

1 June 2020

Executive Mayor's Office

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Dear resident

Supporting pupils to return to school safely

Last week I wrote a letter outlining our position on the re-opening of schools. This was based on widespread conversations with our education and public health professionals.

All of us are to a greater or lesser degree in the dark about the course of the pandemic but our statement was also informed by the fact that we have seen a massive reduction in infection and death rates in the borough. A few weeks ago, we would hear of four or five deaths each day, and now most commonly there are none. Our local hospital was at risk of not coping, but now hospital admissions are much reduced, and the NHS is returning, carefully, to its more routine non-Covid19 activities. Last week we understand that eight new positive tests were recorded in Tower Hamlets, far fewer than in previous weeks. While that is almost certainly fewer than the actual number it is positive news. An 'R' rate below one means a continuing reduction in infections. We understand the R rate within London is currently at 0.4 – the lowest of any region of the UK.

Yet the virus remains a very real threat. We know that the most vulnerable are those who are elderly or with a long-term health factor. We also know that those from BAME communities are over-represented in those suffering harm, which is of obvious concern in our diverse community. So we must continue to be careful, to avoid increasing the 'R' rate, to keep it as low as possible, to 'shield' vulnerable people and to constantly monitor and be willing to change the rules if there is any increase in the rate of infection.

So, where do our schools fit into this? There is a strong campaign, particularly of teaching unions and concerned residents, and including our two MPs, urging that our schools should not open, other than to children who are vulnerable or from 'key worker' families, from 1st June. It has been suggested that I should give a strong signal as Mayor that I support this. A number have suggested that 15th June would be far safer, as the earliest date for beginning to reopen for wider groups of children.

My job is to build support for a position that keeps us safe and around which we can build confidence. I recognise the opinion around 15th June and if this is a date around which schools and families can plan, and be confident, then that is a major step forwards for us in Tower Hamlets and I support it. The reality is that a few schools will start to widen attendance before 15th June. There is no fixed date when we will be entirely safe, and we must respond to the evidence. A small number of schools will be confident to open sooner, and are able to decide to do so, but for most, and depending on the evidence and any local factors, this is a good date to plan for.

To be clear, whatever the date no school should open until they have undertaken a thorough risk assessment and put in place a range of measures in their schools, informed by local conditions and expert advice. Every school which does begin to expand the number of students attending must do so carefully and gradually. We must be very careful and put the safety of children, staff, families and the wider community first. This is what we have been doing and will continue to do. In exceptional circumstances the council does have power to intervene if it became necessary, I do not imagine however that this will happen as we are working very closely with schools.



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To recap, reopening our schools is a delicate issue. Schools are legally able to make their own, reasonable, decisions, but guidance is a good thing. And it must be about building confidence. Most schools have stayed open but just for vulnerable children and the children of key workers. As we know, the Government have asked that primary schools begin to open to more pupils from 1st June but only a very small number – three or fewer – intend to do this. But even they only expect a very small number of additional children to attend, and there is no obligation to attend. Building confidence around a later date, of 15th June, for those schools who do not feel confident with the date suggested by the Government, is a good idea.

This means that on the 1st of June most schools will not start admitting additional pupils. A small number will, gradually, open to more children earlier but most will begin over the following weeks in June. It is good to get your children back into school, for their progress, but there are difficult personal decisions for many families and there will be no obligation to attend this term.

As schools are so different, the return of pupils will vary between them. If you are a parent, your individual school will contact you once they have made their arrangements. The key to success is partnership, trust, and recognising that this is an extremely stressful time for us all, where we must carefully build confidence in managing risk. The council will continue working closely with our schools and trade unions, and you, to ensure every step is taken to manage the safety of our schools during this difficult time.

Yours sincerely,



Mayor John Biggs
Executive Mayor of Tower Hamlets

