

Director of Public Health

Prof Jim McManus, FFPH, CPsychol, FBPSS,
CSci, FRSB, CharteredFCIPD



Hertfordshire County Council
Public Health Service
County Hall
CHO231
Pegs Lane
Hertford SG13 8DE

Date: 23rd September 2020

Dear Parents and Carers

Supporting nurseries, schools, colleges and other education settings to respond to Coronavirus (COVID-19)

I appreciate that many of you will feel anxious about your child(ren) returning to school. I am writing to update you on the work we continue to do, in order to keep pupils, students and our teaching and school staff safe. Since I last wrote to you, government has also introduced new national regulations on gatherings.

This letter is to update you on the following topics:

- **New regulations on gatherings**
- **What we are doing to keep education settings safe**
- **Infections are rising in Hertfordshire: Play your Part**
- **Provide information on self-isolation, testing and symptoms**

In an appendix to this letter I have provided information about symptoms of coronavirus, self-isolation, managing symptoms, getting a test and support for people who are self-isolating which has been written with our NHS colleagues.

New regulations on gatherings

As you will probably be aware, from Monday 14 September, Government changed the regulations about gatherings, which mean that in most circumstances, the maximum number of people allowed to meet in groups either indoors or outdoors is **six**.

More detailed information about these regulations, including the penalties which can be imposed on illegal gatherings, can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do/coronavirus-outbreak-faqs-what-you-can-and-cant-do>

As I said when I wrote to you recently, a number of cases of infection have been linked to social events in Hertfordshire. It is important that we continue to adhere to the rules including new rules on gatherings if we are to avoid an escalation of infections and further restrictions placed by Government on our daily lives.

Keeping education settings safe

We are working to ensure every education setting in Hertfordshire complies with the national guidance on being COVID-19 safe. All education settings in Hertfordshire, from our childminders through to colleges were asked to complete a risk assessment based on their own individual circumstances. This covered their buildings, other facilities and also considered the intake of children they support at their setting.

Based on these assessments and following strict Government guidance which you can read in full at, <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus/education-and-childcare>, each education provider worked over the summer to prepare their classrooms and shared indoor and outdoor spaces to implement measures that allowed children and staff to remain safe.

In addition to making physical changes to their settings, they also planned new timetables allowing staggered start and finish times, alternative lunch and break times and planned for classes and year groups to attend and learn in restricted bubbles.

Since children returned to school and normal routines and activities have resumed for many residents more generally, we have been closely monitoring positive cases of COVID-19. We are putting in place the following further support:

1. We are developing further tools and guidance for our education providers to help them implement prevention measures and ensure they are clear on how and when to report cases.
2. Guidance for determining close contact has been created specifically to help schools plan and deliver teaching bubbles in a way that means they can deal with COVID-19 cases with the least disruption to your children's education. This should help reduce the need and number of children asked to self-isolate unnecessarily.
3. All education providers have access to a dedicated local authority helpdesk for advice and guidance.
4. We have created a local support team made up of health professionals, environmental health, health and safety officers and teachers who are contacting and visiting schools to provide them with advice and support to deal with COVID-19 issues.
5. All schools have considered children who are vulnerable because of health conditions as part of their risk assessment and they will continue to do so.

We are working with nurseries, schools and colleges to support their teachers and other staff members to understand and follow the guidance on social distancing measures and best practice on hygiene to keep themselves, as well as their pupils, safe.

Infections are rising across Hertfordshire: Play Your Part



The numbers of people infected are rising across Hertfordshire and nationally, especially in younger people. In the last few days, the numbers of people admitted to hospital have started to rise again in Hertfordshire. Almost every area of Hertfordshire at the time of writing is experiencing a rise in cases. We will do everything we can to keep the virus suppressed for as long as possible, but we will only succeed if everyone adheres to the measures which will prevent transmission.

It remains important that we continue to do everything we can to prevent the virus from spreading. To protect ourselves and our family members, you need to:

- wash your hands regularly or use sanitiser
- keep your distance from people (2 metres remains the advised distance)
- wear a face covering where required or advised
- self-isolate if you have symptoms

These four things are part of the countywide **Play Your Part** campaign. You can read more at www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/coronavirus.

Concerns and further information

I hope this letter goes some way to reassuring you that we are doing all we can to protect children and young people from the virus. If you still have concerns relating to your own personal circumstances, I'd urge you to speak with your school or college to try and resolve these with them directly.

We will keep updating information on the County Council's website for parents and education providers. For regular updates and the latest information relating to childcare and education, please visit www.hertfordshire.gov.uk/returningtoschool.

