- ensure that testing is fully available, without the need to show symptoms
- provide funding for additional accommodation and staff to reduce class size

- accept that some secondary schools will need a blend of on-site and home-based learning to sustain full-time education
- make an early announcement to cancel primary school tests and make alternative arrangements for GCSEs and A-levels
- provide additional funding to schools to cover needs such as supply cover, ventilation, face coverings, books, ICT, CPD for teaching staff.
- make funding available to specialist subject associations to provide resources for home-based learning

Ofsted schools inspectorate must:

- continue to review the overall quality of health and safety, and the availability of learning resources, and disseminate good practice
- avoid inspections of individual schools except where absolutely necessary.

Local authorities must:

- develop capacity so that local public health teams can provide advice and support to all schools, and work cooperatively with the Health and Safety Executive, and health and safety and trade union representatives in schools
- systematically monitor all schools in their area, however governed, working cooperatively with academy trusts as appropriate

Headteachers and governors must:

- draw up a plan for moving forward, highlighting budgetary and resource needs
- ensure staff and parents are informed of infections and risks, in order to respond intelligently to changing situations
- work with health and safety and trade union representatives to safeguard the welfare of staff, students and the wider community
- avoid putting undue pressure on parents who have decided that attendance could endanger medically vulnerable family members.

An Urgent Plan for Safer Schools: Main Report

This guidance note is published to tackle shortcomings in government advice⁸ and strategy for schools dealing with Covid-19. It is specifically focused on schools in England, which operate under separate regulations, but may have some relevance elsewhere in the UK. It will not provide a comprehensive set of advice but will concentrate on key points in official guidance.

The situation in schools has become dangerous. While cases have increased rapidly overall, this has been most dramatic recently for secondary school students (Years 7-11).⁹ There has been a 50-fold increase in infections since the start of September¹⁰. Despite a brief dip after the half-term holiday, infections are now higher in this age group than any other, and more than 1 in 5 pupils are absent from school¹¹. Meanwhile, infections for primary school children continue to rise. Opportunities for a 'firebreak' to reduce infections were lost by failing to extend the October half term holiday, and may still be needed before Christmas. *Dangers have now been increased by a government ban on schools re-arranging holidays, or using a combination of on-site and home-based learning.*¹²

The government's official advisers in SAGE have finally acknowledged that secondary school students can be infected, and infect one another as well as adults.¹³ Children at school have a wide transmission circle which could endanger parents and grandparents.¹⁴ Whilst wishing to minimise disruption to children's education, stricter guidelines are needed for reducing opportunities for infection. Many schools have been steered to respond minimally to positive cases by only sending home the closest contacts. The risks from casual contact on school transport, breaks and lunchtimes have not been adequately recognised. Many classes have been sent home this term on more than one occasion. Misleading information has been given on health risks to teachers.¹⁵ Action is urgently needed, to make schools safe for staff and students and to reduce infections in the community.

⁸ www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools

⁹ It is not possible to show statistics for older secondary students, i.e. Years 12 and 13, as they are included in the same age group as college and university students and other young people up to age 24.

¹⁰ Coronavirus Infection Survey, Office of National Statistics
[ons_infection_survey_by_age_20201113.xlsx](#)

¹¹ www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-55057125

¹² www.tes.com/news/exclusive-covid-hotspot-school-attendance-down-65

¹³ www.gov.uk/government/publications/sage-65-minutes-coronavirus-covid-19-response-4-november-2020

¹⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/20/opinion/sunday/covid-bubble-thanksgiving-family.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.tes.com/news/coronavirus-schools-urgent-warning-over-misleading-teacher-covid-data>

Independent SAGE has long argued that control of the virus requires an excellent test, track and trace system. The government made a serious mistake by establishing a privately run testing and tracing operation, rather than strengthening public health nationally and local authority teams. Undue delays, difficulties in getting tested, and inadequate contact tracing, have all affected infection control for school staff, students and families.

