

Teachers' responses to the school reopening strategy



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Acknowledgements

This report is the first of a series of reports that focus on how schools and colleges in England are responding to the current coronavirus pandemic. The surveys on which these reports are based were developed in collaboration with Schoolzone.

Thank you to all of the teachers and lecturers who have taken the time to complete these surveys under very challenging circumstances. The first survey was launched at 9am on 12th May, two days after the Prime Minister announced steps for lifting the lockdown in England including the partial reopening of schools scheduled for 1st June. This survey received over 4,600 responses, reflecting the strength of feelings teachers have about the issue.

These responses have given us an insight into what matters to teachers and pupils and what concerns them most. They will be valuable in informing future policy decisions on support and provisions for schools, teachers and children. We are very grateful for the time given to completing the survey, without which we could not publish the findings in this series of reports.

Executive summary

On Wednesday 18th March 2020, the UK government announced that schools were to close from Friday that week, except to children of key workers and pupils who had been identified as vulnerable. The suddenness of the closure left many schools unprepared for the new reality, and alternative ways to deliver their lessons were hastily conceived. Prior to the Covid-19 outbreak [EPPI-research](#) found that disadvantaged children are on average one and a half years of learning behind other pupils by the time they take their GCSEs. There were fears that a prolonged closure of schools will further widen this attainment gap.

To ensure that teaching could continue, many schools resorted to online learning platforms. Concerns were immediately raised about the lack of access to online learning for our poorest children. There are clear reasons for these concerns: schools in the most deprived areas are less likely to have the necessary digital technology for remote teaching, and their teachers are less likely to be trained to use online platforms. Less than a week after the lockdown, a [Teacher Tapp survey](#) reported that teachers, especially those in deprived schools, felt ill-prepared for distance teaching. Data collected in the same week by [the Sutton Trust](#) found that 60% of private schools in the richest areas already had an online platform in place, but this figure fell to 23% for the most deprived schools. Moreover, children from working class families were also less likely to take part in online lessons.

We surveyed teachers, school leaders and school staff across all phases of education including Early Years, primary, secondary, further education and higher education to seek their views as the situation unfolds. The first survey was completed seven weeks into the school closure, including two weeks of Easter holiday. At this point, 25 days of face-to-face teaching for the majority of pupils had been missed. Forthcoming national assessments in the summer term were also cancelled, meaning a knock-on effect on applications to sixth form and universities. All of these factors could potentially affect teachers' views on the impact of school closure.

In this first report, we look at how teachers' views on the government's proposed school reopening strategy. This strategy advised for the partial reopening of schools to Reception, Year

1 and Year 6 and for some face-to-face provision for Year 10 and Year 12 from 1st June 2020, with a later announcement on 24th May 2020 delaying Year 10 and 12 plans to later in June. A number of guidance documents from the Department for Education were published and updated throughout May.