Yours sincerely

Jim McManus
Director of Public Health

Important information for parents and carers

The main symptoms of coronavirus are:

- a high temperature
- a new, continuous cough – this means coughing a lot, for more than an hour, or 3 or more coughing episodes in 24 hours
- a loss or change to sense of smell or taste – this means they cannot smell or taste anything, or things smell or taste different to normal

If you are not sure whether you or your child's symptoms suggest that they have coronavirus or an everyday cough or cold, you can consult this online NHS symptom checker: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/symptoms/>

If your child(ren) or anyone in your household develops what could be coronavirus symptoms, they should **not** go out or attend school unless they have had a test and their test results are negative. At the end of this letter is a brief guide to the rules on self-isolation set by national government.

If you develop symptoms: self-isolate and get a test

If you think that you or a family member has coronavirus symptoms, self-isolate immediately. You will find more details about how to do this below.

The next thing to do is to seek to book a test. If you have internet access, go to www.nhs.uk/coronavirus to book a mail-order or drive-through test.

Testing is run by national Government, **not the County Council**. We continue to work with Government to improve testing access and availability and continue to work with them to resolve the capacity problems in their system, but the County Council is **not** in charge of testing.

In recent days, this service has been very busy, and some people have had problems booking a test due to capacity issues in the laboratories that process the results.

New testing slots are added hourly, so please keep checking, and self-isolate while you do so. Additional laboratory capacity is being added, but in the meantime, areas of the country where there are significant outbreaks are being prioritised.

If you cannot access the internet to get a test, call 119 instead. **Ringling 119 will not help you to get a test if there are no tests available on the national website and 119 is not an advice line.**

Hospital Emergency Departments (A&E) **will not** test you or your child(ren) for coronavirus. Hospitals have a limited number of tests available which must be prioritised for people who are waiting for planned procedures or who are waiting to be discharged from hospital.

If you don't have COVID symptoms, **please do not book** yourself a test. Doing so only makes it harder for people with symptoms to get the test they need.

Self-Isolation

The rules on self-isolation vary depending on whether or not you or someone in your household has symptoms. You should read and follow the guidance here:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/self-isolation-and-treatment/how-long-to-self-isolate/>

If your child is asked to self-isolate as part of a school bubble but does not have symptoms

If your child is part of a school bubble but **does NOT** have symptoms they may be asked to self-isolate:

- Self-isolation means you do **not** leave your home for fourteen days because you have or might have coronavirus (Covid-19). This is to help stop the virus spreading to other people. The reason for fourteen days is because it can take that long to show symptoms
- Your child(ren) should not leave the house and **cannot** visit family, friends or attend any activities or parties, even if these are outdoors. They **cannot** go out to exercise, use public transport or taxis
- Being sent home does not mean that your child(ren) has coronavirus and you should not book a test for your child(ren), unless they develop symptoms
- Other members of your household will **not** be expected to self-isolate due to child(ren) being sent home in a school bubble **unless** the child develops symptoms, in which case the rules on testing and self-isolation apply above.
- If your child(ren) develops symptoms while self-isolating at home, your entire household must self-isolate immediately and you should book a test for those with symptoms.
 - You should check the period of self-isolation which applies here <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/self-isolation-and-treatment/how-long-to-self-isolate/>

I appreciate these rules can seem confusing, but they are designed by the Chief Medical Officer for England to help us prevent the spread of the virus. I have tried to set them out in ways that are as clear as possible.

Families who have a member who is or was shielding

We understand that for parents and carers of children or a family member who were previously shielding due to health conditions at the beginning of the pandemic, the return to school may feel especially difficult. Government have provided guidance specifically for these families which you can read at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19#history>

Schools have considered children with health conditions as part of their risk assessment process.

Managing coronavirus symptoms

There is currently no specific treatment for coronavirus, but you can often ease the symptoms at home until you recover, using the advice on the NHS website:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/self-isolation-and-treatment/how-to-treat-symptoms-at-home/>

You **must not** go to a pharmacy, GP practice, clinic or A&E department if you have coronavirus symptoms. This risks spreading the virus to vulnerable people and reducing the ability of the NHS to help people who are very ill.

If you become concerned about managing your coronavirus symptoms, or suspected coronavirus symptoms, go to <https://111.nhs.uk/covid-19>. This is also the web address to use if you have been asked to get an isolation note for your employer, if you have been asked to self-isolate.

Financial help, employer's isolation notes and help with shopping while self-isolating

You can find information on how to obtain self-isolation notes for employers and information on how to get help with shopping and other essentials here:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/self-isolation-and-treatment/help-and-financial-support-while-youre-self-isolating/>