

Monday 19 October 2020

Dear parents and carers,

On Thursday, the government approved the request presented by Essex County Council (ECC) and supported by Council leaders to move to Local COVID-19 Alert Level: High. This change came into effect at midnight on Friday 16 October.

You can find the full details on our website at essex.gov.uk/news/government-confirms-essex-to-move-to-high-covid-alert-level

None of the three alert levels introduced by the government have direct implications on the operations of schools and colleges. Education settings in Essex will remain open full-time to all students and pupils.

Schools and colleges have strong measures in place to reduce the spread of COVID-19. These preventative measures – such as keeping pupils in class or year group-sized bubbles, extra handwashing and phased starts – greatly reduce the risk of COVID-19 being transmitted.

In education settings that teach those in Year 7 and above, students and adults should now wear face coverings when moving around indoors, unless the person is exempt from doing so. This requirement would apply in corridors and communal areas where social distancing is difficult to maintain. We have asked schools to review their risk assessments and to inform you of any changes they have introduced. Parents will need to provide their child with a mask and ensure they know how and when to wear it.

It is now more important than ever for young people, parents and families to consider their actions outside education settings.

We must all follow the social contact restrictions that come with Essex's move to the High alert level. Only one household / support bubble can mix inside. Outside, the rule of six applies.

It is crucial that young people and parents maintain a two-metre distance from others at the school gate during dropping-off and picking-up time. This cannot be stressed enough: you are highly unlikely to catch or spread COVID-19 through air-borne particles if you maintain this distance. We urge you to work with our education leaders to keep our settings, schools and colleges safe for staff, pupils and the wider community.

Those who can travel to school or college safely by walking, cycling or scooting are recommended to do so. To help with this, there is a dedicated Getting to School section on ECC's Stop.Swap.GO! website, which can be found at stopswapgo.co.uk/getting-to-school. It includes maps and information on cycling and walking routes to schools and colleges in Essex, as well as suggested drop-off zones away from the school gate to reduce congestion in some of the county's busiest areas. Those able to wear face coverings must do so when travelling on home to school or public transport.

Early years and childcare settings – including childminders, after-school clubs and nannies – can still be used under High alert level restrictions.

Informal childcare (defined as unpaid and unregistered childcare) can be provided in private homes by people in your support bubble or your childcare bubble. A childcare bubble is where someone in one household provides childcare to a child aged 13 or under in another household. For any given childcare bubble, this must always be between the same two households. The full guidance on childcare in High alert level areas can be found at [gov.uk/guidance/local-covid-alert-level-high#childcare](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/local-covid-alert-level-high#childcare)

You may ask why children and young people can mix with lots of other people in schools and colleges but not see their grandparents. The reason is that we are prioritising keeping education settings open, and in order to do this, we need to make difficult trade-offs elsewhere.

Every contact avoided helps reduce the potential for the virus to spread, so your child not having contact with a relative outside their household becomes a really important action in reducing the reproduction rate (the 'R rate') of the virus. Closing schools would help but is not something we would want to do because education has a major impact on children's long-term health, wellbeing and economic outcomes. This action would also impact severely on parents' ability to work and will only be implemented as a last resort.

Moreover, schools, colleges and other sectors are deemed COVID-secure places, with protective measures in place to reduce transmission. These measures are not required in household settings, nor could they be effectively enforced.

The decision we made with our district leaders and MPs to ask for this move to the High alert level was not taken lightly, and we know this may not be welcome news to many who live in Essex. But we are extremely concerned about the exponential growth of cases and our ability to control the spread of the virus with the current restrictions available to us.

We are confident this swift action now will ultimately help protect residents, businesses and the NHS in the coming weeks and months.

Thank you for your support.

Yours faithfully,

Councillor Ray Gooding

Cabinet Member for Education,
Essex County Council.