

Dear Mr Williamson

### **Potential closure of schools / Covid-19**

I write in my capacity as Cabinet member with responsibility for Children and Young People's Services, including education, at Rotherham MBC.

As Rotherham is in a Tier 3 area RMBC are not, at the moment, thinking of asking the schools in the borough to close to pupils. Sadly, our colleagues in other parts of the country are clearly facing a much more acute infection rate, giving a much more immediate and concerning situation in their area. As the infection rate nationally continues to rise we must therefore keep that position under review, with the health and safety of the borough's children, teachers and other school staff taking priority.

That consideration is currently made more difficult due to the lack of clarity around the government's own advice to school. I note that that is the advice for all schools in London to close, but not in all Tier 4 areas. That makes it impossible for Rotherham to plan ahead with any sort of certainty. I would appreciate you telling me what criteria the government are using to ask schools to close, so that if Rotherham moves into Tier 4 – or simply if we face a sharp increase in infections – we can make appropriate arrangements in advance.

In Rotherham we have had to close (either partially or fully) some schools last term as there were too many staff off – either with Covid or self-isolating – so the school could not open safely. I would hope you would recognise as we do that this is ultimately harmful to the education of the children affected. Given this, and that understandable concerns being expressed now by all teaching unions, I would therefore urge you to make staff in schools a priority for vaccination as the Government have done with medical staff and care home staff.

Finally, in light of the current challenges being faced by schools across the country, I must comment on the government's plans to pursue formal exams this year. This is a subject close to my heart because before I was in this role I was a science teacher for 36 years and for the last 30 or so years I have been involved in marking and setting examinations at both GCSE and A level. This experience tells me that with the uneven number of weeks that Year 11 and Year 13 students have missed from education this year means that it will be impossible to set fair examinations this summer, even if further school closures are not required. It is just too far from being a level playing field. I urge you to consider replacing this summer's examinations with controlled assessments done in school and moderated by the exam boards. We did this for years with 'coursework' and so the expertise and experience is already there.

By taking these three steps: giving local authorities reliable information so they can plan for any necessary school closures, ensuring that school staff are prioritised for vaccinations so that more schools can remain open, and by making proper plans now to scrap this summer's planned exams, the government would go a long way towards giving certainty to worried families and salvaging the best possible outcomes for all our children and young people.

Yours Sincerely

Cllr Gordon Watson

Deputy Leader RMBC and Lead Member for Children and Young People.