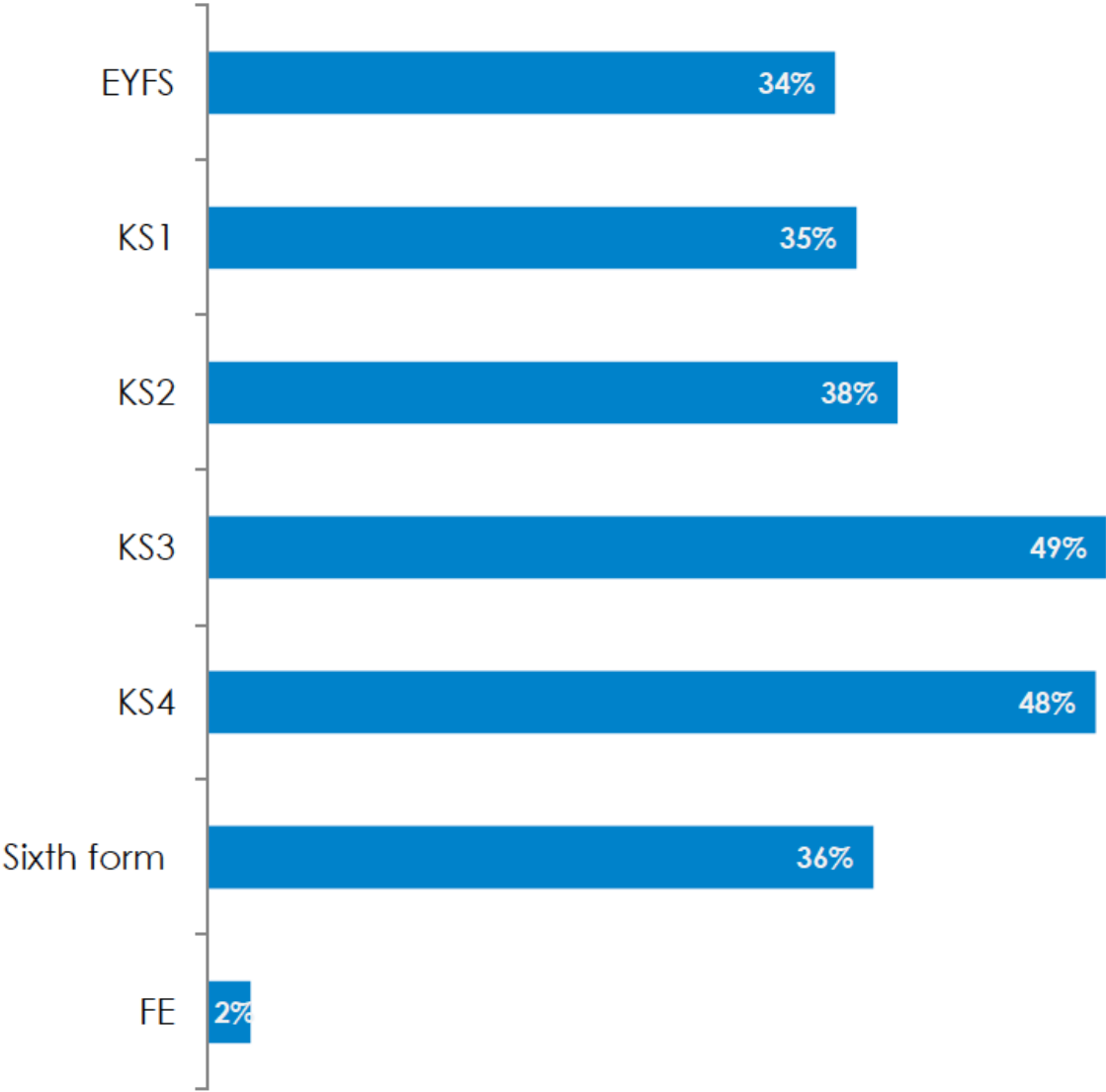
Key findings

1. Two thirds of teachers across all key stages thought that school closures would have a significant impact on pupils' education.
2. The impact of school closures was felt most strongly at KS4.
3. Primary school teachers and those teaching KS3 were more likely to agree that reopening schools in June will help mitigate the adverse effect. Teachers taking high stakes exam classes (Year 6 and KS4) were less likely to think so.
4. Teachers did not expect a high turnout for the year groups that are scheduled to return in June. Only a third of teachers expect more than half of pupils to return. Secondary school teachers were less optimistic than primary teachers.
5. Three-quarters of teachers did not expect social distancing measures in schools to be effective. For most proposed safety measures, the majority of responses to measures were negative.
6. Just under two-thirds of teachers expect a Covid-19 test and trace system will be an effective safety measure for schools.
7. Teachers expressed an unwillingness to return to schools unless safety measures such as effective social distancing, frequent hand washing, deep cleaning and a test, track and isolate system were in place.
8. However, other than frequent cleaning and hand washing, most teachers were not confident that safety measures would be in place.
9. Teachers described the government strategy for reopening in June as dangerous, irresponsible, unrealistic and ill-considered.
10. In general, teachers did not trust the government to tell them when it is safe to go back. Conversely, two-thirds of teachers said they trust the scientific community.
11. Three-quarters of teachers said they would follow the advice of their unions if they suggest boycotting the return to work.

Profile of respondents

On 12th May, we launched our first survey related to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. We had over 4600 responses from across the education sector.

