



18/05/20

GMB Update on Government proposals to increase school and early years pupil numbers in England from 1st June

On Friday 15 May GMB, along with other education unions, met with Professor Chris Whitty the Chief Medical Officer, Sir Patrick Vallance the government's Chief Medical Advisor, along with other government scientists and members of SAGE (Scientific advisory group for emergencies) to discuss the risks of Coronavirus transmission by children, and the science behind the proposals to widen the opening of schools from 1 June.

GMB asked the following questions on behalf of schools members:

'What evidence do you have that younger children cannot transmit the virus as easily as adults can, and therefore pose a significant risk to adults in schools, families and the wider community?'

'Would you agree that PPE would be beneficial for staff working closely with children for example providing first aid, and administering medication?'

'You have mentioned data about risks to the teaching profession. But not other school staff who will be providing the physically closest care for young children. Why not?'

Whilst the meetings were very useful and welcomed by the unions, there remain many unanswered questions and unsatisfactory responses to our concerns which means that GMB, along with the other unions, do not feel satisfied that our members can yet be assured that their safety is paramount.

GMB's position, therefore, is that 1 June is wholly unrealistic, and we will continue to oppose the large increase to pupil numbers from that date.

Why?

The following are examples of key concerns GMB have:

- Virus transmission – a failure of the government to provide clear evidence about the transmission risk from pupils and staff. GMB believes that the latest research has been conducted on an unacceptably small sample group which would be statistically insignificant. A low sample size lowers the reliability of the results.
- The government has yet to meet the unions' safety tests.
- The government scientists acknowledged that they have yet to meet their own 5 key tests and we are less than two weeks from a potential wider opening of schools in England.
- Many support staff come from BAME backgrounds and are in older age brackets, both of which put them at a higher risk.
- Social distancing. GMB believes this is not possible to maintain in schools and nurseries.
- PPE – the government's guidance to schools on PPE is wholly insufficient and we cannot have staff put in a situation where they face an uncontrolled risk.
- Testing, tracing and isolation – failure of the government to demonstrate a workable strategy before increasing pupil numbers.
- Travel – increased risks posed by pupils, parents and staff travelling on public transport and gathering at school gates.



- Redeployment - concerns that DfE guidance will be interpreted to mean that schools can deploy support staff to other roles that they are not trained, experienced and paid to do.
- The guidance encourages schools to use support staff to fill the gaps if there aren't sufficient teachers, which creates the potential for support staff to be exploited if this is not part of their normal duties.

What is the government saying now?

We are pleased that as a result of representations made by the GMB and other education unions that the Department for Education (DfE) officials are now saying that the June 1st date was 'aspirational' and was 'from' rather than 'on' 1st June, and that the guidance being provided was 'non statutory'. Employers should engage with unions locally and nationally regarding a wider cohort of pupils in schools and should continue to follow the NJC circulars guidance as they normally would.

What is GMB doing?

We have produced model letters for members and branches to send to employers / head teachers, so that staff should not be pressurised to return by their employers until it is safe and that plans are agreed with unions. The model letter for members can be found [here](#).

We will continue to encourage education unions to work together locally as well as nationally to agree plans.

We encourage branches to begin to work with employers to discuss plans on the understanding that 1 June is not possible and that more time is needed, and to remind employers that members have rights to be safe at work and protect themselves under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act 1996.



We have produced a model Covid-19 Secure Checklist for risk assessment with other unions to support local discussions – this can be found [here](#).

We must remind employers of the NJC guidance for safeguarding the most vulnerable pupils and staff, including those who have an underlying condition, are pregnant, over 70 or in the shielded group, and those who live with (or care for) anyone in these categories. The NJC guidance documents on Covid-19 can be found [here](#).

If you have colleagues who are not in a union, encourage them to [JOIN THE GMB!](#)