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**MEMPRANDUM E (20)118 (C)**

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**TO: EXECUTIVE COLLEAGUES**

**FINAL EXECUTIVE PAPER - EDUCATION RESTART PLANNING**

1. This paper provides the Executive with an overview of my Department's planning **to ensure that the education system can restart in a safe and effective manner.**
2. The paper outlines the challenges faced in education by the current Covid-19 emergency; the work delivered to date in managing and mitigating the effects of the disruption; and outlines the proposed approach in moving towards recovery.
3. A more detailed Restart Plan will be developed through engagement with public health officials and a wide range of education stakeholders.

**The challenges we face**

4. The Covid-19 pandemic has presented significant challenges right across society. This has been a particularly difficult time for children and young people; parents and carers; and the education workforce. The educational workforce, working alongside parents has largely responded in an effective and innovative manner, to minimise the impact of this disruption, whilst appreciating that distance learning can be no long term substitute for the benefits of attending school.
5. About half of the schools have remained open for children of key workers and vulnerable children, although as in other parts of the UK, the numbers of vulnerable children has been low. Many of these children particularly benefit from the structured support of a school setting away from often a challenging home environment, which is why supporting such children has been a key priority of my Department.
6. Education alone cannot address the complex needs of all vulnerable children and young people which is why my Department has been working with other

**OFFICIAL – EXEC UTIVE**

## OFFICIAL - EXECUTIVE

government departments, agencies and the community and voluntary sector to put in place a cross departmental plan setting out the range of current and planned measures of support during the Covid-19 pandemic.

7. We have been encouraging schools to work with parents/carers, the Education Authority (EA) and, where appropriate, social services to ensure that these children and young people have access to the support they need through attendance at their own school or a cluster school in their area. A multi-disciplinary panel process involving health and education professionals has also been put in place to consider, on a case by case basis, the needs of children with complex needs who normally attend special schools. Nevertheless, it is clear that some families whose children have complex needs are experiencing particular difficulties and pressures as a consequence of the general closure of the schools estate, particularly special schools.
8. We do not know the final impact of the current crisis on children's safety, well-being and learning. The longer children remain out of school, the slower the recovery of lost learning. The loss of peer interaction, disrupted routines, and even shared experiences of key transition points in their education, have the potential to affect all children and young people, leading to increased anxiety and worry over their futures and how to make sense of the world.
9. Good progress has been made in recent years in improving outcomes for our most disadvantaged learners and the concern is that some of that improvement could be lost. Some pupils with additional needs may need more individual support than is possible with remote learning, and will need support for their wellbeing before any meaningful learning can take place.
10. All schools (pre-schools, primary, special and post-primary) are providing children and young people with remote learning packages either non-digital (paper-based and practical materials) or digital relevant to their individual needs. In doing so, schools have been addressing technical and operational challenges for children and young people and staff. It has become apparent that there are practical realities within homes in accessing/sharing devices and having sufficient connectivity that pose real challenges for remote learning. A plan to provide additional IT equipment has been developed and is being implemented to help bridge the gap.
11. Against this backdrop, it is therefore important that we proactively plan for the re-opening of schools and settings whilst mitigating the longer term impacts of the ongoing disruption on our children and young people. The closure of schools has a range of negative consequences for children and young people, their educational attainment and their families, disproportionately affecting the most

OFFICIAL – EXECUTIVE

## OFFICIAL - EXECUTIVE

vulnerable and the most disadvantaged, and it will be important to return to normal schooling as quickly as it is safe to do so.

### Current position

#### *Context*

12. All schools closed to the majority of learners at the end of the school day on 20 March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. From 23 March 2020, some settings have been open for the children of 'key workers' and 'vulnerable children'. The figures below sets out the broad picture across all settings since 23 March.

|                        | Average | High   | Low   |
|------------------------|---------|--------|-------|
| Settings open          | 470     | 580    | 136   |
| Children attending     | 1,100   | 1,575  | 122   |
| Staff in open settings | 1,494   | 2,101  | 271   |
| Staff working remotely | 10,744  | 13,818 | 2,708 |

13. Since the Easter break there has been a rise in the number of children attending open settings. Some parents have had difficulty in obtaining a place for their children due to their "home school" being closed. A helpline and placement system has been implemented and has already supported the placement of over 539 children, with only low numbers of children still requiring placement.
14. "C-19 Clustering" arrangements for schools have been implemented to encourage all settings to work collaboratively to accommodate the children of key workers and vulnerable children in their local area. To date 33 C-19 Clusters have been registered with DE involving 131 settings. The Department also launched a scheme for volunteers from across the wider education sector to register and offer their assistance. To date over 1,000 volunteers have been identified and cleared by Access NI to work within Clusters if required.
15. Northern Ireland benefits from a highly sophisticated IT education infrastructure for all schools which enabled teachers to establish distance learning with their pupils at pace. A DE survey found that 96% of schools which responded were using on-line learning as part of their approach.
16. The majority of youth settings also closed from 20 March, the exception being for delivery of targeted support to young people at risk. Alternative youth work delivery mechanisms have been put in place to support vulnerable young people and many local voluntary youth settings have kept in contact with their members through on line and other creative solutions to deliver youth work.