N = 4,602



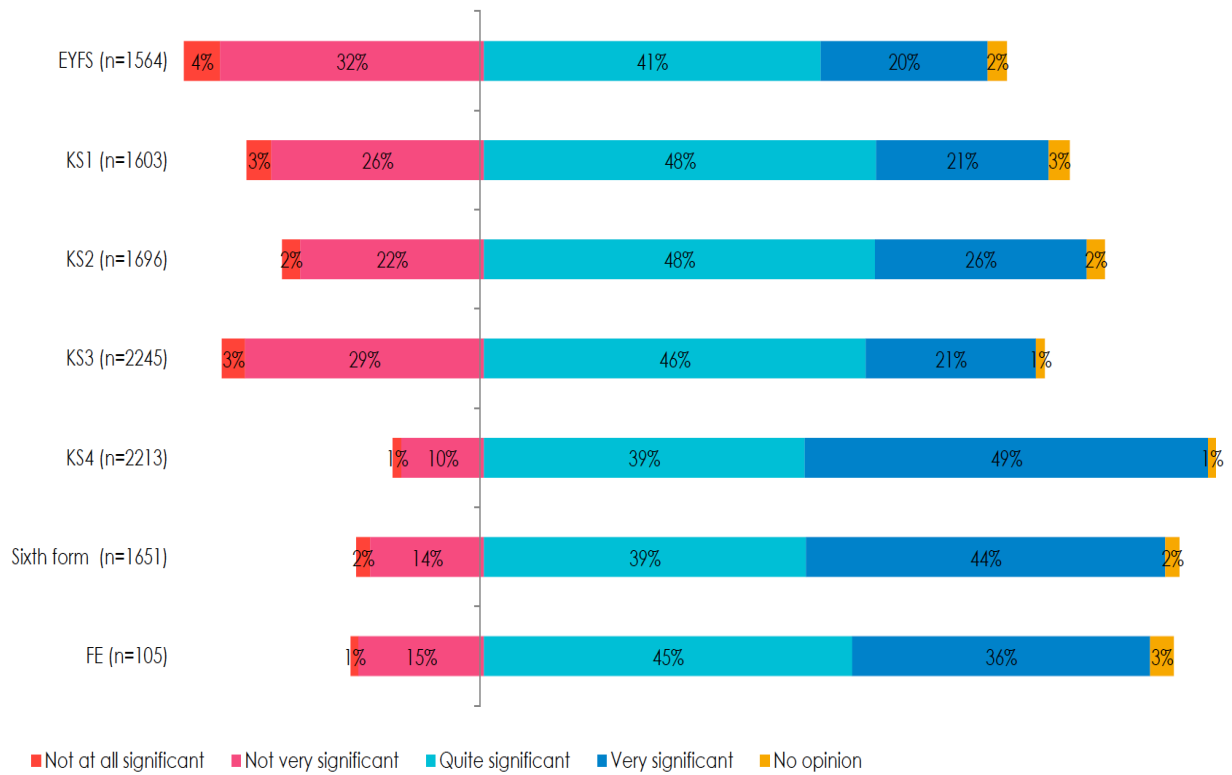
Teachers' views on school closure

Overall, around two thirds of teachers across all key stages expressed concern about school closure.

KS4 and Post-16 teachers were the most concerned about the impact of school closure on their pupils with 88% of KS4 teachers and 73% of Post-16 teachers saying that there has been some impact, and almost half of KS4 teachers said that the impact has been very significant.

Teachers in the earlier key stages were less likely to describe the impact on children's education as very significant.

How significant do you think the impact of education establishment closures have been on students' education so far?



Teachers' views on school reopening

At the time of the survey, schools were partially opened for vulnerable children and children of key workers.

