

Dear parents and carers of Essex school children,

Last month marked the end to an extraordinary school year. Schools and colleges had to respond to necessary measures aimed at reducing the spread of COVID-19, meaning they closed to the majority of pupils on 23 March. June then saw the return of some pupils, largely on a part-time basis. Throughout, we have been incredibly proud of Essex's response. Many parents and carers have had to provide childcare and assist with education on top of their work commitments, teachers and education staff have had to deal with the logistical issues associated with ensuring those attending settings were kept safe, and pupils have experienced disruption to their routine, education, exams and social interactions. We do not underestimate the sacrifices that have been made, the uncertainty that's been felt, and the hard work that's gone into Essex's response to this crisis.

The government has said education settings can return to full-time opening for all students from the beginning of September. This is possible because the prevalence of COVID-19 in the community has decreased since settings restricted opening in March, NHS Test and Trace is now up and running, and settings have a better understanding of the measures that need to be in place to create safer environments. While there will still be risks as long as COVID-19 remains in the community, scientific evidence shows that COVID-19 presents a lower risk to children than adults of becoming severely ill, and that there is no evidence that children transmit the disease any more than adults.

In preparation for wider opening, we ask that parents and carers read the government's guidance on [what parents and carers need to know about early years providers, schools and colleges in the autumn term](#) and speak to their children about the important role we must all play in reducing the spread of the virus. Essex schools and colleges have been communicating their individual plans for September with their parent communities; it's crucial we support our county's schools and colleges by understanding and adhering to the protective measures they put in place.

Outside school and college, and as a wider population, we must all remain vigilant and observe social distancing measures. It is vital we all play our part if we are to ensure we avoid further restrictions that will impact society.

Essex County Council (ECC) has been working with schools, colleges and partners to prepare for this return, and measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in schools and colleges will be in place in September. These may include pupils being kept in class or year group-sized bubbles, older pupils being asked to socially distance where possible, the staggering of start, end, break and lunch times, and regular hand-washing. If children, or anyone they live with, have coronavirus symptoms, they must not attend their school or college and you will be asked to collect your child if they are displaying symptoms whilst at school or college. Remote education will be provided for pupils self-isolating.

You will also note the recent change in the government's advice regarding the wearing of face coverings for children over the age of 12. Schools and colleges have the discretion to advise on the wearing of face coverings in communal areas and have assessed this need as part of their risk assessment. Your school or college will advise

you on the decisions it has taken. It is only compulsory to wear face coverings in schools where a local lockdown is in place. This is currently not the case in Essex but please do talk to your school or college about any concerns you have regarding face coverings.

It is recognised that the disruption to children's education since partial school closures in March has the potential to have a long-lasting impact. It is therefore vital that all children and young people are supported to catch up on any lost learning and to return to the structure and routine of school and college as soon as possible, as we know that schools and colleges play a crucial role in providing for children's educational, social and emotional developmental needs. We further recognise the challenge placed upon parents needing to home educate their children during this time. It is therefore vitally important that every child returns to school and college when they fully open from 2 September 2020.

However, we also recognise the significant impact that COVID-19 has had on many families' lives, and that some families will need more support during this time. We will therefore be asking all schools and colleges to work with families who are anxious about their child returning to the classroom to understand the individual circumstances and the concerns they have. All schools and colleges have been required to complete a risk assessment to outline the protective measures that they have put in place to make their setting COVID safe – it is therefore important for parents who are anxious to talk to their child's education setting to discuss the measures they have put in place and any further support that may be required.

The government has made it clear that attendance will be mandatory for pupils of compulsory school age from September. If any parents are still not sending their child back to school after the school has made contact to explain their risk assessment and measures that are in place, or if levels of attendance were low prior to the lockdown, then it remains within the headteacher's discretion to request that we, ECC, issue a targeted penalty notice in line with our policy on attendance. We will want to see clear evidence of the support the school has offered to the family to help their child to attend before we agree to the school's penalty notice request, and will take each case on an individual basis.

Parents and guardians of eligible students who receive transport to their place of education should have now received a letter outlining transport arrangements and protective measures in place for the new school year. We have been working with transport providers to ensure passengers can travel safely.

Students and parents who can travel to school or college safely by walking or cycling are recommended to do so. To help with this, a new dedicated [Getting to School section](#) has been launched on ECC's Stop.Swap.GO! website. It includes maps and information on cycling and walking routes to schools and colleges in Essex, as well as suggested drop-off zones away from the school gate to reduce congestion. These are being developed for schools in Essex's most congested areas, with more suggestions being added soon. The aim is to help families develop a sustainable and active travel option for the school run.

We are sharing advice, resources and information about local organisations that can help children to prepare to go back to school with confidence as part of our Every

Family Matters campaign. Find out more on the [Staying Well: Children and Families page](#) on our website.

Finally we would like to wish all young people, their parents and families, and school staff our best wishes for a safe and successful start to the autumn term. We know that whether you are starting a new school for the first time, returning after a long period away from your school setting, or returning from the summer break, the start of a new school term is always an exciting but anxious time – we know this year there will be more nerves than usual, but have confidence in our school leaders and staff that they will welcome you back with warmth, support and understanding.

Yours sincerely,

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