

Government proposals to increase school and early years pupil numbers in England from 1 June

UNISON's National Schools Committee met on Thursday 14 May and agreed that the union should continue to oppose the government's unsafe proposal to increase pupil numbers in England from 1 June. The Committee was a little encouraged to hear that at a meeting earlier that day, Department for Education (DfE) officials were keen to stress that the 1 June date was 'aspirational' and that the guidance being provided was 'non-statutory'.

The Committee expressed strong concerns around the following issues:

- **Virus transmission** – failure of the government to provide clear evidence around the transmission risk from pupils and staff.
- **Social distancing** – the impossibility of maintaining social distancing in schools and nurseries because of the year groups chosen to go back first, and the significant increase in numbers this would bring in some schools. The government recognises this yet is still moving on regardless.
- **PPE** – the government's guidance to schools on PPE is wholly insufficient.
- **Testing, tracing and isolation** – failure of the government to roll out a comprehensive strategy before any increase in pupil numbers.
- **Travel** – increased risks posed by pupils and staff travelling on public transport and when parents drop off or collect their children.
- **Redeployment** - concerns that DfE guidance will be interpreted to mean that schools can deploy support staff to do jobs they are not qualified to perform, protected to do or paid to undertake. Examples include using support staff other than cleaners to undertake cleaning duties and teaching assistants to take classes where they are not qualified or paid to do so. Schools must ensure that support staff are not required to routinely cover for teacher absence or lead classes. UNISON will not support any use of staff to support teaching in an inappropriate or un-agreed way.
- **Cleaning** - Schools and nurseries will need clear plans about how they will enable the additional cleaning required by government guidance. Additional staff and cleaning materials will be required before settings will be safe to open. Staff undertaking additional cleaning must be paid for these extra hours, including overtime premiums where appropriate.
- **Early years** – The government has acknowledged that it is not possible to apply social distancing among these children and unless adequate precautions are in place, staff and children in these setting will be placed at risk. UNISON believes that all nurseries must undertake risk assessments and have adequate measures in place to ensure safe re-opening before 1 June.

It was agreed therefore that UNISON would continue to work with the other TUC education unions to protect pupils and staff by continuing to campaign for schools and nurseries to only open when proved safe to do so. Further, that branches could begin to work with employers on the understanding that 1 June is not possible and that more time is needed.

To support members during this difficult time the Committee agreed to take the following steps:

- Produce [model letters for members](#) and branches to send to employers / head teachers, so that staff should not be pressurised to return by their employers until it is safe and that plans are agreed with unions. Please note that [new DfE guidance](#) states that it expects schools and trusts to *"work closely with parents, staff and unions...when agreeing the best approaches for their circumstances"*.
- Produce a model Covid Secure risk assessment / checklist with other unions to support local discussions – this will follow shortly.
- Make it clear that members have rights to be safe at work and protect themselves under Section 44 of the Employment Rights Act 1996. Please see the advice under [‘What if I don’t feel my workplace is safe’](#) on the UNISON website.
- Encourage education unions to work together locally as well as nationally to agree plans.
- Call on the government to provide sufficient funding to wipe out past debts and for additional staffing that may be required.
- Call on schools to approach local authorities about having framework agreements covering both LA and academy schools.
- Call on the government for clear strategies for safeguarding the most vulnerable pupils and staff, including those who have an underlying condition, are pregnant, over 70 or in the shielded group, and those who live with (or care for) anyone in these categories. These pupils and staff should be allowed to self-isolate or work from home as per [NJC guidance](#).