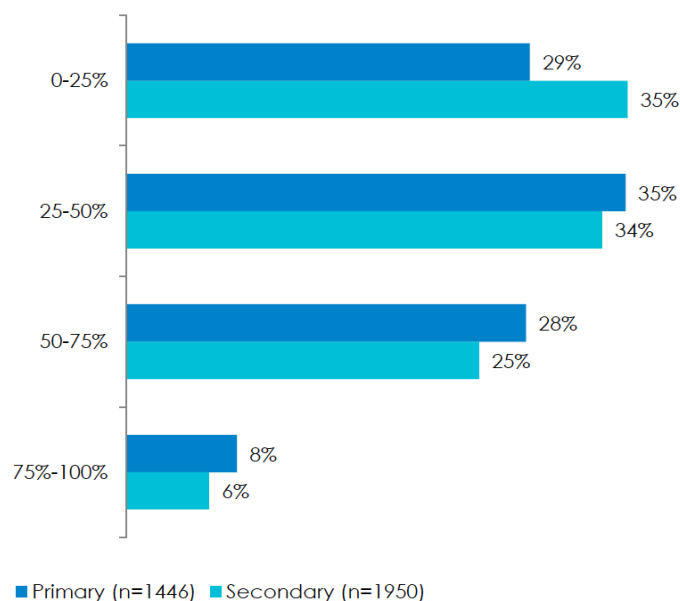
The majority of schools were still open: 78% of settings (around 19,200 schools and colleges) were open. However, many were open for a **reduced number of hours**.

Teachers reported that only **10% of children in need** and only **4% of children of critical workers** were attending school. This represents a pupil:teacher ratio of 1:1.7. **Only one in three early years settings** were open during this period.

Across all year groups, from EYFS to Post-16, teachers were not expecting many children to return when schools reopen in June; overall, two-thirds of teachers think that up to half of pupils will remain at home.

A week after reopening, [government figures](#) on attendance were released. They suggest that only half (52%) of primary schools reopened to more pupils in Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 on 1st June. Only a quarter of children in these year groups were present in school.

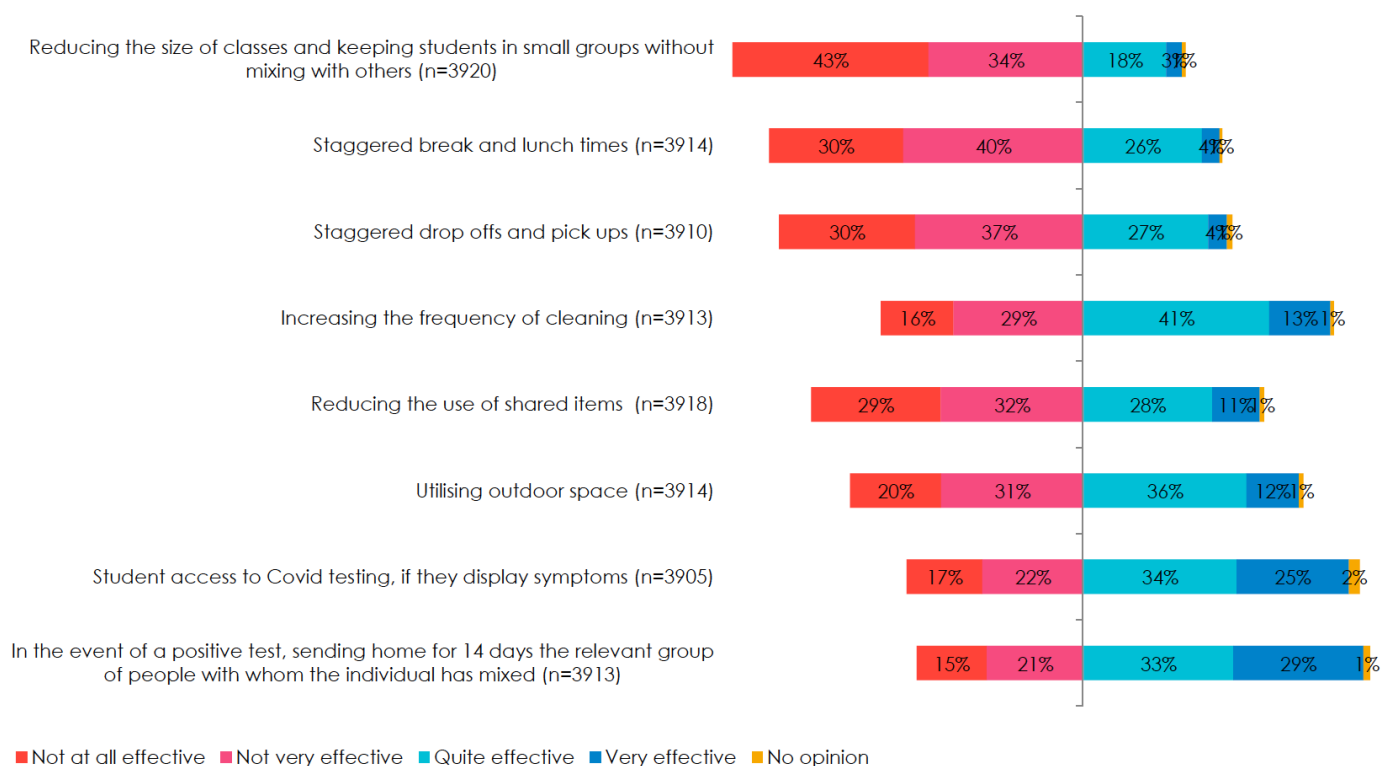
What proportion of children in the year groups that will be open do you think will be in your school if they do re-open in June?



