

Dear Secretary of State Matt Hancock,

It was deeply concerning to us as leaders of North East local authorities that our request for informal childcare arrangements to be allowed to continue under the new restrictions in our region had been omitted from the legislation published on Thursday evening.

Families across our region rely on the support of their relatives, friends and neighbours to care for their children while parents work long hours, typically in low-pay jobs and often in essential roles such as in the NHS. Such services cannot afford further disruption.

These parents provide an invaluable service to all sectors and as we try to recover from the profound effects of the pandemic while simultaneously taking extraordinary measures to control the virus, this decision will be another devastating blow to families who have already suffered so much.

It was right that tighter controls were introduced across the North East considering rising transmission levels. But our collective ask was for restrictions that would limit the infection opportunities for the virus while allowing the majority of businesses to continue and residents to go about their lives with an added level of protection.

The hospitality trade, grassroots sports and household mixing are all problem areas and environments in which the virus is given the conditions to thrive. Premises in the hospitality trade can continue to operate in a COVID-secure way and sports teams can continue to fulfil their fixtures. It therefore seems unjust that employees who have already suffered so much during the course of this pandemic must make the difficult decision of whether to go to work or to stay at home and care for their children.

As a region, we recognised the spiralling situation that transmissions of the virus were becoming, and we wrote to you seeking the power to step in and take decisive action to allow us act with urgency. We are grateful that this request was largely approved but would now ask that you show the same eagerness to recognise the difficulty this additional restriction will present for the many thousands of families across the North East who do not have the means to pay for childcare.

Sincerely,

Cllr Nick Forbes, Leader of Newcastle City Council

Cllr Martin Gannon, Leader of Gateshead Council

Cllr Glen Sanderson, Interim Leader of Northumberland County Council

Norma Redfearn, Mayor of North Tyneside Council

Cllr Iain Malcolm, Leader of South Tyneside Council

Cllr Graeme Miller, Leader of Sunderland City Council

Cllr Simon Henig, Leader of Durham County Council

Jamie Driscoll, North of Tyne Mayor