Dear Parents and Carers,

As you know the Prime Minister announced on the 4th January that the country needs once again to move into a national lockdown, because the new variant of COVID-19 is spreading rapidly leading to acute pressure in the NHS and further loss of life.

In the last week the situation in Wirral has become very serious which means we now all need to work together to drive infection rates down. We need to stay at home to protect the NHS and save lives. Only leaving the home when it is absolutely necessary to do so and when we do sticking to all the rules at all times.

In this context we are writing to remind you that your child should stay at home and access remote learning if it is at all possible to do so. This will reduce the number of households mixing and the transmission of the virus in the borough.

Our schools and colleges are open but only for those children who cannot learn from home. Many of our settings last week experienced many more children attending school than they expected and in some cases children who attended could have accessed their learning remotely.

Schools have to work within the capacity they have which is determined by the school based risk assessment, the need to provide remote learning for the majority of children and the number of staff they have available to work. On occasions last week this led some schools having to inform parents that they do not have enough places to accommodate their child.

Already this week the number of school based staff who have tested positive for COVID-19 or who are having to self-isolate has increased and this is likely to continue at least for the next few weeks due to the high levels of community cases in the borough. This means that school leaders will need to prioritise the return of children based on individual need, and on the safety of the school.

Vulnerable children and children of health workers, social workers and those working in our schools will be allocated places before children of other critical workers. The number of places available will be determined by the head teacher of each school and is likely to vary from week to week. All decisions will be made based on the school risk assessment, staffing availability and the capacity needed to provide high quality remote education.

To reduce community transmission, we need to ensure that the number of children and young people accessing the offer of provision in a school or college is kept to the lowest number possible. Therefore, in line with updated government guidance issued on Friday (8th January), even if you are a critical worker, if your child(ren) can remain at home rather than attend school, on some or all days, then they should. Please only use the offer of provision when it is crucial for you to undertake your critical role.

Whether or not your child's education setting is putting in place the rapid testing programme right away, it is very important that we reassure you that all settings will

be continuing to regularly review and put in place all the protective measures recommended by Public Health England and the Department for Education to reduce the risk of transmission. These will include social distancing, hand washing, good ventilation, use of face coverings as appropriate, and ensuring people with symptoms do not attend. These remain the most effective ways to reduce the spread of the virus, even with rapid testing in place.

We ask that you continue to show the same patience and compassion to leaders and staff that you have demonstrated throughout this pandemic. We have learned from the first two waves that if we pull together as a borough, with everybody playing their part, we can help to slow the spread of the virus.

Julie Webster, Director of Public Health.

Paul Boyce OBE, Director for Children, Families and Education