A heavy responsibility has been placed on the headteachers and staff of individual schools to make them safe. Considerable efforts have been made to audit and plan for risks, based on local circumstances, but this has often been undermined by contradictory advice and incoherent strategies from central government, as well as the lack of financial support. Widespread dissatisfaction has been expressed by headteachers about Department for Education helpline operatives who are unqualified for the role and are simply 'reading from a script'. No organisation has been assigned responsibility for monitoring the steps taken and their impact. This report invites schools to assess and call for the resources they need to operate safe; for central government to agree responsibility for monitoring; and for a strengthening of established public health services including the local level.

The impact of Covid has been particularly severe for the large numbers of young people growing up in poverty. Despite an 80% employment subsidy ('furlough') for workers, there has been no specific assistance for families with children who have been most heavily affected.¹⁶ Children in poverty have suffered a combination of problems, exacerbating the educational disadvantage existing already. Consider the compounded impact of a range of pressures - lockdown in cramped accommodation with a shortage of food, cold classrooms without warm clothing, poor quality masks, worries about medically vulnerable parents, neighbourhoods with high levels of infection, lack of books and IT, varying ability of parents to help with school work. Many schools have rightly focused on children's welfare and material needs as the top priority, but the situation requires a generous and coherent response from national and local government, along with new pathways towards further and higher education and employment for disadvantaged young people.

The present situation in many schools and communities worst affected by Covid-19 is characterised by confusion, secrecy, fear, mistrust, demoralisation and exhaustion. There is a

¹⁶ 39% of parents reported having their household finances affected compared to only 22% of non-parents and [62% of parents reported having their work affected by Covid, compared to only 35% of non-parents](https://cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/families-hit-harder-because-nothing-children-covid-19-response).
<https://cpag.org.uk/news-blogs/news-listings/families-hit-harder-because-nothing-children-covid-19-response>

danger that apathy will follow, if people feel they are unable to act intelligently and effectively. The situation is not sustainable.

A. Requirements for safe provision of education

The Covid-19 virus spreads both through surface contact and through the air. Distancing and ventilation are not alternatives to consider: both are necessary.

1. Distancing

Distancing is an essential part of prevention, though the means to achieve it will vary between different kinds of school. This is almost impossible for some schools within present resources of staff and accommodation.

On average, classes are larger in England than most European countries, and especially in primary schools. Many classes have over 30 pupils and some over 35. Distancing may require *hiring additional spaces and staff*. This will require finance from central government. All possibilities should be considered including empty buildings in universities due to teaching online, hiring unused space in community buildings or hotels, and constructing temporary classrooms.

As far as possible, children and teachers should be 2 metres apart. Where this is not practical, children should remain with the same small group at a distance from other groups.

Many countries have facilitated distancing by *dividing classes*. Many primary school classes could be shared between the teacher and a suitably experienced teaching assistant using adjacent rooms, or using nearby community spaces.

Another way to reduce infection in primary school classes is to create *smaller bubbles* of three or four children, distanced from others in the room, and kept together during recreation and lunch breaks.

The traditional organisation of English secondary schools involves large amounts of movement. This increases opportunities for infection and makes contact tracing almost impossible. Rather than stay with one class, students frequently regroup for subjects into different sets or GCSE options. Movement and casual contact also occur on school transport, toilet visits, breaks and lunches, and while waiting to enter rooms. There is no medical evidence that the virus cannot be passed on when children are together for less than 15 minutes. It is essential to *minimise circulation of students*. (See appendix A)

English secondary schools are also large by European standards, and buildings often overcrowded. Plans should be made for effective systems of *blended learning*, so that some lessons are taught on the school site and students spend *part of the week (or alternate weeks or half-days) in computer-aided learning or guided home-based study using high-quality textbooks*. A suitable blend of on-site and home-based learning would enable many secondary schools to operate safely, as not all pupils would be in school buildings at the same time. Teachers need CPD in online learning and time to do this.

Strong distancing measures during lessons are frequently undermined by movement between classes, waiting outside rooms, congregation in dining areas and recreation breaks. Transport to and from school can bring together students from different classes and year groups, and sometimes different schools. These loopholes must be closed.

