

Schools and early years settings could open to more pupils next month

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The government's COVID-19 recovery strategy "Our Plan to Rebuild," outlines the potential phased return of school children after half term.

Depending on how the outbreak progresses and the risk presented by the virus, the Government expects children of all ages to be able to return to early years settings, Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 from June 1. Other primary school children could start to return later in June.

The strategy also says that secondary schools and further education colleges should prepare to begin some face to face contact with Year 10 and 12 pupils who have key exams next year, in support of their continued remote, home learning. But there are no plans to reopen secondary schools before the summer holidays.

Alternative education providers will follow the same approach with the county's special schools working towards a phased return for children and young people without a focus on specific year groups.

Norfolk County Council will continue to work closely with schools, academies, colleges and Early Years providers over the coming weeks to help them to plan for this potential return of more children, as and when it goes ahead.

Cllr John Fisher, Cabinet Member for Children's Services at Norfolk County Council, said: "Norfolk's schools, colleges and early years providers have done fantastic work throughout this emergency, staying open for the most vulnerable and the children of key workers – there is no doubt that their work has played a key role in keeping the NHS and other vital services running.

"We all want life to return to normal and for children to be able to get back to school, nursery and college so that they can carry on with their education and be with their friends. However, this needs to happen in a very careful way so that we do not see any further peaks in infection and children and staff can stay as safe as possible. We will continue to support schools with their planning in the coming weeks, to ensure they have the advice and help they need to safely open to more children, when the time is right."

The plans are part of the government's wider strategy to begin to lift the COVID-19 lockdown.

Schools and Early Years settings will implement a range of protective measures to keep children, parents and staff as safe as possible. This will include carrying out risk assessments, introducing new cleaning regimes, reducing the size of groups coming into contact with each other with special arrangements for drop-off and pick-up and making more use of outdoor spaces.

The Government has said all school staff and workers at early years settings will be eligible for testing and from 1 June testing will be available for any children displaying symptoms. Staff will only need to wear personal protective equipment if a child develops symptoms and a test and trace approach will then be used to reduce any outbreak of infection.

The Government's ambition is for all primary school children to return to school before the summer for a month if feasible, though this will be kept under review. The Department of Education will work with schools and early years providers to develop further detail and guidance on how schools should facilitate this.

Schools across Norfolk have been closed to the majority of pupils since March 20, including over the two-week Easter break. By June 1, the majority of children will have been at home for 10 weeks.

Chris Snudden, Director of Learning and Inclusion at Norfolk County Council, said: "Getting more children back to school in a phased way that meets Public Health guidelines is challenging for schools, who will have to adapt their classrooms and their curriculum, as well as helping children to catch up with any missed learning. We recognise how demanding this will be for all of those working in education and we are grateful for their continued work. We ask parents for their patience, as schools make detailed plans and to keep an eye out for communications from their children's schools.

"Schools know their children and families and will know what will work best locally. They will be able to make decisions on how to open and which children can return based on their own risk assessments.

"Schools have stayed open for vulnerable children and the children of key workers throughout this pandemic and have been working day and night to ensure their children have access to learning and food. This work will continue as more children return to school."

The council will work with schools, colleges and Early Years providers to ensure that they have the most up to date advice from the Department for Education and Public Health England. It will also be making plans for school transport to ensure children can get to school safely.

Schools, colleges and Early Years providers will contact parents directly about their individual plans and circumstances, recognising that some families might need to continue to shield or isolate for health reasons, even if their children are in the year groups who are returning to school.

The government has said that parents will not be fined if they do not send their children to school.

The council will continue its work with the families of the most vulnerable children to assess what is in their best interests. Vulnerable children who are assessed as needing to be at school should continue to attend, even if they are not in one of the year groups identified.

If more children are able to return from 1 June, thousands of the county's children will still remain at home. The council continues to urge communities and volunteers to look out for these children and help to keep them safe. If you See Something, or Hear Something that worries you Say Something and contact the council on 0344 800 8020.