

Pastoral Statement from a group of Church of England Diocesan Directors of Education  
May 20, 2020

The discussions about partial school re-opening continue in various ways in schools, with LAs and MATs. The Church of England Education Office, through Nigel Genders, has released a balanced [statement](https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/news/supporting-schools-reopen-right-time) (<https://www.churchofengland.org/more/media-centre/news/supporting-schools-reopen-right-time>). Although as is often the case, this was seized upon by some sections of the media to support other agendas, we are confident you will read it in full as it stands.

As Diocesan Directors of Education each of us has been listening carefully to our schools, MATs and Local Authorities in recent weeks, and offering support and resources at a local level. We have also been meeting twice weekly to reflect on the common experiences of our diverse church school community.

In the light of this a number of us offer these brief comments.

We wish to pay heartfelt tribute to schools and their leaders; headteachers, MAT leaders, governors, teachers and support staff for the selfless dedication and imagination with which they are serving their communities, and especially the most vulnerable children and families. That is what makes our family of church schools so special and resilience and adaptability have been drawn on as never before. We salute you.

Like you, we have been working through and interpreting the various guidances, policy announcements and national discussions relating to the government's aspiration that schools in England should begin to re-open from June 1<sup>st</sup> where circumstances permit. We note the nuances of words such as 'from' rather than 'on' (June 1) and the difference between 'guidance' and 'instruction'. We have each followed closely both the Secretary of State's statements and those of other ministers and also the concerns and reactions of trades unions and professional associations. Perhaps some of the differences we have noted have been inevitable in a period of such great uncertainty and when we all need to balance risks and calculate what is in the best interests of our children and students. We do not wish to comment on the politics nor should we add another level of 'guidance' to those that have been circulated; we support you in adhering closely to local authority and your MAT advice.

Families will make their own decisions too. We welcome the announcement that there will be no fines where families decide not to send their child back to school in June. We see that as an acknowledgement that although a modified school environment is undoubtedly the best place for many pupils, especially those who live in restricted home spaces and poverty and it is parents and carers who bear ultimate responsibility for their children's and family's wellbeing. We are especially mindful that some appear to be more vulnerable to Covid19 than others, such as among our BAME communities.

So we wish to re-iterate that local decisions must be precisely that; local. They must be made in the best interests of children and their families and to all for whom our schools have a duty of care, including staff and colleagues. We wish unequivocally to affirm that we stand behind you as school leaders as you make the necessary assessments and the decisions that will follow from them.

Within our national church school family, Christian belief and practice is central, regardless of individual personal conviction. Many of you draw great strength and sustenance from Christian community, prayer and the scriptures. Our Christian narrative takes feelings as well as intellect seriously. It recognises that anger, frustration, confusion, uncertainty, even despair, can be part of our human experience. Hope is not naïve optimism; we have to really work at sustaining hope in difficult times. Love is not just 'warm feelings'; loving can be supremely painful. Faith is not just assent to a number of philosophical propositions; it is an act of will and a gift that changes lives for the better. So St Paul was able to say, 'We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed (2 Corinthians 4:8-9).

We want to assure you that whatever your local circumstances as you navigate the weeks ahead in school and beyond, your diocesan education team will support and serve you in prayerful solidarity.

Signed:

Ed Gregory	Diocesan Director of Education	Diocese of Bath and Wells
Quentin Roper	Diocesan Director of Education	Diocese of Canterbury
Vanessa O'Dea	Diocesan Director of Education	Diocese of Carlisle
Tim Elbourne	Diocesan Director of Education	Diocese of Chelmsford
Linda Wainscot	Diocesan Director of Education	Diocese of Coventry
John Searson	Diocesan Director of Education	Diocese of Exeter
Andrew Teale	Diocesan Director of Education	Diocese of Hereford
Claire Shaw	Diocesan Director of Education	Diocese of Lichfield
Richard Noake	Diocesan Director of Education	Diocese of Leeds
Deborah Smith	Diocesan Director of Education	Diocese of Manchester
Tony Wilson	Diocesan Director of Education	Diocese of Oxford
Peter Cantley	Diocesan Director of Education	Diocese of Peterborough
Margaret James	Diocesan Director of Education	Diocese of Worcester
Andrew Smith	Diocesan Director of Education	Diocese of York