

## **Open letter to Mr Seeley MP, Councillor Stewart and Councillor Brading**

We are writing directly to you on this urgent schools' issue. We wish to ensure; we are all aware that the National Education Union has repeatedly called upon Government to move learning online in all primary schools including primary special schools in England for at least 2 weeks and is issuing advice to all members informing them of their legal rights not to have to work in an unsafe environment.

The reasons should be clear. The Isle of Wight Council issued a statement, published New Year's Eve, saying: "Isle of Wight schools will be following the national guidance that the government published yesterday which takes into account all of the scientific evidence."

This is contradictory to so much evidence. We share some based on the science released right at the end of the year. The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine from the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December, the Sage papers dated 22<sup>nd</sup> of December but released on 31<sup>st</sup> of December or the report from Imperial College on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December - all have the same message - that it will not be possible with the new variant to get R below one without at least a period of school closure.

In the light of this recent updated documentation, increased staff anxieties regarding Health and Safety over returning in the present escalating situation, we strongly urge that schools, particularly primary schools need to remain closed on 4<sup>th</sup> January, in order to avoid even stricter measures down the line.

We highlight 3 specific aspects impacting on schools and virus transmission.

1 – SAGE expressed a lack of confidence in succeeding bringing the R rate below one, irrespective of whether we introduced future measures similar to those in November (i.e. with schools open) or even stricter measures as we did at the start of the pandemic.

SAGE continues by warning, the introduction of Tier 4 measures combined with the school holidays has complicated data analysis, which means any credible analysis of the impact of the new variant will not be possible until mid-January. Surely, a good reason to close all schools for this period.

2 - The Children's Task and Finish Group: updated paper on children, schools and transmission (released 31/12) makes clear the important role schools play in the spread of coronavirus. Increased transmission occurring amongst school children, when schools are open. They report multiple data sources show a reduction in transmission in children following schools closing for half term, and transmission rates increasing again following the post-half term return.

3 - This is confirmed in the latest Coronavirus Infection Survey, which shows that infection rates are highest amongst school age children. It also shows the very strong correlation between confirmed cases amongst pupils and staff, i.e. school pupils and school staff are infecting each other and presumably spreading the virus outside of schools.

In summary, the virus disrupted island education in the last two weeks before Christmas. At least 15 known establishments had to deal with cases, leading to hundreds self-isolating. With the possible exception of Year 1 and Years 12-13, all other year groups including pre-school and staff were disrupted.

Based on the scientific evidence - all we know is that it is going to get worse. As cases have been soaring since the end of last, this is a reasonable assumption.

Therefore, we are expecting even greater disruption, which arguably will be even more disruptive than closing schools now.

We do not believe that it is safe for the community, pupils or school staff for schools and colleges to reopen on Monday. Schools should remain closed, except for vulnerable children and those of key workers at least until mid-January, so that the Government can make an informed decision on the safety of reopening schools as SAGE advise.

We regret having to write to you in this manner at this late stage, but we believe it is the right thing to do. If we don't do this, the NHS will become overwhelmed and our schools and communities will become more unsafe. Therefore, we ask you to re-assess the evidence and make the right decision, so that we can keep all our pupils, staff and communities secure.

Assistant District Secretary, Isle of Wight  
Peter Shreeve

On behalf of NEU support and teaching staff members



## Addendum:

### More information regarding the 3 specific aspects impacting on schools and virus transmission here:

1: Seventy-fourth SAGE meeting on COVID-19, 22nd December

2020 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/948606/s0991-sage-meeting-74-covid-19.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/948606/s0991-sage-meeting-74-covid-19.pdf)

Following the release of the SAGE 74 minutes held on 22nd December, it is now clear that SAGE told ministers that they needed to close schools to contain coronavirus well before Christmas.

Minute 11 states clearly, that if we only introduced measures similar to those in November (i.e. with schools open), then it is highly unlikely that they would be sufficient to maintain R below 1. SAGE continues in minute 12, explaining their lack of confidence in bringing R below 1, even if strict measures similar to those from last Spring with both primary and secondary schools closed were introduced. SAGE are obviously highly concerned about the new variant, as we all should be.

2: Children's Task and Finish Group: update to 4 th Nov 2020 paper on children, schools and transmission, 17 December 2020.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/948617/s0998-tfc-update-to-4-november-2020-paper-on-children-schools-transmission.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/948617/s0998-tfc-update-to-4-november-2020-paper-on-children-schools-transmission.pdf)

Released on 31/12 was the Children's Task and Finish Group: updated paper on children, schools and transmission. This document makes clear the important role schools play in the spread of coronavirus.

‘Overall, accumulating evidence is consistent with increased transmission occurring amongst school children when schools are open, particularly in children of secondary school age (high confidence): multiple data sources show a reduction in transmission in children following schools closing for half term, and transmission rates increasing again following the post-half term return to school (medium confidence).’

3: Coronavirus (COVID-19) Infection Survey, UK: 24 December 2020, ONS

see Figure 5 in particular

This is confirmed in the latest Coronavirus Infection Survey, which shows that infection rates are highest amongst school age children.

In Annex B, “Report on COVID-19 in schools in England” (figure 2), it also shows the very strong correlation between confirmed cases amongst pupils and staff, i.e. school pupils and school staff are infecting each other.

The virus disrupted island education in the last two weeks before Christmas. At least 15 known establishments had to deal with cases, leading to hundreds self-isolating. With the possible exception of Year 1 and Years 12-13, all other year groups including pre-school and staff were disrupted.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/coronaviruscovid19infectionsurveypilot/24december2020>