

## An Important message from the Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Schools & Families

### Covid-19 and the Bury Education Service

I am writing to you, firstly to place on the public record my sincere thanks and those of our council for your unswerving professionalism and for the dedication of your staff during what is an unprecedented time in the life of Bury, whilst we get to grips with the biggest public health crisis our country has ever seen.

Secondly, I want to set out the concerns we have regarding the proposed extensions to the current opening arrangements as proposed by central government.

The third matter, and one which is of the utmost gravity is to announce I have approval from Bury Council's Cabinet to not support the government guidance regarding the progressive extension of schools re-opening to more pupils from 1st June 2020.

I set out below the main themes of my argument;

From the detailed discussions I have had with the DCS, Karen Dolton, and the Interim Director of Education and Inclusion, Julien Kramer, I have become very clear that there is an unacceptable risk to our pupils, our staff and to the communities of vulnerable people in Bury, if we were to extend the opening of our schools from 1st June as central government had proposed.

The North West region and Bury face persistently high levels of new infection, and a significant level of deaths through Covid-19 infection: and we have very high levels of vulnerable individuals within our communities. There are in addition real concerns regarding, Covid-19 testing, availability of PPE, limitations on the proposed Track and Trace, and real concerns regarding the inconsistent level of central government support for our recovery.

As the lead Member for Children's Services Schools and Families, I feel the heavy responsibility of protecting our education communities; and the wider community. I therefore have approval from Bury Council's Cabinet to not open schools to a wider intake of pupils from 1st June. I further intend, to lobby our case for a delayed, and more planned restart, with central government through the Secretary of State for Education. We will commit to regularly review this decision if there is clear evidence to suggest any changes around Covid-19 infection rates or if the government brings forward different direction or guidance than it has done currently affecting education.

I have only praise for the superb professionalism and determination of our Heads, and our staff in Bury schools. Through the daily briefings and from conversations with heads and staff it is clear how resilient the education service is, and how determined colleagues have been to protect the most vulnerable. I thank them for their brave work.

But I must recognise, both the high level of uncertainty regarding persistent high levels of Covid-19 infection in the North West; and the widespread anxiety which government proposals have created; across our education service, among parents and carers; and in the communities we serve here in Bury. In the last week the public view and the views of parents and carers around the re-opening of schools has been quite clear. I know some of our schools have directly consulted with parents to ask

if they intend to send their children into school in line with the governments timescales, and overwhelmingly the response has been NO.

The decision to ask Early Years Children to be amongst the first back into the school was ill thought out and most definitely ill judged. Pupils of that age, would not adhere to or understand social distancing and this would place greater pressure on our teaching staff.

Moreover there are clear significant implications including, the impact for our SEN children, school staff that are shielding, the lack of physical space in some schools and the fact next to no PPE has been offered for our School staff. We must learn the lessons from recent weeks where significant number of health and social care staff were put at risk without PPE.

I have had detailed engagement with Heads, parents, carers and professional associations/unions; and I have listened carefully to their expressions of doubt, and their misgivings.

The latest government announcement by the Prime Minister, together with an unfortunately timed and poorly judged Ministerial letter, have created yet further uncertainty and some dismay.

As the Lead Member for Education I have had valuable advice from, and discussions with the Bury Heads Advisory Group. I have also had numerous representations from parents and local groups; unions and the professional associations. All are saying to me, the present risk is too great.

Bury Council believe passionately that each child in our Borough should have access to education, we are also conscious of the fact that there will be gaps around the teaching and learning of disadvantaged pupils. However we will continue to work with you as our head teachers in helping to bridge and repair this gap at the earliest opportunity. Moreover at this stage our decision making and priority has been based on the clear concerns that have been raised from the teaching profession, parents and carers and teaching unions and the risk that is placed on all if schools were to reopen on 1 June.

The cabinet recognises that this decision will necessitate clarity around safeguarding procedures aligned to the latest government advice. We will continue with our safeguarding plans which have been in place through the period of lockdown and ensure through this next stage of the Summer Term we keep up the engagement with schools. We are clear that vulnerable children and children of key workers should continue with school provision as they have been doing over recent weeks.

I recognise the Cabinet's heavy duty in making this decision to not further open schools from 1st June; and I am clear that there are wider health and safety issues which government must address, before we risk returning more children to our schools. Subject to your advice to me, I intend to write to the Secretary of State for Education, citing the persistently high levels of infection in the North West region, the lack of PPE, the very slow progress in setting up Track and Trace, and the confused government approach to resourcing our recovery. I will urge him to reflect on the importance of local evidence, the local scientific advice, and the national opinion of the British Medical Association in proposing decisions which could have a dramatic impact on our lives here in Bury.

In conclusion I thank you for your outstanding contribution and leadership to teaching and learning within our borough during this pandemic. It is abundantly clear that you have more than risen to the challenge. I share my gratitude and thanks to you our Head teachers and all of your staff for the

flexibility, resilience, and your determination to protect the health and safety of our schools communities at this time.

Once again Bury has shown the strength of our Education Service, through the strong family of schools, including our local authority maintained schools, our faiths schools and our academy trusts.

Looking ahead, the Local Authority advice that you (schools) have been receiving on a daily basis will continue, and we will of course keep dialogue open with you around risk assessments, and your individual plans for the eventual opening of schools whenever that may be.

Please forward this letter to the parents and carers in your school, your staff team and your governing bodies.

Yours faithfully,

Councillor Tamoor Tariq

Cabinet Member for Children's Services, Schools and Families