2. Ventilation

Given that normal breathing and speaking can spread the virus across a room and not just to those nearby, good ventilation is essential. Where feasible, *windows and doors should be open*, allowing fresh air. It is not sufficient simply to open some windows to avoid draughts.¹⁷ Even in cold weather, a thorough change of air should be achieved by opening windows and doors for five minutes every 20 or 30. Students and staff should be encouraged to wear *outdoor clothing*¹⁸ in colder weather, with warm clothing supplied free to children in need.

Many artificial ventilation systems recirculate air, aiding the spread of infection, and often between different rooms. Only ventilation or air-based heating systems which rely *entirely on new air* should be used. Recirculating air without a HEPA filter is dangerous. Rooms which have no external windows or suitable ventilation systems should *not be used*.

Arranging pupils' desks to *face the front*¹⁹ is not a safeguard against transmission. Research from Spain²⁰ highlights the dangers; because the teacher talks for most of the time, she can spread infection to the furthest corner. Furthermore, the Covid virus hangs in the air and

¹⁷ Advice from the DfE (section 8) suggests it is sufficient to open windows during breaks, or to open only high level windows to avoid draughts. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools>

¹⁸ DfE advice (same source, section 2, School Uniform) places undue emphasis on normal school uniform, modified by 'allowing additional, suitable indoor items of clothing'. This will be insufficient for adequate ventilation in winter conditions.

¹⁹ ref¹⁹ DfE advice (same source, section 6b) suggests 'seating pupils side by side and facing forwards'.

²⁰ <https://english.elpais.com/society/2020-10-28/a-room-a-bar-and-a-class-how-the-coronavirus-is-spread-through-the-air.html>

does not travel in straight lines. When possible, *open air spaces* should be used for teaching and learning, making the most of opportunities for fieldwork, as in many parts of Scandinavia and the growing forest school movement in the UK.

3. *Face coverings*

Good quality masks, when safely used, reduce the spread of infection.²¹ Schools should ensure that:

- children have masks of adequate quality;
- they are washed or replaced regularly;
- the children are taught to handle them safely.

Masks should be provided *free of charge* if families are unable to afford them.

Teachers and other staff should wear masks whenever they are in a room with students or other adults. It is recommended that secondary school students should wear them in classrooms and elsewhere in the school buildings, particularly in areas with high infection levels.²² Where individual students have difficulties due to anxiety or breathing difficulties, it would be safer for them to sit further away and near an open window. Additional consideration needs to be given for children who rely on lip-reading.

4. *Hygiene*

Hand cleaning is essential to stop the spread of infections through surfaces. Schools must ensure:

- good provision of hand gel dispensers
- students use them on entering and leaving rooms
- they are reminded regularly of hygiene advice in toilets and eating areas.

Hard surfaces in particular must be frequently disinfected. Audits should ensure that all potential infection points are disinfected regularly, including door handles. Elbows should be used for opening doors as far as possible. Toilets should also be well ventilated.

²¹ Research by *Which?* has identified that some reusable face coverings can filter 99% of particules, while others manage just 7% <https://www.which.co.uk/news/2020/10/which-face-mask-tests-reveal-huge-differences-in-filtration/>

²² DfE guidance (same source, section 2) only proposes use of face coverings in secondary schools, in high or very high alert level areas, and only outside of classrooms

Sharing books or equipment should be avoided. School cleaning must be thorough, and any detergents should have a minimum alcohol level of 60%.²³ 5. *Bubbles*

The idea of students staying within bubbles (consistent self-contained groups) remains important for the purposes of

- reducing the spread of infection
- tracing possible contacts
- isolating.

The recommended 'bubble' for primary schools is the class. Given the large size of primary school classes in England, they should be divided where possible or children stay consistently in smaller groups distanced from others (see 1 above).

Department for Education advice²⁴ that the *entire year group* (often 180 or 240 children) should be treated as a single bubble in secondary schools is seriously problematic. This provides too many difficulties both in spread and tracing of infections. Every step should be taken to *prevent movement outside a much smaller group (see appendix 1)*.

