**NASS Update (18th May 2020)**

Hello everyone,

We hope you got to see some sunshine at the weekend, with more promised this week for all of us.

There was more guidance issued on Friday, which somewhat counteracts the effect of the sunshine, including the Department for Education publishing its evidence base for starting to re-open schools from 1st June. You can read it for yourself here: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/885631/Overview_of_scientific_advice_and_information_on_coronavirus_COVID19.pdf>

It’s not immensely reassuring! Whilst there is some evidence that most children do not experience severe symptoms from the virus there is little evidence to suggest that children pose a lower risk in terms of transmission. Much of the ‘evidence’ published is actually just a recapping of the guidance published to date with very little extra that will allow schools to feel confident about the basis on which decisions about wider opening have and can be made.

There has been an update to the ’Supporting Vulnerable children and young people …’ guidance: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-vulnerable-children-and-young-people/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-vulnerable-children-and-young-people>  There is nothing with a major practical impact but the ongoing categorisation of all children with EHCPs as ‘vulnerable’ is unhelpful and risks pushing up expectations that all special school pupils should be looking to return. Schools are still asked to use risk assessments to decide which children it is safe to have back in school.

We know that there is further specific guidance for special schools due this week. I expect this to be a slight evolution from existing guidance, not a revolution in terms of fully addressing those core issues of PPE, social distancing and risk-reduction.

If you have watched the news over the weekend you will have seen widespread coverage of schools re-opening and the growing tensions between Government and unions. Gavin Williamson gave Saturday’s Government briefing and made a thinly veiled attack of the unions as the ’some people’ who want to deny vulnerable and disadvantaged children access to school. There has not been a full union response to this but it is interesting to see that ASCL has now backed DfE plans for wider re-opening from 1st June. You can read Williamson’s statement here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/education-secretarys-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-16-may?utm_source=e4467b2b-4d69-471a-a9df-4168aca10082&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=immediate>  I would expect a strong response from other unions today and a fairly robust discrediting of the scientific evidence document mentioned above. There is likely to be quite a bumpy path to 1st June!

BBC News this morning indicated that some local areas are NOT planning to re-open schools due to higher local transmission rates. Liverpool and Hartlepool were mentioned. This adds an interesting possible dimension to your own plans to re-open - both if you are located in an area where other schools are remaining closed and where you are taking back children from areas with higher transmission rates. To note, there is nothing in guidance so far on this topic but it may be something that you factor into your own risk assessments. I am raising this with DfE as an area where more guidance is urgently needed for special schools that work with multiple authorities in multiple regions.

This week there is the third meeting of the SEND Reference group with wider opening of special schools central on the agenda. I’ll report back after it. The next 2 weeks are likely to be tough with lots of new guidance and conflicting views about risk and safety for schools. I understand why many school staff have lost faith in the guidance issued to date - especially where PPE is concerned - and the difficulties this leaves school leaders with. I know that many of you are already taking a highly pragmatic approach and using PPE where you can access it and where it enables staff to work with more confidence. My own view is that this is a reasonable response to managing the uncertainties left by the guidance. As ever, if you want to use us as a sounding board for any plans or decisions we will do our best to help or connect you to other schools.

We wish you all as good a week as possible!

Claire, Kate, Karen and Jenny