

Council responds to increase in north west 'R' rate and impact on schools

The Council and schools headteachers have urgently reviewed plans for a phased return of some children to school, responding to the latest public health position.

Public Health England and the University of Cambridge have provided additional analysis that the North West's virus reproduction rate (R) is now estimated to have risen to 1.01.

Commenting on the latest position, the Leader of Cheshire West and Chester Council Louise Gittins said: "Cheshire West has taken a cautious approach to the ending of the "stay at home" message. In my view the government's approach to releasing the lockdown has been premature, and the new messages confused and contradictory. This approach is supported by the latest assessment of the reproduction rate for the North West region."

"We will continue to take a cautious approach, guided by our local public health experts, and in support of our headteachers, their staff, pupils and parents. Together, great progress has been made in reducing the rate of infection in our communities up to this point, and together we will continue play our part to make further progress."

"Some schools in our borough had been planning to welcome back a small number of their pupils from Monday, as part of a phased approach. We continue to support headteachers to make their own judgement, based on their own schools' circumstances, and with robust plans for social distancing and cleaning in schools. We have also reassured parents and children that no action will be taken if they chose to continue to stay at home."

"In discussions today [Saturday] with headteachers, many expressed the need for more clarity about the current public health situation, and that there should now be a delay for two weeks. We will therefore support any headteacher who now chooses to delay the phased expansion of their educational offer. And we will continue to work with all our schools to assess the most up-to-date public health data and guidance. The children of key workers and vulnerable children will continue to be supported in school facilities."

"Above all we need to all continue to abide by the key public health messages. Stay at home whenever possible. Wash your hands frequently. Protect the NHS and Save Lives."

Explaining the new evidence Director of Public Health Ian Ashworth said: "On Friday Public Health England published new regional estimates of the rate that people, on average, pass the virus onto others: known as the R value. For the North West, this figure was 1.01."

"This means that the infection is likely to stay at constant levels, rather than continue the reductions we have seen so far. That central estimate has significant uncertainty around it, and it could range between 0.83 and 1.18."

"The R value is just one of many indicators that public health officials are monitoring carefully and should not be considered in isolation. We must all continue to exercise caution in our day to day lives so we can help get this virus properly under control and not undo all the amazing hard work and sacrifices that have been made since March across west Cheshire."

The Government set out five tests to enable lockdown to be lifted.

1. The NHS ability to cope.
2. A sustained and consistent fall in the daily death rates.

3. Reliable data from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) to show that the rate of infection was decreasing to manageable levels.
4. Protective equipment and testing.
5. Being confident that any changes do not risk another peak.

Of the five tests, there remain concerns that the rate of infection has sufficiently decreased to be managed effectively through an effective Test and Trace system, and the risks of another peak of infection.

Ends