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Lockdown school closures mean we need to act now to save children's education and wellbeing

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Since the start of the pandemic, I have pushed again and again for schools to be the last to close and the first to open in any lockdown. Yet something that seemed unthinkable only a month ago – a national closure of schools – is now happening as a result of the new, more transmissible variant of Covid-19.

The decision to close schools should always be taken with a heavy heart. It is not something to celebrate or welcome, and it causes more harm to children the longer it goes on. We have been here before, last Spring, when millions of children were out of school for six months. We know that had a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable. The 6-year-old who needs help to learn from home when mum and dad are both trying to work as well. The 8-year-old knowing that she won't see her friends again for weeks on end. The teenager trying to cover everything for their GCSES on a cracked phone screen, or sharing a laptop with their siblings and parents. The family stuck in a B&B trying to entertain younger siblings and do their homework on the floor. The autistic child who needs extra help in lessons and who can't access the curriculum online.

Last year, over 575 million school days were missed. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds suffered most, with less contact with teachers and less work marked. Over half of teachers say the disadvantage gap has widened as a result of the first national lockdown. Teachers estimated that their pupils were on average three months behind by last September, rising to four months in the most deprived schools. Children with special educational needs and disabilities were particularly hard hit. Even by July, 72% of those with an EHC plan were still not in school, despite them being allowed to attend, and countless others with additional needs but no EHCP were struggling to learn at home. Children with a social worker were also able to attend, though just 8% were attending on average in the months of the first

A second national closure of schools will see a repeat of all of this, compounding problems that have not been addressed since the first lockdown. The impact of the pandemic on children's mental health has been particularly worrying. In 2017, 1 in 9 children were found to have a mental health disorder. This jumped to 1 in 6 by last summer. As we do everything we can to tackle this virus, we must remember also that while children are less at risk from the virus itself, they are at real risk from the measures we take to prevent transmission, and that risk cannot be ignored.

The challenge, as it has always been, is to balance multiple competing harms and risks, and to weigh up different costs and benefits which will vary over time and across different groups of people.

Now the Government has announced schools will close, it is vital that this happens for as short a period as possible. Ministers must strain every sinew to get schools open again quickly – and certainly before non-essential shops, theme parks, pubs and restaurants – but also sustainably. Schools must be the last to close and first to reopen. The Government has rightly committed to keeping early years settings open, given the negative impact of closures on parents and the very youngest children and relatively low health risks.

We need to act now to save children's education and wider development throughout the rest of the school year, and to ensure that their life chances are not damaged further. To deliver this, I want the Government to take the following measures:

1. Publish a clear forward plan for how education will be delivered over the next three months in order to give children, families and schools clarity, certainty and the ability to plan. This should include arrangements for remote learning with attendance in school for priority groups of children.
2. The Government must ensure children have the laptops, broadband and data they need to learn remotely, and support schools to provide full online learning and learning at home. More specific requirements should be in place, particularly for direct online contact with teachers. Any children who are unable to learn from home because a lack of technology should be able to return to school for lessons with children of key workers and vulnerable children, from next week.
3. Schools should be reopened ahead of other sectors of society and the economy, with primary schools being the highest priority to reopen. This will require a strengthened mass testing system for all schools to drive down transmission, giving parents and teachers more confidence, and preventing children having to miss even more lessons. Teachers, and other staff working with children, such as social workers or children's custody staff, should also be prioritised for vaccinations, alongside health and social care staff within the existing priority list. Where the supply of vaccines outstrips the