As far as possible, staff should not move between different classes or bubbles. Infection is also common between staff, so proximity should be avoided by using smaller staffrooms and holding consultation meetings by video. *Staff who are clinically vulnerable* should be enabled to *work from home*.²⁵

6. *Self-isolation*

As school attendance decreased during the autumn, schools were encouraged to respond to infections by asking only the closest contacts to isolate²⁶, often only those sitting adjacent to an infected child or sitting very near to a teacher. This is particularly inadequate given

- airborne infections
- movement between groups
- the extent of asymptomatic infection.

The bubble should define not only patterns of contact for reducing infection spread but also isolation in the case of an infection. It should not be assumed that people are safe if together

²³ DfE (same source,, section 1 The system of controls: protective measures) refers only to 'standard products eg detergents', having removed bleach which appears in earlier versions.

²⁴ DfE advice (same source, section 6a)

²⁵ DfE advice (same source... only recommends that staff who are '*extremely* vulnerable' be allowed to work from home.

²⁶ defined as "face to face contact with an infected individual for any length of time, within 1 metre' or 'within 1 to 2 metres for more than 15 minutes'. DfE advice (same source, section 10)

for a short time, or that the virus only spreads between children sitting near one another. Schools should be alert to various possible symptoms among children which may require a test, including fatigue, fever, sore throats or stomatic upsets. Many will be asymptomatic.

7) Testing and tracing

Many staff, students and their families have encountered difficulties obtaining a test after being in contact with a positive case, unless they themselves are already showing symptoms.²⁷ Indeed, under current regulations, individuals are having to lie to get a test. Given the extent of asymptomatic infections among children and young people, this creates serious dangers.

All staff and students within a bubble, or accidentally nearby an infected child or adult, should be offered tests. Other family members should also be offered tests. Repeat tests should be offered if there is a possibility that the initial test was too early.

8) Resources for home-based learning

In the first wave, during lockdown, it was acknowledged that many students did not have access to suitable technology, with many reliant on phones and without wifi. Government funding was provided, but only for Year 10, and deliveries were delayed. Access to computers and wifi remains a problem for large numbers of children.

Although schools are expected to provide for distance learning if a child needs to self-isolate, there is no systematic provision of equipment. Furthermore, many students did not have access to textbooks or library books, so were often reliant on notes sent by teachers. High quality textbooks and reading books are an even higher priority when teaching becomes unreliable, as in the present crisis. Large numbers of children are missing school once more, and lack resources to learn at home.

Schools should ensure that all their students have textbooks and computer technology and access, with CPD for staff on online teaching. The Department for Education should underwrite this with additional funding.

Schools are now expected to provide teaching both at school and online, placing additional pressures on teachers. New possibilities should be considered such as inviting trainee teachers to collaborate in resource design or tutoring individuals and small groups.

Unlike some other countries, there is no national infrastructure for online resources, and government funding was withdrawn many years ago for the excellent programmes and

²⁷ DfE guidance (same source, section 10) suggests close contacts who are isolating should only get a test if showing symptoms.

software produced by the BBC. The quality of online resources urgently needs to be improved, including drawing on specialist teacher organisations for school subjects.

9) *Barriers to wellbeing*

Delayed decisions about primary school tests and GCSE and A-level examinations are creating widespread anxiety among teachers, children and parents. The lockdown during spring of 2020 and irregular school attendance (particularly in secondary schools and areas of high infection) make formal testing unreliable. A government decision is now urgent:

- i) to abandon primary school tests for 2020-21
- ii) to replace secondary school examinations with assessment by teachers, evidenced partly by tests during the year and suitably moderated to ensure fairness.

Young people growing up in poverty are seriously handicapped in terms of entering university. The Covid crisis has exacerbated this, and now the head of the largest examination board has warned that it will be impossible to resolve this unfairness. Universities should be asked to provide alternative credentials based on teacher recommendations, particularly for disadvantaged candidates who have been unable to prepare properly for GCSEs and A-levels, including funded access courses.²⁸

* * *

Parents who are medically vulnerable have been placed under intolerable pressure when they consider it unsafe for their children to attend school. Threats of prosecution or removal from the school's role are inappropriate and punitive, and must be withdrawn. Distance learning at home should be facilitated (see 7 above).

