

LiFE MAT approach to reopening schools – widening participation phase

General Principles

What we provide for our children and communities is incredibly valuable and important. The longer we cannot provide our service the more harm is done. This is a significant risk and has to be balanced with the possibility of within school transmission on C19

1. Final decisions on timeframes need to be taken locally as each school will have it's own context such as the number of staff available.
2. It is right and proper that schools look to bring children in, when the risk to health is low enough to balance the considerable risk of a failure to provide an adequate education and pastoral care. It is accepted that C19 is likely to be within the community for far longer than it is safe to keep children out of school. It will therefore be impossible to reduce risk to zero.
3. Risk evaluation or 'scoring' needs to be owned at national level. Headteachers do not have, and will not be able to have, sufficient and timely enough information to create risk scores. These risk scores would fluctuate wildly according to local context on a daily basis. Attempted risk scores would therefore be unreliable and lead to a misplaced perception of risk. This decreases safety not increases it.
4. We currently know from experience that all school based staff can be tested quickly – if this changes we will have to review our plans. We will take PHE advice on the possible need to close should there be evidence of any within school transmission.
5. At present we have adequate supplies of PPE for those who may have to work more closely with pupils. We may have to close if that situation changes.
6. Schools should have robust risk mitigation plans (RMPs) in place before wider participation. These plans should be shared with staff for consultation. Then they should be shared with parents and children, so they have accurate information, in order to make an informed decision on their child's return to school. This whole process is time consuming and therefore needs to commence before we reach the point where significantly more children can come in.
7. It is accepted that all vulnerable children should now be attending full time, and therefore we will need greater staff numbers in school for these children.
8. RMPs are complex and very different to normal operation. Therefore, training in order to ensure their safe operation is essential. Ongoing flexibility and adapting to circumstances is essential.
9. Training of staff must be conducted with strict social distancing in place and must be no riskier – and probably far less risky - than the existing childcare and vulnerable children provision. This is therefore in line with the TUC/HSE guidelines on adults returning to the workplace - which has been possible since 13.05.20.

10. Asking colleagues to participate in training is for their own safety as well as that of the children and their families.
11. There is not a preconceived date when we will know it is safe to bring greater numbers of children in– we will take all views into consideration. It is not possible for staff to form a view on safety, until they are familiar with the RMPs in-situ, and have expressed these views. School leaders will need time to respond to the views of staff and reform plans accordingly. We do not, and should not, wait for the point where children can come in before starting the process with staff.
12. There is a clear difference between when it is safe to bring more staff into school and when it is safe to bring more children in. The two should not be conflated. It is clearly safe and proper to train staff with the new procedures, before it is safe for the children themselves to return. This will avoid unnecessary delays in bringing children back into school when it is appropriate to do so.
13. There is a limited amount of time left in this academic year for schools to re-engage with their pupils. Unnecessary time lost is unacceptable, however delay caused by getting plans right is essential. It would therefore be unfair to our children to delay widening participation because we have failed to create plans and consulted staff as soon as we are able. It would be unfair on our staff not to plan and consult as soon as possible so we know if we have to delay.
14. Staff will be anxious about returning to the workplace. Schools will appreciate this and handle concerns with empathy and understanding. Similarly, colleagues need to be open about their anxiety so they can be supported. This must not be conflated with the national debate as to when the moment comes, that there is agreement on the conditions being met for schools to widen participation. Schools will be sympathetic to concerns around staff who fall into more vulnerable groups, beyond those defined as ‘extremely vulnerable’. Schools should be flexible in how these staff can contribute to the wider school operation. This may mean setting work from home for those pupils who are still remote learning, or performing in-school roles where strict social distancing can be expected such as supervising queues of parents waiting to drop off their children.
15. We have to accept that we all live in a world where there is a small increase in risk in most things that we do. The school workplace is no different. It is therefore important that the exposure to that risk is minimised, and this is assisted by ensuring there is a degree of equitability in that exposure. Unions affiliated to the TUC have demanded this, and we support this notion. Once again, we state that it is impossible to reduce risk to zero, and therefore this has to be a risk balancing exercise as the risk of failure to educate is accepted to be high.
16. We are not in an industrial dispute with our colleagues – all national advice has to be pragmatically applied to our local context.
17. We will not take a local decision that it safe to open in contradiction to national advice.
18. We will take decisions to go beyond the national advice on safety. For example we will have maximum class sizes of fewer than 15 when in normal classroom spaces.
19. LIFE does not support training staff during the half term holiday or lengthening the summer term in order to increase the possible safe contact time with children. However, colleagues who would appreciate some opportunity flexible working could help provide a valuable catch-up service in the summer, and therefore should discuss this with their headteacher.