Teachers' views on implementing safety guidelines

We asked teachers what they thought about the effectiveness of the government safeguarding guidelines pertaining to school reopening. Most teachers were not convinced that these safety guidelines could be implemented effectively, with a **reduction in school size and keeping children in small groups** reported as being least likely to be effective. Of the safety measures we listed, the only measures which teachers reported would be effective in ensuring the safety of children and staff were frequent cleaning (54%), access to testing (59%) and isolation of children tested positive (62%).

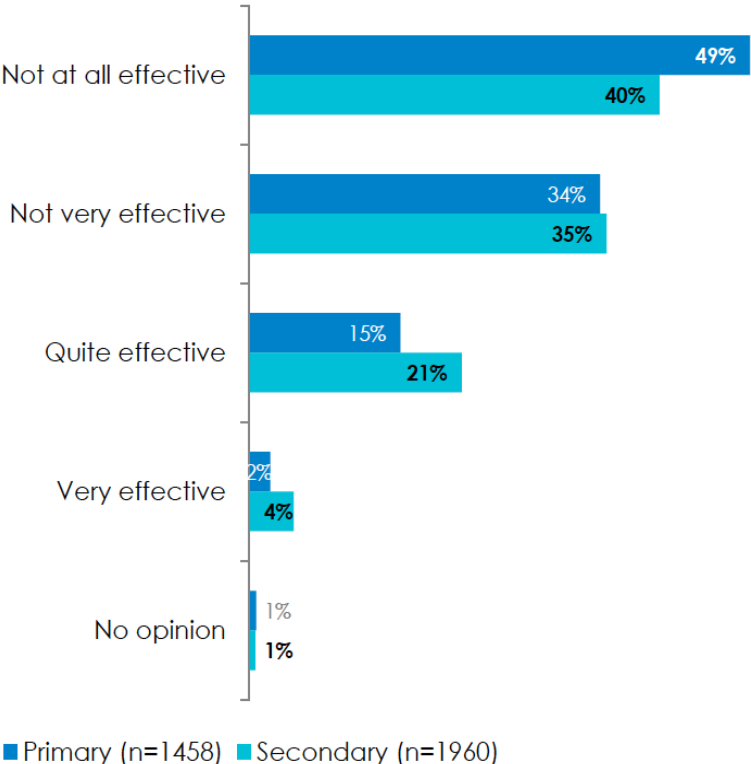
How effective do you think the government guidelines published 11 May will be:



Eight-three percent of primary teachers (n = 1458) and **75% of secondary** teachers (n = 1960) did not think that their schools could effectively implement class size reduction and social distancing measures. One reason for teachers' apprehension was that there have been suggestions that pupils should be taught by just one teacher the whole time they are in school; this was a particular concern for secondary teachers. Teachers also expressed concern that the 2m separation rule had been left out of the guidance.

Primary school teachers (66%) were less likely than secondary teachers (56%) to think that **reducing the use of shared items** would be an effective measure.

Reducing the size of classes and keeping students in small groups without mixing with others



The majority of teachers were also not confident that **staggering breaks, lunchtimes, drop offs and pickups** could be practically carried out. They felt that the need for adult supervision during breaks to ensure physical distancing would make staggering break time difficult.

When do teachers think it is safe for them to return to school?