Even children who originally counted as 'clinically extremely vulnerable' are now expected to attend school even in areas with high infection levels unless they are 'one of the very small number... under paediatric care (such as recent transplant or very immunosuppressed children)'. Greater trust should be placed in parents for judging their children's best interests.

* * *

Academic progress is not the only reason for attending school; young people's mental health and social development depends on interacting with peers. Scant attention has been paid to the

²⁸ A system already exists in Scotland whereby young people who have been in care are guaranteed a university place if they have the minimum requirements.

pressures which lockdown and isolation have placed on young people. More than one third of adolescents reported high levels of loneliness during lockdown.²⁹ and there are indications that child suicide rates may have increased.³⁰

This is very worrying, as young people need regular peer contact to maintain mental health. Human beings are not full neuronal adults until their mid-twenties, and their biological developmental during adolescence is heavily dependent upon social experiences. There is a range of evidence that engaging in social experimentation with peers ‘has a profound impact on life course trajectories’.³¹ It is only via such interaction that young people can build the social hardiness and resilience to face the complexities of social life as an adult.

Imaginative responses are needed which do not add to teachers' burdens. These may include drawing on the skills of actors, musicians, sportspeople and employees in the leisure and entertainment sectors who are currently unable to work, as well as volunteers from youth organisations, to organise safe activities, including during school closures or holidays.

10) *Advice and support for managing outbreaks*

Difficulties are common for teachers, parents, students, headteachers, governors, and local authorities or academy trusts, when information is withheld about a possible outbreak. Teachers complain of not being informed of infections among their pupils. While respecting a need for appropriate confidentiality, it is very difficult for individuals to adjust their behaviour and take intelligent action. Early indications of a local upsurge in infections is essential, and might require large scale testing.

Good practice has developed in many places by drawing on existing expertise and using a multi agency approach. In some areas the Health and Safety Executive have visited schools facing particular difficulties and consulted with the recognised health and safety representatives. Teacher unions have provided extensive training to their school representatives and local branch officers.

Headteacher organisations have expressed widespread frustration at the advice available from Department for Education telephone helplines. The most effective advice has often come from

²⁹ M Loades et al (2020) *Rapid systematic review: the impact of social isolation and loneliness on the mental health of children and adolescents in the context of COVID-19* (Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry 59(11)

³⁰ National Child Mortality Database (2020) Child suicide rates during the COVID-19 pandemic in England. <https://www.ncmd.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/REF253-2020-NCMD-Summary-Report-on-Child-Suicide-July-2020.pdf>

³¹ S Blakemore and K Milles (2014) *Is adolescence a sensitive period for sociocultural processing?* (Annual Review of Psychology 65)

local public health teams with knowledge of local conditions, substantial experience and the ability to develop a coherent strategy for the area. This should become the first point of access for headteachers responding to an outbreak or developing a prevention strategy.

11) *Welfare of staff*

The education and wellbeing of students and their families depends on the welfare, health and morale of staff. At present, many staff feel tired and vulnerable, and local shortages are occurring. Staff are a major route for infections.

School staff should have minimal contact with colleagues, for example by avoiding whole-school staffrooms and running meetings electronically. Supply staff should be offered long term contracts to avoid them working in more than one school. Newly qualified teachers could be recruited, and retired teachers to increase support for home-based learning.

Great care must be taken by school managements to avoid overloading or demoralising staff, and to involve them fully in managing the crisis. In particular, staff working in special schools and early years centres should be fully involved in discussing how to protect themselves and children, since social distancing is rarely possible in these settings.

A risk assessment should be made for every staff member. Staff who are clinically vulnerable should be enabled to work from home, for example to support distance learning.

Many staff who have been in close contact with infected pupils or colleagues have been denied tests because they are not showing symptoms. They must have full access to testing, for their own and their pupils' safety. Staff living in areas of high infection should be tested regularly. Teaching staff must be informed of infections among their pupils.

Teaching staff are being required to undertake online teaching with minimal training. Universities could be commissioned to provide training.

