

Re-opening Schools and Colleges: A summary of ASCL members' views

30 April 2020

Consultation process

We shared the DfE's questions with our 19,000 members through an online survey, sent out on Monday 27 April pm, with a deadline of 9am on Wednesday 29 April. We received just over 2000 responses.

Below is a summary of these responses. We would be happy to provide more detail if helpful.

- 1. On the assumption that there will need to be fewer pupils in school at first, what is your preferred model for achieving this? Is it better to have all students in on a rota basis, or specific year groups?**

There were mixed views on this, with some clear differences between sectors.

Leaders in **state secondary schools** expressed a distinct preference for specific year groups returning first. Year 10 was overwhelmingly considered the key target group. Year 12 was the next priority, though some leaders felt that Year 12 students were better able to learn remotely.

Some secondary leaders wanted to prioritise the vulnerable, the 'digitally disadvantaged' and students with SEND, rather than students in particular year groups.

A significant minority preferred a rota system, expressing concerns about gaps in knowledge and implications that education is more important at some ages than others.

It's worth noting that many respondents felt that this wasn't, in fact, an 'either/or' question, and that rotas would need to be introduced even if only one or two year groups were invited back to school, to comply with likely social distancing requirements.

Views among leaders in **state primary schools** were more evenly split, with 45% in favour of prioritising particular year groups and 55% in favour of a rota system. Unlike at secondary, there were fewer strong views about which year groups should take priority. Primary leaders tended to be more in favour of prioritising vulnerable children, and of rotas based on family groups rather than year groups.

Respondents from **FE colleges** all favoured a rota basis, with students following practical vocational courses the main priority. Leaders in **sixth form colleges**, who are now really only dealing with Year 12 students, all called for a rota approach.

80% of colleagues in the **independent sector** favoured an approach based on year groups, with Year 10 and then 12 again the overwhelming priorities. Leaders of boarding schools were clear that phasing based on year groups was the only plausible option for them, as rotas would be impossible to organise. 5% of leaders in this group made the point that they've already implemented very effective home learning processes, which would be disrupted by a phased return, and would prefer to wait until all pupils could return.

Colleagues in **AP settings** were mainly in favour of a rota.

Special school leaders were divided between those favouring year groups (approximately half), those favouring rotas (approximately a quarter), and those who were already open to large numbers of children on a case-by-case basis, and wanted to continue with that approach (approximately a quarter).

2. How far should government mandate who should be in school and how much should schools be able to decide for themselves?

Again, there were mixed views, with nuanced responses. The headlines are as follows:

- Leaders appreciated the clarity of the decision-making around the closing of schools to all but the children of key workers and vulnerable children from 20 March. This provided clarity, consistency and protection for leaders. Most ask for similar clarity around which pupils should return as they begin to re-open.
- However, how this will work in individual schools and colleges can only be decided on the ground, taking into account the context of different settings, and their physical layouts.
- Most leaders would therefore like clear government directions (not guidance) on which groups of pupils should be prioritised and why, with individual settings then given the autonomy to work out how they will implement this in their own context.

These broad views were common across most sectors, with some individual exceptions. Colleagues working in AP felt differently, indicating that only they could decide what was right and feasible for their setting, though some would welcome overall government guidelines.

Leaders are clear that representative organisations such as ASCL must be an integral part of the decision-making, so that government mandates on this issue are informed by the expertise and experience of those who will be responsible for implementing these directives.

3. If there were an announcement about some kind of return for more pupils to schools and a three-week lead-in period given, what are the specific actions and decisions schools/trusts would have to take in that time?

We received a large number of detailed responses to this question. Some key points are as follows:

Purpose and expectations

It is imperative that government articulates clearly the *aim* of gradually re-opening schools. Is this largely for reasons based on education, on safeguarding and wellbeing, or on re-starting the economy? A clear explanation of the reasons behind any decisions taken is essential to building confidence and agreement among school

and college staff, pupils, parents and the wider public. Many leaders also made the point that such clarity of purpose is also required when determining which pupils should be prioritised.

