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NSEAD response to the publication of the Interdisciplinary Task and Finish Group on the Role of Children in Transmission paper: Modelling and behavioural science responses to scenarios for relaxing school closures

On reviewing the evidence to support the planned opening schools to all nursery, reception, year 1 and year 6 pupils in English primary schools from June 1st, and the expansion of numbers from year 10 and 12 in secondary schools on June 15th. NSEAD has continuing concerns about the safety of pupils, staff and communities.

In our view, there are two key considerations raised by the evidence:

1. **Relative infectiousness of children**

Whilst the updates on Susceptibility and Transmission in Children note that the balance of available evidence suggests that children are less susceptible than adults, it is noted that the SAGE document “SAGE Subgroup: The role of children in transmission SAGE 26: 16 April 2020 concluded:

‘evidence on relative susceptibility and infectivity of children was as yet unclear. It recommended consideration of additional data gathering.’

The original caveat in this paper holds:

‘we still do not have robust, high quality evidence on the susceptibility, estimated asymptomatic and relative infectivity of children’

1. **Community adherence to social distancing measures**

Throughout the paper caveats are made emphasising the importance of community adherence to social distancing measures. Concern that the relaxing of school closures might lead to a belief that it is safe to abandon social distancing is a key issue:

‘the scenarios for relaxing school closures must be understood in the context of interaction taking place beyond the school. For example social distancing guidance beyond the school will inform the infection rate in schools’

The acknowledgement by society that any return to school will have to require ‘Messaging to teachers, parents, and students will play an important role in each scenario’ and necessitate the acceptance of conditions, based on the adoption of ‘new routines’. This might particularly be the case where relatives and grandparents have typically played some role in the management of school attendance for very young pupils, when parents are at work.

‘Interventions must be eased in in a logical manner. Failure to do so will influence the

number of parents who are willing to send their children to school. It will be vital to explain

why and how school reopening is safe, and ensure that changing restrictions is not a signal

that the risk from coronavirus is over and that it is safe to resume other activities or to

abandon social distancing.’

‘Although the choice of scenario for relaxing school closures is of importance, a more critical issue is adherence to existing measures elsewhere in the community.’

Hence, parental and community ‘buy in’ is a significant factor through the adherence to wider Social Distancing as evidenced in the Bristol/Exeter model. This confirms that society must be prepared and participate in sustained behavioural actions to support the phased return to school.

‘Messaging to teachers, parents, and students must be robust to enhance confidence and

willingness to return’

It is our opinion that there has been a dangerous lack of clarity and logical presentation in the messaging to the community about both return to school and the wider relaxing of lockdown measures since the Prime Minister’s announcements on the 10th May.

Furthermore, we are dismayed at the turn of events surrounding the actions of special advisor Dominic Cummings and have no doubt that this has seriously undermined confidence in public health messaging, compromising compliance with adherence to social distancing measures elsewhere in the community.

Taking these two factors into account, NSEAD is not able to support the policy decision taken by the DFE to expand school numbers as currently planned.

Further questions

Many of the caveats raised in the paper do not appear to have been addressed. There are a number of questions raised by the paper:

i)

We consider the availability of track and trace testing to be crucial to ensure that parents, staff and communities feel re-assured about the safety of arrangements in their schools. The national roll out of testing has not been included in the modelling, but it is stated in guidance to schools that

‘all staff and students who are attending an education or childcare setting will have access to a test if they display symptoms of coronavirus’

**Will all staff and students have access to a test with timely return of results, and will contact tracing be available in educational and childcare settings by the 1st of June?**

ii)

Interventions for relaxing wider community lockdown were announced to co-incide with the expansion of numbers of pupils in schools.

‘any assumption that school and work measures are relaxed close together needs to be explored cautiously – the impact of both on transmission is greater than their individual effects.’

**Has the impact of introducing school and work interventions at the same time been considered and what was the assessment made about the potential increased impact on transmission?**

**Has that been re-assessed in the light of concerns about the undermining of public health messaging following the Government response to Dominic Cummings’ actions?**

iii)

Capacity and delivery at local level are a concern – resources for additional sanitation, PPE, logistical planning and staffing.

**What support and resources is Government providing?**

iv)

The SAGE subgroup on the role of children in transmission (16th April 2020) highlighted the need for the development of a survey or portal ‘capable of identifying concerns and issues from the bottom-up.’

**How have these bottom up concerns and issues been identified and how have they influenced DFE policy?**

v)

Indirect impacts (for example, parents congregating at school gates) have not been included in the modelling. Neither has the involvement of wider family members in supporting the return to school, particularly of younger age pupils, coincidently and as an essential factor in supporting parental return to work.

**How have indirect impacts been taken into account in modelling and in DFE policy?**

vi)

Scenario two has been in place since the guidance issued on 12th May – encouraging all eligible children of key workers and vulnerable pupils to attend school.

**What has been observed since then of the take up and impact of this measure before moving to scenario three?**

**What has been learned by schools about effective measures as steps have been taken to increase those numbers under scenario two and how has this influenced plans for wider opening of schools?**

vii)

We are concerned about the lack of clarity around dates and the extent to which they are aspirational, advisory or fixed. The announcement on the 24th May by the Prime Minister that the 15th June should be the date for secondary schools in England to welcome back year 10 and 12 pupils rather than June 1st created more confusion.

**Is this the earliest that schools should expand numbers?**

**Is it a fixed date that all schools must observe?**

**What will happen to those that do not feel ready to observe the 15th June?**

viii)

Many headteachers feel that flexibility in local and national guidance is only helpful if they and their governing bodies are fully supported in the informed decisions they make about when it is possible, and safe to expand numbers – even when this does not align with target dates set by the Government. There is a fear that Government will simply pass the responsibility if it goes wrong.

**Can Government confirm that headteachers will have full autonomy to make informed decisions?**

ix)

All of the phased models operate on the understanding that a reduction in class sizes to accommodate social distancing in each classroom is an essential element to any school plan. How does the DFE see the models developing into further phases when the capacity of schools operating a correct social distancing policy determines a total capacity of somewhere between 33- 66% total pupil numbers (when even taking into account those cohorts not returning until September).

**Can Government confirm that additional classroom capacity will be required to move much beyond the initial proposed return of those cohorts under discussion?**

Conclusion

The modelling evidence clearly shows the potential for a growth in the R number, particularly where there is insufficient adherence to social distancing in the community

‘even a small change will lead to exponential growth’.

We cannot accept that this is an acceptable level of risk.

On the basis of the evidence in this paper, NSEAD is not confident that is safe or that arrangements are viable and urge the Government to reconsider their approach to relaxing school closures.

NSEAD

May 26th 2020