12) *Evaluation of measures taken by schools.*

No organisation has been assigned responsibility to systematically monitor and evaluate the provision made by schools during the pandemic. This cannot be done effectively at national level, by DfE or the Ofsted inspectorate. Academy trusts often operate across a wide geographical area. The only competent body is the local authority, despite funding cuts over the years. This can be carried out in conjunction with local public health teams and adapted to local conditions and levels of infection. Local trade union representatives and accredited

health and safety representatives in schools have an important role to play, and are generally well trained and experienced.

Summary of key measures:

13. *Distancing*: Smaller classes are needed in primary schools to make distancing more successful. Secondary schools should reorganise to minimise contact between different classes, and prevent opportunities for infection outside the classroom such as school transport, lunchtimes, and gatherings to enter rooms. Many secondary schools in areas with high levels of infection will need to introduce a blend between on-site and home-based learning. [page 3 and appendix A]
14. *Ventilation*: Good levels of ventilation are necessary, through opening windows or ventilation / heating systems using entirely new air. Students should be encouraged to wear warm outdoor clothing, regardless of normal uniform requirements, with warm clothing supplied to children in need. [page 4]
15. *Face coverings*: Schools should make sure that children have face coverings of good quality. Secondary school students should wear them in classrooms and elsewhere in the school. [page 5]
16. *Bubbles*: Consistent self-contained groups are essential for reducing infections and tracing possible contacts. In secondary schools, these should be much smaller than the entire year group. [page 6]
17. *Self-isolation*: In the case of infections, the bubble should form the basis for isolating contacts. Self-isolation must not be restricted to children sitting next to each other or in sustained contact. [page 6]
18. *Testing*: All staff and students within a bubble should be tested where they are positive cases, regardless of whether they are showing symptoms. [page 7]
19. *Learning resources*: Home-based learning should be supported with textbooks and other books, as well as IT. Sufficient funding and resourcing must be provided for young people in low-income families. Nationally, it would be valuable to draw on the specialist subject associations. [page 7]
20. *Examinations*: Schools need to focus on learning and wellbeing, without sources of stress. Standardised tests and exams can't run fairly when some schools have been affected worse

than others. Primary school tests should be cancelled, and secondary school exams replaced with assessment by teachers, with suitable moderation. [page 8]

21. *Wellbeing*: Creative thinking is needed to ensure that young people are able to socialise safely. The threat of removal from school rolls or fines for non-attendance should be removed where there are medically vulnerable people in a family. [pages 8-9]

22. *Transparency*: Clear information should be provided to all stakeholders and organisations to aid intelligent response to infections. Teachers must be informed if there are cases in their classes. [page 9]

23. *Advice and support*: Local public health teams should become the primary source of advice and support for schools. [page 9]

24. *Staff*: The welfare and morale of teaching and other staff is vital to sustainable provision. Those who are clinically vulnerable should be enabled to work from home where possible. [page 9]

B, Organisation of responsibility

1. *Responsibilities of central government*

- revise the Department for Education guidance in response to the above report, removing ambiguities and shortcomings
- ensure that testing is sufficiently available, timely and accessible, as recommended above, without the need to show symptoms
- empower and support local public health teams as the first point of advice for all schools
- provide funding for additional accommodation and staffing to reduce the size of classes, overcome staff shortages due to sickness and isolation, and provide improved ventilation where needed
- recognise the need for a blend of on-site and home-based learning, particularly in secondary schools in areas where infection levels are high
- make an early announcement to cancel primary school tests and change assessment arrangements for GCSEs and A-levels, and consider alternative pathways for pupils who have faced barriers to learning
- provide additional funding to schools to overcome shortages for disadvantaged students, including face coverings, books and ICT
- fund professional bodies such as the specialist subject associations to make relevant resources available for home learning

2. Responsibilities of the Ofsted schools inspectorate

- continue the thematic review of schools to ensure health standards are high, including sample site visits
- identify shortages of resource (teaching staff, textbooks and reading books, ICT and wifi access) and other issues which are hindering students' learning on the school site and at home
- help disseminate good practice in schools for maintaining student learning whilst minimising the risk of infection, with a particular focus on school organisation
- avoid standard inspections of individual schools except where absolutely necessary.