## OFFICIAL – EXEC UTIVE

## OFFICIAL - EXECUTIVE

17. In terms of early years, the 38 Sure Start projects have continued to provide vital support by on-line and other means to children (aged 0-3) in the most disadvantaged areas across Northern Ireland, particularly those most vulnerable.

### *DE Covid-19 response*

18. The Department of Education's Covid-19 Response Plan, which is set within the context of the Executive's plan, has seven priorities:

- **Distance Learning** – To ensure continuity of learning for children and young people through collaboration across the education sector to support schools to deliver effective education to their pupils.
- **Vulnerable children** - To ensure the prioritisation of a continuum of support for vulnerable children and their parents/carers through collaboration across education and health sectors, facilitating their attendance at school and support for their education and care needs at school and in the home.
- **Examinations** – To ensure the awarding of a fair grade in qualifications entered within the 2019/20 academic year so that pupils can move on as planned to the next stage of their lives in the autumn and are not disadvantaged.
- **Free School Meals** – To ensure families do not experience hardship as a result of schools closing through a direct payment scheme to families eligible for free school meals, including asylum seeker families.
- **Key Workers** - To support the wider national effort to keep vital services functioning through the provision of school places for the children of key workers.
- **Childcare** - To ensure the availability of an appropriate range of childcare services for vulnerable children and key workers and support the long term sustainability of the sector.
- **Pay issues** - To ensure the continuity of pay and pension payments for all teaching and non-teaching staff and continue to progress the pay negotiations with teacher unions.

19. Further detail on the delivery of each of these priorities is provided at **Annex A**.

20. Whilst these issues remain important and work remains ongoing, it is essential that the focus now switches from response to recovery and restart.

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## Linkages between education disruption and other sectors

21. The ongoing disruption to education services, and planning for its recovery, impacts on other sectors and therefore a cross-departmental approach will be required to consider a number of key areas. These include, but may not be limited to:

- **Health and Social Care:** The closure of schools has required the establishment of bespoke arrangements for engagement between the education and health and social care systems to provide services to vulnerable children, those with Special Education Needs (SEN) outside of original settings and a £12m package on childcare. On a wider point, the re-opening of schools and settings will be dependent on health advice and public health guidelines (on issues such as social distancing and protection). DE will therefore be seeking support from DoH and PHA throughout the recovery planning.
- **Economy:** The continued closure of schools has an impact on the ability of parents and carers to attend work and to re-open businesses. Any relaxing of current restrictions will have a resulting impact on demand for school places and childcare. In addition, the loss of learning will, in due course, impact generally on skills in the economy, but more immediately may impact on progression from school to further or higher education, or employment with ongoing engagement between DE and DfE (and DAERA in respect of CAFRE) therefore essential.
- **Transport:** Of the over 84,000 pupils in receipt of free home to school transport, Translink delivers 56% of these services by bus and train. It will be likely that in restarting school transport provision, the extremely complex nature of this task will require all stakeholders to be flexible in order to maximise the safe and effective capacity of transport services. The Department and EA will continue to work in close partnership with the Department for Infrastructure, Translink and private transport operators in order to achieve this.

## Preparation phase

### Education Restart Principles

22. A number of underlying principles will inform restart planning design and delivery in due course (and are open to revision).

23. Education Restart will need to:

- **Be Evidence Informed**

## OFFICIAL - EXECUTIVE

- **Protect the Workforce and Learners**
- **Involve Collaboration and Consultation with Stakeholders**
- **Plan for a New Normal**
- **Be Implemented through Phasing and Prioritisation**

### Education Restart Priorities

24. My Department has now established a formal Education Restart Programme to oversee restart planning. This programme will be led by DE and its statutory education partners and informed by engagement with stakeholders, through a co-design process. At this stage, the Department has identified six priority work areas which will now be taken forward as interlinked projects.

