**Leader statement on schools opening to more pupils - 20 May 2020**

In Waltham Forest, my priority is doing everything we can to improve the life chances of children and young people. Schools in the borough have a strong record of improvement, which is enabling more of our children to progress, achieve and thrive than ever before.

Following the Government’s announcement that schools should prepare to open for more children from 1 June we have been working with our schools to plan how this can be delivered in Waltham Forest.

The safety of children, their families and school staff remains the prime concern for the Council and Headteachers. We will do all we can to support Headteachers to open schools to more pupils, but this decision must be based on when it is safe to do so, not by an arbitrary deadline.

Many schools in Waltham Forest have remained open to certain pupils throughout the lockdown period and we are extremely proud of their tireless work to:

* provide places for children of key workers
* support our most vulnerable children and families
* provide materials to support families with their children’s home education
* deliver free school meals and vouchers to those eligible

We would like to thank our Headteachers, and all school staff - from teachers and teaching assistants to school business managers, site service officers and cleaners – for their continued dedication, compassion and care provided across our community.

We recognise and share the concern of parents and teachers for the safety of children and staff around any return to school. We are also acutely aware of the need for children to access education and social opportunities. There are risks to children of being out of school, including to those vulnerable to neglect, abuse or exploitation and the risk to all children and young people of learning being lost. We are also mindful of our responsibilities as Corporate Parents to our children in care and care leavers.  School is vital to the day-to-day lives of families and every day out of the classroom has an impact on children’s life chances.

That is why the Council has been working closely with our schools on a coordinated strategy to ensure that any return to school can be implemented safely. Following careful consultation with schools, unions and parents, it is clear some schools are ready to open on 1 June, but some schools still have further planning to do. Waltham Forest Council will support schools to re-open further for priority groups only **when they are ready and it is safe to do so, from 1 June.**

The Government has set out five tests for moving to Step 2 of their recovery plan - which includes reopening primary schools to priority groups - and has said that it will take the final decision based on the evidence on 28th May, three days before schools are expected to be ready. In order to build the confidence of parents and staff in schools re-opening we urge the Government to publish the full SAGE advice on expanding the number of pupils attending schools.

We have made it clear to schools that we expect them only to open to additional pupils once risk assessments have been carried out and appropriate measures put in place. A one size fits all approach will not work and schools will need to implement plans based on a range of factors including their size, layout and availability of their staff. This means that schools may decide to be open for one or more-year groups, on either a full or part time basis.

Safety is the paramount concern and the Council therefore does not expect all schools to be open on a full-time basis to all year groups identified by the Government from 1st June. Nor do we expect schools to re-open to all additional year groups later in the Summer term. However, we have asked schools to continue to develop plans for opening that support the needs of their community and plan for a safe increase of pupil attendance.

The Council has written to parents to set out in detail the principles we are following alongside schools to ensure they can safely re-open and want to make it clear that no family will be fined for the non- attendance of their child until we return to normal. Schools are also contacting parents regarding the specific individual arrangements they are putting in place.

We are very aware of the difficulties families are facing throughout the borough. Alongside the work to reopen schools to additional pupils we are working on a recovery plan with all our schools to begin to address the issues of children missing vital education and to provide additional social and wellbeing support that we know many children will need.

We ask the Government to give schools the tools they need to do the job – provide promised digital equipment for vulnerable children, extra resources for cleaning, safety and protection measures and to allow schools to provide for high numbers of children and families who will need extra help to access food and learning support in the summer holidays.

The Council is working closely with all interested parties, including the Department of Education, relevant unions, the Local Government Association and London Councils to raise vital issues and seek constructive solutions in the best interests of our children. We expect further information and guidance from Government this month and will continue to work with schools to keep parents and staff informed.

**Cllr Clare Coghill**
**Leader of Waltham Forest Council**