

Parents United statement for Long Covid Kids MP Briefing, 11th January 2021

In advance of Parliamentary debate/ APPG

Parents United Against Unsafe Schools are campaigning for a sensible, safe and sustainable approach to education during the pandemic. Our group of over 23,000 parents and carers are gravely concerned about the spread of coronavirus in schools, and that knowledge concerning the long-term impact on the health of young people who contract the disease is limited.

The UK government's insistence that schools are "safe" does not stand up to scrutiny. Public Health England data covering the final 12 weeks of 2020, shows that schools were responsible for 3 times the number of Covid-19 outbreaks than hospital settings: they accounted for 26% of all outbreaks in that time, second only to care homes. Cases rose sharply over the course of the Autumn term, and ONS infection survey shows that both secondary and primary school children age groups had the highest levels of infection at the end of term in December.

This is unsurprising given the overcrowded nature of schools, and the importance of social distancing. Health and Safety legislation allows for less than 2 cubic metres of space per pupil or staff member in a classroom environment, and that classrooms were running at full capacity between September to December. This situation could have been addressed by reducing class sizes, with the use of rotas and provision of additional spaces and staff. Unfortunately, the UK government have decided not to furnish schools with any such additional resources for this purpose.

In addition, schools have not been provided with resources to increase classroom ventilation and combat airborne transmission. This route of transmission is now widely recognised to be a major one, and is a considerable risk in crowded environments which are occupied for significant lengths of time, such as the school or working day.

Against this background, it is extraordinary that the "Role of Ventilation in Controlling SARS-CoV-2 Transmission" report published by SAGE-ERG on 30th September 2020, SAGE-ERG included an analysis of the number of colleagues an office worker would be expected to transmit the virus to given different levels of ventilation.

Meanwhile schools have been relying for hoping for the best: using often small and barely opening windows to increase ventilation, and packing pupils and staff into small spaces to endure uncomfortable working temperatures during the autumn and winter months.

A 70% more transmissible variant is now in play, and the prevalence of long-term symptoms and life-long disability being incurred by children and young people as the result of coronavirus infection is uncertain. Before attempting to widen the opening of schools, we recommend the government ensure:

- A significantly lower rate of infection within the population
- The development of safety measures such as class size limits to facilitate social distancing and the reduction of the risk of airborne transmission, based on published and appropriate scientific data
- That schools are provided with sufficient resources to enact the safety standards set out above

Should the UK government attempt to open schools further before these factors are in place, we consider it highly unlikely that parental confidence will be sufficiently high to make this practical.