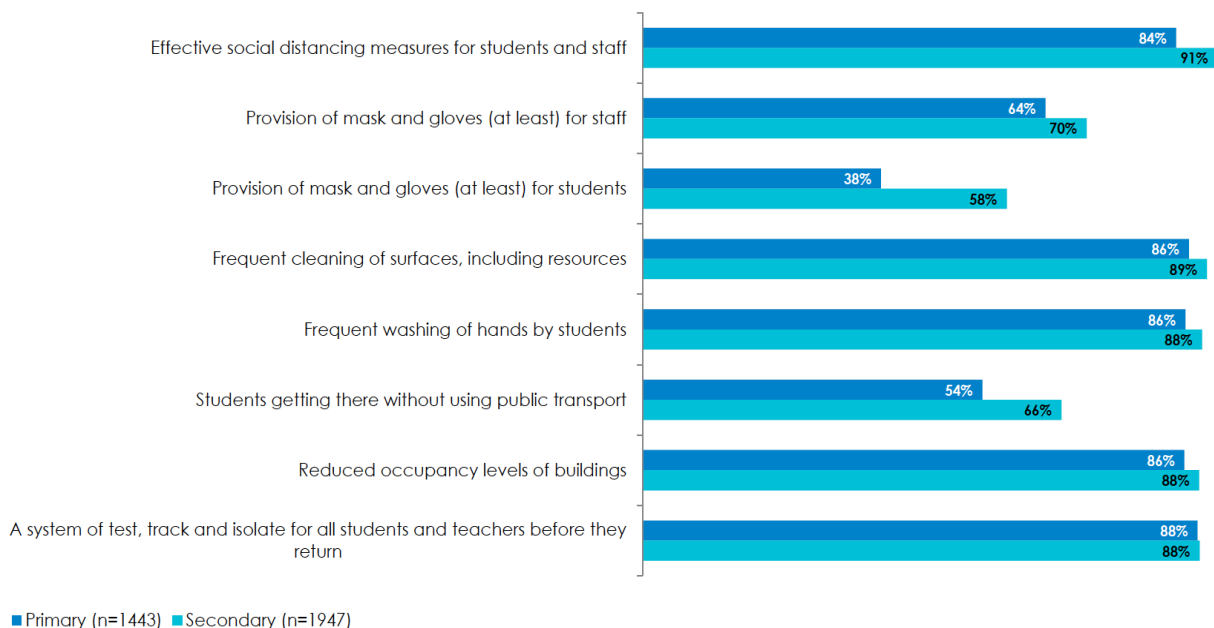
Teachers were asked what measures need to be in place before they felt safe to return to work. At least 85% of teachers across all phases said they would feel safe to return if the following measures were in place:

- Effective social distancing measures for students and staff
- Frequent cleaning of surfaces, including resources
- Frequent washing of hands by students
- Reduced occupancy levels of buildings
- A system of test, track and isolate for all students and teachers

Half of our respondents expect the following provisions to be available before they felt safe to return:

- Provision of mask and gloves for staff and pupils
- Students are able travel to school without using public transport

