

Dear parents and carers of Essex school and college pupils,

In the last three weeks, schools and colleges in Essex have been able to open full time to all pupils. Many children and young people will have returned to their education setting five days per week for the first time since 20 March, meaning they've been able to socialise with friends in their class, be taught by their teachers in person and get back to a productive, positive routine. In turn, many parents and carers have been able to return to more regular home and work lives.

On 17 September in Essex, the information available to us suggests that all our schools were open, and that 90 per cent of pupils on roll attended their setting, slightly higher than the national average figure of 87 per cent published for the same day.

The return to education settings has been possible in a large part due to a reduction in COVID-19 cases in the community. This reduction is thanks to the sacrifices every member of the community made earlier this year, by staying at home, not seeing friends and relatives in person, and maintaining social distancing measures. However, as restrictions have been eased, and the rate of transmission now rising, we must all remain alert. The government have made it clear that further school and college closures will be an absolutely last resort.

We must also recognise the tremendous efforts of our schools and colleges over the last few months to put in place measures required to open safely. We ask for your support to ensure pupils adhere to the policies their school or college has in place – whether this is around phased starts, cleanliness, or maintaining class or year group-sized bubbles. All of this limits the number of people each pupil comes into contact with in their setting, reducing the number of people the virus could potentially spread to.

This includes on home to school transport, where pupils who can should wear masks for the full duration of their journey, including when entering and exiting the vehicle. This will reduce the risk to pupils and drivers, and ensure we are able to continue providing home to school transport.

However, the preventative measures being practiced in education settings are just one piece of the jigsaw. The whole school and college population, whether on site or off it, must remain vigilant and observe national social distancing measures. This is key to preventing an increase in COVID-19 cases in the community and ensuring we sustain the successful opening of schools and colleges.

This means we must all follow recently-revised guidance on socialising with others.

On 14 September, the number of people allowed to meet socially, both indoors and outdoors, was reduced to a maximum of six. Even with these smaller gatherings, people should remain two metres apart from those not in their household wherever possible. This cannot be stressed enough: you are highly unlikely to catch or spread COVID-19 through air-borne particles if you maintain this distance.

This guidance applies to the activities children, young people and families engage in outside school; such as visiting play areas, going shopping at the weekend, or having friends and family visit. It also applies when travelling to and from education settings. It is crucial that pupils and parents maintain a two-metre distance from others at the school gate if we're to avoid a spike in the community and the reintroduction of lockdown measures as has happened in other parts of the country.

Schools and colleges have strong procedures in place to deal with suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19 in their setting, again helping to reduce the spread. Please do familiarise yourself with these procedures and ensure that you take the necessary action required around alerting your school about any suspected or confirmed cases within your household so that the school can take the necessary action.

We understand that there is a lot of anxiety around and the school processes should look to minimise this as much as possible. We would encourage you to consider what you post on social media, particularly around positive cases, as this can cause further anxiety and concern amongst the community.

In the event of a confirmed case in your child's bubble, a dedicated specialist advice team will work with the school to carry out a rapid risk assessment to identify who has been in close contact with the individual during the period they were infectious. Staff and pupils identified as close contacts may be sent home and advised to self-isolate for up to 14 days. Other members of these people's households will not need to self-isolate, unless the person isolating develops symptoms. More information can be found on our website.

Anyone displaying one of the main symptoms of COVID-19 – a new continuous cough, high temperature, or loss or change to their sense of taste or smell – must self-isolate straight away, and book a test as soon as possible. Members of their household must self-isolate for 14 days, or until the symptomatic person receives a negative test.

Tests are not available for household members with no symptoms. If there has been a positive case within a household, other members of that house must remain isolated for the full 14 days, even if they themselves test negative during this time. This is because the positive individual may still be contagious and household members could develop the virus at any point during those 14 days.

If a child has a runny nose, sore throat (without a fever) or mild cold, but is otherwise well, does not have COVID-19 symptoms and they would normally have been sent to school, they can attend school as normal.

We know that for many families and schools the difficulty in getting access to a test, and delay in receiving results is causing issues and concern. We would like to reassure you that we are highlighting the issues Essex residents are facing around testing with the government at every opportunity and also looking at local solutions to provide some extra capacity.

For the time being, we believe the best chance of booking a test is if you phone between 8 and 8:30 in the morning, or 8 and 8:30 in the evening, as these are when new slots for tests are first made available. Others have sought postal tests. Only people with one of the main symptoms of COVID-19 should access a test.

We'd like to again recognise the hard work of teachers and school and college staff who spent the summer preparing for this term and making their education settings as safe and welcoming as possible. We've been delighted with the way pupils, parents and carers across Essex have adapted so quickly to the measures education settings have in place and the start we've collectively made to the new school year and have been pleased to hear many stories about how excited and happy children and teachers have been to returning to the classrooms, getting back into learning and being able to socialise again.

We hope you will continue to support us and your schools to ensure that this is able to continue for as long as possible by taking all measures to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 and allow the continued and sustained opening of schools.

From:

Cllr David Finch, Leader Essex County Council

Cllr Ray Gooding, Cabinet Member for Education

Clare Kershaw, Essex County Council's Director of Education

Dr Mike Gogarty, Essex County Council's Director of Wellbeing, Public Health and Communities