

Date: 08 June 2021

Dear Parent/Carer,

As you may have already been made aware by your child's school, we have made a formal recommendation to all secondary schools and colleges in Wigan to reintroduce the use of face coverings, until the summer term. Other areas in Greater Manchester are making the same recommendations to their schools and colleges, and we wanted to write to you to explain why this recommendation has been made.

Q. Why are you recommending face coverings in schools again?

As has been reported extensively in the media in recent weeks, there has been an increase in cases of COVID-19 across the UK, particularly of a variant called Delta (also known as the Indian variant). In Greater Manchester, we have seen a considerable increase in cases in all boroughs in the last fortnight, apart from Bolton. In Wigan, there has been a consistent rise in the number and prevalence of cases within the borough since the week ending 30th April, and over the last 7 days (prior to 2nd June 2021), there have been 261 cases in Wigan, at a rate of 79.4 per 100,000 population, which is over twice that of the national average.

The reason we have seen these increases is likely because the Delta variant of COVID-19 is more transmissible than the previously predominant variant in this country (the Alpha variant, originally known as the Kent variant), as well as the increased mixing of people and movement of people between areas as a natural result of the relaxation of lockdown measures.

In addition, amongst our cases, we are seeing a higher proportion of children and young people than we had previously been seeing. Our rates in the 11-16yr olds are currently at 108.4 cases per 100,000, and in our 17-21yr old populations at 164.2 cases per 100,000. Largely, this increase in proportion is due to the success of our vaccine rollout in other age groups but does indicate that where children and young people are regularly mixing without the appropriate COVID-19 controls and safety measures in place, there continues to be a risk of COVID-19 transmission. Alongside rapid testing, the available scientific evidence states that, when used correctly, wearing a face covering reduces the emission of virus-carrying particles when worn by an infected user, helping to protect others.

As a result, all Local Authorities in Greater Manchester have therefore secured permission from the Government to formally recommend to our schools that they reintroduce face coverings in secondary schools and colleges, with the intention that retaining face coverings will help prevent further

transmissions of COVID-19. This recommendation will now be in place in Wigan until the end of the summer term.

Although we have not yet advised any individual school to reconvene on-site LFD testing of pupils, we have also secured permission to do so if needed. In the meantime, we would ask secondary school pupils and college students to continue taking LFD tests at home. It is also really important that any symptomatic children do not attend school and immediately isolate and undertake a PCR test.

#### Q. What are the recommendations around face coverings?

The recommendations we have made to schools and other educational settings are:

- Where pupils in Year 7 and above are educated, face coverings should be worn by adults and pupils when moving around the premises, outside of classrooms, such as corridors and communal areas where social distancing cannot easily be maintained.
- Face coverings do not need to be worn by pupils when outdoors on the premises.
- As before, some pupils will be exempt from wearing face coverings, and schools should take this into account. Further information on face coverings, including exemptions, can be found via this [link](#).
- Face coverings are worn in early years and primary school settings by staff and adult visitors in situations where social distancing between adults is not possible, for example, when moving around corridors and communal areas.
- In secondary schools and further education settings, staff should wear face coverings in all indoor environments – including classrooms – where 2m social distancing cannot be maintained during lessons.

#### Q. Are our schools still safe for young people?

As the Government has regularly pointed out throughout COVID-19, there are no risk-free options. Therefore, decision-making around schools has always aimed to weigh up the balance of risk between contracting COVID-19, and the risk to children and young people from not being able to access education.

That being said, although scientists are continuing to study COVID-19 and any new variants, including the Delta variant, the evidence we have available continues to suggest that children and young people are less likely to suffer serious illness/hospitalisation as a result from COVID-19 than those in other age groups.

The transmission route of COVID-19 and therefore the ways we can keep ourselves safe continue to be the same for all variants; including vaccination, social distancing, face covering, regular handwashing, ventilation of indoor rooms, and regular testing. Our schools in Wigan have been open throughout the pandemic and are therefore extremely experienced in implementing and monitoring the control measures within their schools. Our schools regularly review and update their risk assessments, implementing any changes as needed. The Health Protection Team continue to monitor

cases in schools on a daily basis and are quick to offer schools any additional support where needed. The Health Protection Team continue to be impressed by the creativity and dedication school leaders have shown in identifying and applying robust COVID-19 safety measures in our schools.

Furthermore, our internal data shows that the majority of cases in school continue to be brought into schools from outside in the community rather than being in-school transmission. Our data also shows that in the majority of cases, our schools are then able to prevent further transmission when there is a case within the school.

#### Q. What about proms and transition events?

We acknowledge the importance of both proms, transition events, and other celebratory events to schools, parents and young people. In particular, we know that proms and other celebratory events are really important for our young people, both as a celebration of their achievements in the previous academic year and during their time at a school, as well as for the positive emotional and mental health and wellbeing benefits these events bring.

Although we know there are really strong control measures in place in our schools which are able to reduce the likelihood of in-school transmission, and that transmission is happening in communities rather than schools, we are trying to balance the risks of transmission against the benefits of accessing education. Therefore, taking into account the current prevalence of cases in Wigan, including amongst our children and young people, our local advice to schools is that proms and other similar events should not go ahead under the current circumstances.

However, we are at present supporting the holding of transition events, although we have advised schools that they should carry out risk assessments before transition events, that events should be held virtually where possible, and that this position may change in future should there be further worsening of COVID-19 transmission within the borough. Your school should contact you about any arrangements for transition events.

#### Q. If my child is identified as a contact of a confirmed case, what should we do?

Due to the current increase in the number of new variant cases in Wigan in recent weeks, we are asking all staff and pupils who are identified as a contact of a confirmed COVID-19 case to access PCR testing, where appropriate. Household members of those isolating can also book a PCR test through this route. This will help us to identify and isolate cases including where people don't have any symptoms, prevent onward transmission, and minimise our case rates in the Borough.

To access PCR testing as a contact of a confirmed case, you can visit <https://www.gov.uk/get-coronavirus-test>. You will be asked to identify whether you (or your child if you are arranging a test on their behalf) have COVID symptoms. If there are no symptoms, you should select 'No' for this answer and proceed through the questions until you get to the question: 'Why are you asking for a test?' In response, please select the box that says, 'I've been told to get a test by my local council,

health protection team or healthcare professional'. And then, after this, select the option that states: 'My local council or health protection team has asked me to get a test, even though I do not have symptoms'. You can then proceed to book a test. It would also be helpful if you could report to the school when you have accessed testing so that your school is aware of whether tests are being undertaken.

We hope that this letter has helped to reassure you about your child's return to face-to-face education and we thank you for your continued support of our schools in these challenging times.

Yours sincerely,



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