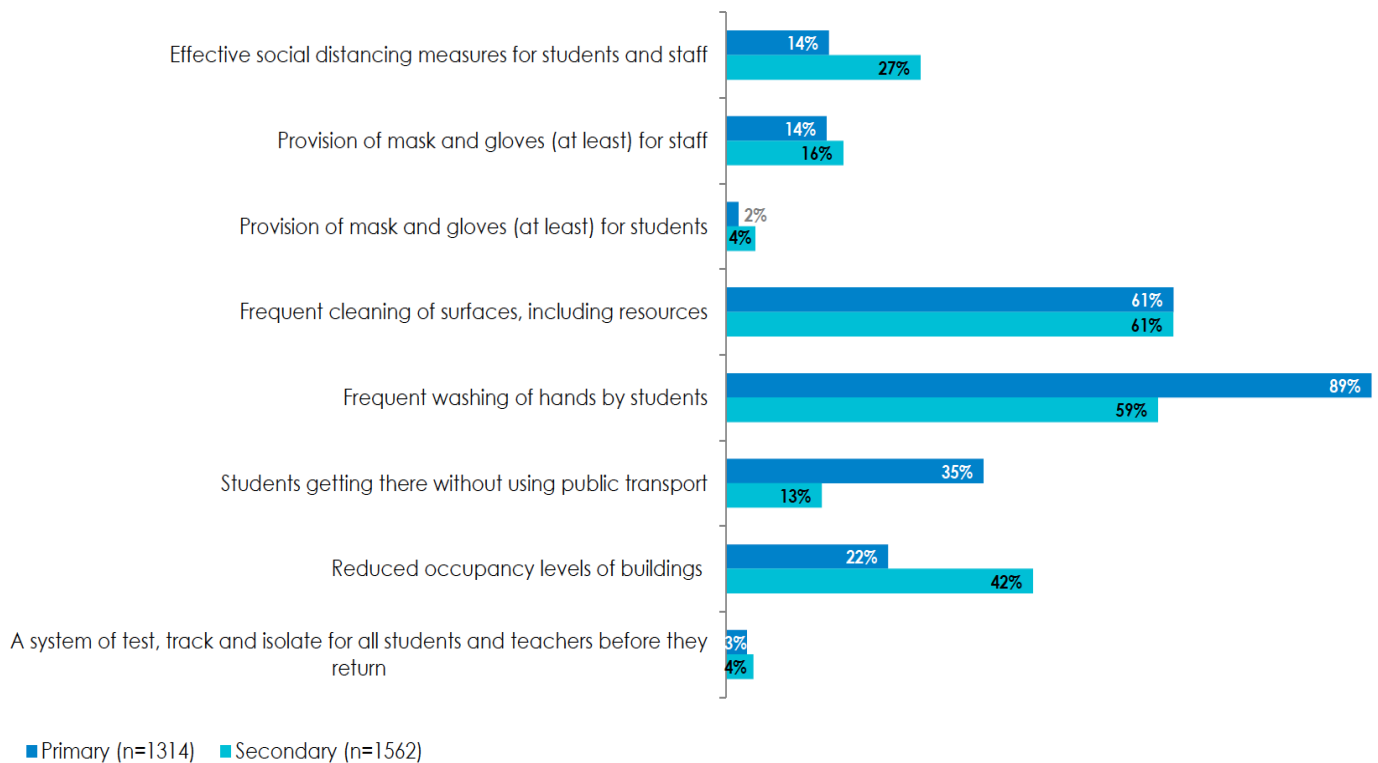
Which of the following strategies would have to be implemented, before you felt safe in returning to work?



Unfortunately, teachers did not have high expectations that these measures would be in place this term. Only hand washing and cleaning of surfaces were expected to have been provided.

- Only **14% of primary** and **27% of secondary** teachers expected that social distancing will be in place.
- Only **22% of primary** and **42% of secondary** teachers expect schools will have a reduction in the occupancy of buildings when schools reopen.

Which of these do you think are likely to be available in your place of work this term?



Although the system of track, trace and isolate was deemed to be the most effective measure by teachers in preventing the spread of infection, only **4% of teachers** thought the system would be available when they return to school this term.

How do teachers feel about returning to school?

When teachers were asked what **one word** they would use to describe the government's plans for phased reopening of schools from 1st June, over 4,000 responses were received. The most common responses are displayed here:

