

Wednesday 6th January 2021

Dear Parent / Carer,

You will be aware that on Monday 4 January, the Prime Minister announced a national lockdown in order to reduce the spread of COVID-19, which has now come into effect. Full details of the lockdown restrictions can be found at www.gov.uk/guidance/national-lockdown-stay-at-home.

This central Government decision does not suggest that schools and colleges are no longer safe places for young people. Instead, limiting attendance is about reducing the number of contacts that all of us have with people in other households.

The new restrictions mean that schools, alternative provision, special schools, and colleges will remain open only for the children of critical workers and vulnerable children and young people to attend on site. All other pupils and students will receive remote education until February half term and must remain at home, in line with national guidance. I have set out further details below.

I understand this will not be welcome news for many parents and carers but it is absolutely essential if we are to successfully protect the NHS and reduce the transmission of the virus. In Essex we have witnessed the growing pressure on our NHS hospitals and the wider health system during the past few weeks. Last week a major incident was declared for our hospitals. The county is not yet through these pressures, and our colleagues across Health and Social Care are working tirelessly to ensure the viability of our health services.

Children of critical workers

Schools are remaining open to the children of workers who are critical to the COVID19 response and EU transition, who are unable to safely stay at home.

We need to ensure that the number of children and young people accessing the offer of provision in a school or college is kept to the lowest number possible. Therefore, even if you are a critical worker, if your child(ren) can remain at home rather than attend school, on some or all days, then they should. Please only use the offer of provision when it is crucial for you to undertake your critical role.

The list of critical workers can be found here:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision/guidance-for-schools-colleges-and-local-authorities-on-maintaining-educational-provision

If your child's school or college feels that your role does not fit the critical worker criteria, you may be asked to verify this with a letter from your employer as to why you personally are critical to the COVID19 response or EU Transition or to keep your children at home. If there is an alternative adult such as partner or second parent who is not a critical worker, you may be asked why your child(ren) are not able to stay at

home as per the Government's guidance. If the other adult is working at home or able to take leave from their non-critical job, this will be deemed as a safe alternative.

Schools, settings and colleges are open to provide care to enable critical workers to respond to the crucial role you will play in the response to the COVID-19 emergency, but you must also support your school, setting and college and only use this offer of support if you have no alternatives for childcare for your child(ren). Clearly the more children and young people that attend an education setting the wider the risk of spreading the virus grows.

Vulnerable children and young people – including those with education, health and care plans or a social worker

If your child has an education, health and care (EHC) plan and/or an allocated social worker they may attend their school or college. If you do decide to keep your child(ren) at home and you need additional support, please contact your school and they will work with the local authority to support you.

The DfE definition of vulnerable children and young people who can access their school or college can be found here:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision/guidance-for-schools-colleges-and-local-authorities-on-maintaining-educational-provision

Government advice on leaving children unattended

There is no law about when you can leave your child on their own but it is an offence to leave them alone if it places them at risk. As parents, you should use your judgement on how mature your child is before you decide to leave them at home.

If you are at all unsure, the NSPCC recommends that children under 12 are rarely mature enough to be left alone for a long period of time, children under 16 shouldn't be left alone overnight and babies, toddlers and very young children should never be left alone.

Childcare

Early years settings – including nurseries and childminders – can remain open during this period. Parents are able to form a childcare bubble with one other consistent household for the purposes of informal childcare, where the child/ren are under 14. This is mainly to enable parents to work, and must not be used to enable social contact between adults. Some households will also be able to benefit from being in a support bubble.

Details of support and childcare bubbles can be found here: www.gov.uk/guidance/national-lockdown-stay-at-home#support-and-childcare-bubbles

I thank you for your continued support of Essex's schools, settings and colleges and your compliance with the wider national restrictions in place. Together we all play our part to protect ourselves, those around us, and the NHS.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Clare Kershaw".

Clare Kershaw
Director of Education, Essex County Council