

Keep schools open for now, heads are urged as they face falling staff numbers due to coronavirus

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Headteachers say they are faced with plummeting staff levels as teachers self-isolate and dozens of schools have been forced to close after staff and pupils were diagnosed with Covid-19.

Some have moved working online but concerns have been raised about children who rely on free school meals.

Business Secretary Alok Sharma told Sky News today: "Right now, based on the balance of this, we think we should keep schools open."

An urgent review is being carried out but the Government's latest advice is that schools and educational establishments should stay open.

During the Prime Minister's daily coronavirus press conference yesterday, Boris Johnson said school closures were under "continuous review".

The National Education Union has written to Mr Johnson, calling for schools and colleges to close.

Anne Longfield, the Children's Commissioner for England, told LBC there was a "big issue" of what happens to children who rely on free school meals. She said France and Austria were keeping schools open for a couple of hours a day to provide meals.

Today, 20 secondary schools in London run by the Harris Federation were partially closed. A spokesman said the schools were closing to specific year groups at a time due to staff shortages including pregnant teachers having to self-isolate. Heads have prioritised teaching for those due to take exams and the youngest Year 7 classes where children being at home would stop parents from working.

Francis Holland school, in Sloane Square, said yesterday that it would close for "many weeks" as head Lucy Elphinstone wanted to protect "teachers and vulnerable member of our families". Fortismere school in Muswell Hill today asked Year 9 to work from home after closing its doors on Monday for a "deep clean" following a teacher's positive diagnosis for coronavirus.

Coombe Girls school in New Malden was closed today for all pupils in years 9 and 10 because of low staff numbers. In an email to parents, acting headteacher Emily Barns said children eligible for free meals could come to school to eat and return home, while school work would be uploaded online.

First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has said that Scotland could see nationwide school closures. She told Reporting Scotland: "It is highly possible we will see a more blanket approach to school closures in the coming days."