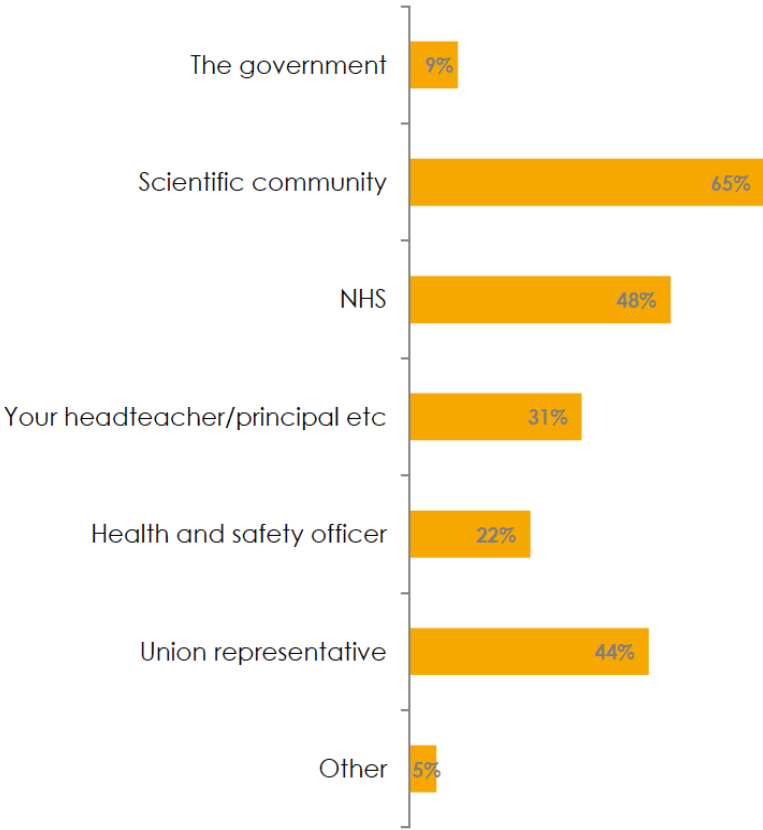
Dangerous	294	Necessary	46
Ridiculous	197	Scary	44
Irresponsible	156	Good	43
Unrealistic	132	Confused	41
Madness	113	Vague	41
Risky	103	Foolish	39
Ludicrous	86	Misguided	39
Unsafe	82	Hasty	36
Rushed	74	Sensible	36
Crazy	71	Impractical	35
Chaotic	69	Impossible	26
Optimistic	60	Foolhardy	25
Ambitious	55	Wrong	23

Only three of the comments were positive (in bold). "Dangerous" appears to be the most common sentiments expressed by those who responded to this question.

Who do teachers trust to tell them when it is safe to return to school/colleges?

Teachers were least likely to trust the government (9%) to tell them when it is safe to go back to school. This may be partly because teachers think that the government has a political agenda and that is to kickstart the economy as soon as possible. A small number of teachers said they fear for their lives and those of their students. Some felt like they were being treated as guinea pigs, while others talked about the impact on their mental health.

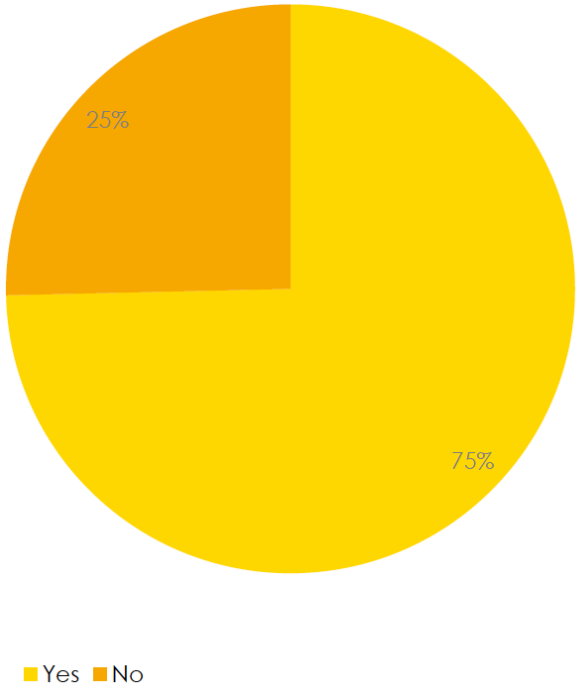
**Whom do you trust to tell you it's safe to go back to work at your establishment?
(n=4525)**



Teachers also do not trust their headteachers (31%) or health and safety officers (22%) to tell them when it is safe to return. One potential reason could be because they do not think their headteachers have the experience or expertise to judge what is a unique situation, but we cannot confirm this here.

The most trusted group was the scientific community (65%). Again, one potential reason could be a perception that the scientists have the expertise to interpret the data, and the knowledge and experience to make such judgements, but we would need to explore this further.

If your union suggested nationally that you boycott re-opening because of health and safety concerns, would you take part in the boycott? (n=4523)



Teachers reported higher confidence in their union reps telling them when it is safe to return to school than their school leaders, but this was still a negative response overall. However, they were prepared to boycott school reopening if their unions suggested they did. Unions here include the National Education Union, the National Association of Headteachers, NASUWT, GMB, Unison and Unite.

In short, teachers clearly did not feel safe to return to school on 1st June.