3. Responsibilities of local authorities

- develop capacity so that the local public health team is the first point of contact and advice for schools
- ensure good communications and data transfer between the local public health team, education directorates and schools
- systematically monitor all schools in their area, however governed, and provide support where necessary
- work with academy trusts operating in their local area by sharing information and expertise

4. Responsibilities of headteachers and governors

- work with teachers and students to draw up a future plan that meets health and education standards, highlighting budgetary and resource needs
- ensure staff and parents are informed of infections and risks, in order to manage fast changing situations intelligently
- work with health and safety and trade union representatives to promote staff welfare and ensure the practicality of decisions
- avoid putting undue pressure on parents who have decided that attendance could endanger the health of family members.

APPENDIX A: specific needs of primary and secondary schools^{32 33}

Primary schools

Classes in England's primary schools are larger than almost anywhere in Europe. The average class size here is 27, compared with a European average of 20. When schools in Denmark reopened, children were taught in classes of 10-15.³⁴ With suitable government investment, that could happen here and would help create a world-class education system. It may be possible to share a class between a teacher and experienced teaching assistant in adjacent rooms, but efforts should be made to encourage qualified teachers back into schools.

There are good educational and safety reasons why students should remain with their class, rather than being redistributed into different teaching groups for literacy or numeracy. Finally, there are considerable educational and health benefits in children spending more time learning outdoors.

Secondary schools

There are particular features of English secondary schools. Pupils are frequently allocated to different sets (ability groups) for specific subjects, and between different subject options in Years 10 and 11 (sometimes Year 9). By contrast, a common core curriculum is the norm in many European countries.

More open-minded discussion of alternative ways of conducting secondary education is urgently needed. Without pretending to offer a specific model, which would depend on the physical layout of the school and many other factors, it is appropriate to offer some possibilities (below).

Additional risks arise from the physical problems of movement between lessons, for lunch time, access to toilets and handwashing facilities, and walking or transport to and from school.

³² This section is composed of extracts from the Eagle Research Group paper 'Can schools open safely in September?' (8 July 2020), abbreviated and adapted for clarity. <https://eagleresearchgroup.org/can-schools-open-safely/>

³³ *Given the particular difficulties of special schools of various kinds, and early education settings, we have refrained from giving particular advice but recommend thorough discussion among staff and with parents.*

³⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-52550470>

In the light of these factors, it seems likely that most secondary schools will *need some combination of on-site and distance learning*. Few schools will be able to accommodate all their students full-time whilst complying with Public Health England advice.

The following points are intended to suggest some ways of organising the curriculum which might enable secondary schools to operate safely and sustainably.

1) 'Bubbles' of 180 or 240 have a high risk of infections spreading and would make tracing the source almost impossible. This can be reduced somewhat by dividing year groups into two or three parts.

2) The layout of many schools means that students in different 'bubbles' have to pass close to each other through narrow corridors or stairs on the way to specialist accommodation (science, arts, PE etc). Subjects could be taught in half-day sessions rather than 40 or 60 minutes. This is particularly important for GCSE and A-level.

3) Pressure could be relieved by agreeing to home-based distance learning for some half-days each week. Students needing additional learning support, including many with SEND or unable to study at home, could be offered tutorials or small group support at school during these half days.

4) Many schools will not be able to accommodate students safely at lunch time, with cleansing between sittings. A longer break between morning and afternoon sessions would allow those living nearby to eat at home.

5) Many schools have a carousel arrangement for some subjects in KS3, for example each class is taught music, art and drama in different school terms. This has certain educational advantages and would make schools safer by reducing movement.

6) Redistributing classes into ability sets for different subjects adds to the amount of movement. Where this cannot be avoided, these subjects should be taught in blocks on particular half days, as suggested earlier.

We are aware that other solutions will emerge, and that their viability is dependent on the physical layout and human resources of each individual school. We also recognise that major curricular reorganisations take time to plan. However, this level of reorganisation may be the only way in which all secondary school students can enjoy a full curriculum while Covid remains a risk.

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Following the science