

Council and education leaders confident of wider schools reopening

The council has continued to work jointly with school leaders in Warrington and a decision has been made today, Thursday, that the wider reopening of schools can go ahead next week, from Monday 15 June.

A decision was made last week to defer primary and special schools extending their opening to more pupils. This decision to delay by one week was based on a series of assessments and indicators from Public Health England, alongside the council's own evidence-led and safety-first approach.

After further preparatory work, and following the joint conclusion this week from Directors of Public Health across Cheshire and Merseyside that schools would be safe to open to more children in a phased approach, the council and its education partners are preparing for schools to welcome more children from Monday 15 June.

The agreement to allow more school children to go back into educational settings is also based on both the council and schools agreeing that robust and appropriate risk assessments are in place for each school.

The council's Director of Public Health, Eileen O'Meara, said: "Alongside my fellow Directors of Public Health across Cheshire and Merseyside, I am confident that a phased return of pupils back to school can be safely managed.

"Where head teachers and councils in the region have rightly paused to consider if they should expand the number of children coming back to school, including Warrington, I support the decision locally to now proceed with a phased return. This includes our secondary schools priority groups.

"Evidence from the North West Scientific and Advisory cell (STAC), demonstrates that there is very low transmission from child to child and children to adults in schools. I am also assured that plans are in place to manage any suspected cases of COVID-19 in schools, with each school having prepared robust risk assessments alongside the council. There will be strict adherence to the health and safety arrangements made in each school, alongside containment arrangements such as 'bubbles' of staff working together.

"Everyone has a role to play in keeping schools safe and I would like to make clear that the public should continue to observe social distancing, use face coverings where social distancing isn't possible and continue good hygiene practices."

Cabinet Member for Children's Services Cllr Matt Smith, said: "In the same way we had to carefully consider many different factors to come to our conclusion to delay the wider reopening of schools last week, we have also had to assess, this week, the practicalities of a wider reopening of schools from Monday 15 June.

"We are confident that the data and information we have pored over this week, alongside validation of a measured and phased approach from the region's Directors of Public Health, leads us to a firm conclusion that it is safe for children to return to the classroom.

"I have absolute confidence that schools are well-prepared to accept more children in as safe a manner as possible. Our school leaders are understandably keen for their pupils to come back to the classroom but have also, reasonably, balanced this with prudence and caution given the absolute need to keep our schools and communities safe.

“The data at this point leads us to conclude that schools can reopen more widely. A lot has been discussed in public about the North West’s ‘R number’, and I must stress that this is just one indicator that is difficult to calculate with accuracy at a local level. I am confident that with our wider risk assessments and detailed arrangements with education partners that our schools are wholly prepared to welcome more pupils.

“At the same time, we do accept that some parents may be anxious about sending their children back to school. I can only offer you my utmost reassurance that we have taken every reasonable step and precaution to keep them safe.

“We are grateful for the ongoing support, understanding and patience of our schools and parents.”