

To: All Head Teachers in Birmingham

June 24th 2009

Dear Head Teacher,

SCHOOLS AND OUTBREAKS OF “SWINE ‘FLU” IN BIRMINGHAM

You will be aware of the significant number of cases of Swine ‘Flu which have either been confirmed or are under investigation in Schools in Birmingham. Currently the West Midlands is the most affected region of the UK, and the majority of cases have been in children.

At the time of writing 23 schools have closed for a short period (some have since re-opened) and there are over 50 schools affected by absenteeism from ‘flu-like illnesses.

You will find that new guidance for schools, to replace the guidance previously issued, is attached to this letter. A leaflet from the HPA has already been sent to you via the e-briefing system.

We would like to take this opportunity to clarify the rationale for activity on schools. You may wish to share this letter with governors, staff and parents.

School Closure

The policy of the Department for Children, Schools and Families has been that schools should remain open wherever possible. There are many good reasons for this, not least of all to minimise the adverse impact on their education of closure, and the impact of large absences on key workers who may have children, as well as to help keep children in a safe environment.

The HPA is undertaking careful day-by-day, school-by-school assessments to determine whether advice to close a school should be given, on public health grounds. The decision to advise closure on public health grounds is not taken lightly, and is taken in close consultation with the City Council. Closure is only advised when the assessment suggests that to do so may slow the spread of virus in the wider community.

The rationale here stems from the fact that this virus affects children in particular and spreads rapidly in schools, and via members of the school can spread more quickly in the wider community. So in areas in which the virus is judged to be not yet circulating wider it may be worthwhile closing a school if pupils or teachers with swine flu have been in school whilst they have symptoms and so may have transmitted their infection to others. However, in areas where there is evidence that the virus is already circulating in the wider community and thus of sustained transmission within the community there is no public health benefit in closing the school because members of the school may be just as likely to be exposed to the virus in the wider community as within the school setting. The school-by-school risk assessments also take into account mixing and movement patterns and other information on the school.

As a result of these risk assessments, the HPA has recommended closure for a number of schools for a period of 7 days. This period allows those who may be incubating the virus to complete that period at home. This, together with subsequent vigilance amongst parents and teachers to keep children with high temperature and flu-like symptoms at home until they are well again and close attention to basic hygiene, means that there is a reduced risk of the virus continuing to spread in the school and thence into the wider community.

As we write this letter however, things are, as expected, continuing to move on in terms of the spread of swine flu, and indeed in our understanding of the virus. We now know that the virus is circulating more widely in Birmingham, and our understanding about the way the virus is behaving also continues to grow, for example, we know that to date, the virus has caused a relatively mild illness in most people. So, it becomes less likely that closure of schools, and indeed widespread prophylaxis of healthy children with antivirals will be beneficial in public health terms, although our day-day, school-by-school risk assessment continues.

If advice has been given that the school does not have to close on public health grounds, it should seek to remain open in the knowledge that closure will have no public health benefit. Parents and staff may find it difficult to understand this advice because they may feel that the closure of a school will somehow protect them. This may lead to pressure being put on the school by parents and others. We will of course support any head teacher in this situation.

Some schools may still need to close for *operational* reasons, i.e. that the level of staff absenteeism or student absenteeism means that essential operations within the school and the school cannot safely maintain a learning environment. But we need to be clear that this is for operational reasons, and is a local decision made by the school in consultation with School and Governor Support, and not a closure on public health grounds.

Key Actions for Schools

Guidance on managing schools including infection control has been issued and is currently being revised. Schools are requested to follow this guidance.

Staffing Issues

Advice on occupational health issues affecting staff in schools is being drafted and will be with you very shortly.

The City Council's Director of Public Health, Jim McManus, has been and is keen to continue liaising with unions, Head Teachers and Governors in clusters. He can be reached on jim.mcmanus@birmingham.gov.uk

We would like to thank you for your professionalism and dedication during this challenging time. We also extend an apology for any inconvenience caused you.

Yours sincerely,

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