Timescale

Most respondents felt that a three-week lead-in period was appropriate.

Safety

Leaders will require strong, evidence-based direction (again, not guidance) on many issues related to safety, including:

- what social distancing in schools means, and what the expectations are on schools to achieve this
- how staff and pupils can protect themselves from risk as much as possible, e.g. by keeping in small groups which don't mix
- which staff will and won't be expected to be in school
- what PPE will provided in different settings, and how it will be supplied
- what testing and contact tracing procedures will be in place

Policies, risk assessments and regulations

Leaders need guidance on what new regulations will apply during this period, what new policies will need to be developed, what risk assessments will be required, and what training will be needed.

Site and facilities

Schools and colleges are already starting to plan for changes they will need to make to their site and buildings, including around classroom layouts, cleaning supplies, catering arrangements, visitors and third-party contractors. They would appreciate support and guidance with this planning, and clarity on any statutory actions.

Transport

Many leaders raised concerns about transport to and from school or college. These included whether school buses (and taxis where appropriate) would operate, how social distancing might be achieved between groups of pupils on buses or walking to school, and how staggered starts might work for bus companies.

Staffing

Ensuring that sufficient staff can be on site, and that those who are on site are as safe as possible, is a major concern amongst all leaders. Many cited 20-25% of staff as possibly being in vulnerable categories. Clarity is required on whether staff:pupil ratios will be relaxed during this period (a particular concern in early years and AP settings).

Teaching and learning

Many respondents expressed significant concerns around the challenge of teaching more children in school while continuing to provide high quality remote teaching to other pupils. Almost all expressed the view that following a 'normal' timetable would be almost impossible, and that they would need to make some difficult decisions about what they felt was most important for the children and young people in their settings to focus on at this time.

Wraparound care

Clarity will be required on what wraparound care and activities schools could offer, particularly for younger children, over this period.

3a. What pre-requisites need to be in place before schools can open further?

Key points were as follows:

- Unequivocal assurances with scientific evidence that it is safe to reopen – for both children and adults.
- National passing of the government's five tests.
- Strong, reliable, clear safety measures that the government takes responsibility for, including on PPE and testing.
- Unequivocal, clear guidance on procedures that must be followed.
- Workable social distancing rules.
- Ideally, clarity on examination expectations for Y10 and 12 to inform timetable planning.

3b In particular, if schools were required to plan for the return of more pupils, how might social distancing be implemented, and how might this vary from school-to-school?

Few leaders think social distancing is possible in schools and colleges in any meaningful way, beyond phased attendance and staggered timings. Settings with younger children, or children and young people with complex needs or behaviours, are particularly dismissive of the possibility of maintaining social distancing. And even if some degree of social distancing is implemented in schools and colleges themselves, will this be pointless if children are then mixing on their journeys to or from school?

Measures which leaders have highlighted that may enable some degree of physical distancing include:

- Rotas (many respondents suggested they could only realistically have a third or fewer of pupils in a year group in school at any one time).
- Variations in timings, such as staggered starts and finishes, and different break times.
- Pupils staying in one room, with teachers moving between them.
- Distance markers – arrows indicating one-way systems, queuing marks, etc.
- Increased numbers of supervisory staff to enforce social distancing.
- Providing pupils with individual sets of resources to avoid sharing – pens and pencils, paper, books, etc.

3c Are there any situations that schools might be facing that would make it impossible for them to expand their opening in 3 weeks (e.g. contractors having gone bust), and would necessitate a ‘window’ of re-opening (i.e. between date A and date B)?

Most respondents felt that a short ‘window’ for re-opening would help ensure they were ready. Factors which might make it impossible to open on specified date included:

- insufficient staff
- lack of transport for pupils
- lack of availability of cleaners and/or sufficient cleaning products
- appropriate PPE in settings where this was necessary