25. These are outlined below

- **Physical Protection** – We must protect the physical health our workforce and learners as they return to schools and settings – minimising the risk of Covid-19 transmission.
- **Well-being** – We must promote the mental health and emotional well-being of our workforce and learners as they adjust to a “new normal”.
- **Special Educational Needs (SEN) Services** – We must ensure the delivery of vital services to vulnerable learners, including SEN services.
- **Standards and Learning** – We must maintain (or re-dress) educational standards, provide continuity of learning and ensure appropriate assessment.
- **A new normal** – We must make practical arrangements to deliver a new normal which is consistent with guidelines on social distancing.
- **Funding** – We must monitor the impact on education funding as schools and setting deal with disruption costs and recovery costs. .

26. Work will now commence on each of these priorities through engagement with stakeholders as appropriate. Phasing of re-opening will be based on health guidance and wider stakeholder and community confidence will be important.

### Education Restart Assumptions

27. Education recovery planning is currently based on the broad assumption that the education system will not be able to return to business as usual from day one. It is also assumed that the ongoing period of disruption will have an impact on learners both in terms of educational outcomes, and social, personal and cognitive development and well-being. This impact will vary depending on the individual child or young person, and the duration of any disruption..



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28. These assumptions mean that DE will work with its partners and stakeholders to design and deliver a “new normal” which involves social distancing and blended approach to learning with class based teaching supplemented by distance learning. Consideration must also be given to specific interventions to mitigate the disruption impacting adversely on educational outcomes or well-being in the longer term.
29. These assumptions will depend on emerging circumstances. It may be the case that these assumptions are incorrect and the education system can return to business as usual more quickly than expected and the impact on learners will be minimal. These are unknowns at this stage. The scale of response should be proportionate to the scale of the impact.
30. As the Restart Plan is delivered effort should be made to learn from the experience of other countries, gather examples of best practice and assess available research.

### Phasing and prioritisation

31. The Executive published a phased five-stage coronavirus recovery plan on 12 May 2020. The document sets out the approach the Executive will take when deciding how to ease coronavirus restrictions in the future.
32. In line with the assumptions outlined above and the approach agreed by the Executive on coronavirus planning, a phased re-opening of schools and settings will be required. This, in turn, will require a level of prioritisation of learners.
33. Prioritisation of learners will need to be considered and agreed. It is likely that this will vary depending on the setting and age group.
34. The steps agreed by the Executive are outlined below, accompanied with some initial planning considerations.

| Coronavirus: Our Approach to Decision-Making |  | DE Commentary   |
|--|--|---|
| Current Position                             | Schools are closed except to accommodate vulnerable pupils and the children of key workers. Measures are in place to support remote learning and to provide outreach services to vulnerable children and special needs pupils. | Work continues on our response phase as detailed at <b>Annex A</b> , with continuous refinement and improvement, particularly with regard to support for vulnerable children and distance learning. |
| Step 1                                       |   |    |

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## OFFICIAL - EXECUTIVE

| Coronavirus: Our Approach to Decision-Making |   | DE Commentary  |
|--|---|--|
| <b>Step 2</b>                                | In addition, subject to risk assessment and adhering to maximum capacities, provision expanded to cover wider definition of key workers as workplace activity gradually increases.                | Increasing numbers returning to work will increase demand for childcare and school places. To some extent this is already being experienced at a modest level with increasing numbers attending school since Easter.   |
| <b>Step 3</b>                                | In addition, schools expand provision to accommodate a number of priority cohorts on a part time basis with a blended learning approach involving a combination of in-school and remote learning. | As conditions allow there will be an increase in learners returning to schools, with consideration to be given to vulnerable children (including SEN) and stage of academic journey, for example those cohorts of pupils preparing for important transitions (e.g. from primary to post primary) and for public examinations.                  |
| <b>Step 4</b>                                | In addition, schools expand provision to accommodate all pupils on a part time basis with a blended learning approach involving a combination of in school and remote learning.                   | All learners return in a phased manner compatible with social distancing, assessment of risk and protection of health.<br><br>Ongoing blended learning, with a combination of in school learning and distance learning, supported as appropriate by more detailed guidance and structured provision of resources, including digital equipment. |
| <b>Step 5</b>                                | In addition, subject to medical and scientific advice, expand early year school provision to full time basis.   | Return to full time education for cohorts of younger children with lessons learned from disruption period and increased preparedness for future.   |

### *Summer provision*

35. My Department is currently considering the issue of summer provision and assessing options. The need for such provision will be considered with stakeholders. There should continue to be a priority on the provision of support for the children of key workers and vulnerable children, but consideration will also be given to what other summer provision may be permitted, subject to health and social distancing requirements. These options may involve the voluntary and community sector. It is important that we balance the desire for such provision with the practicalities involved in preparing for the new school term.

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## **OFFICIAL - EXECUTIVE**

36. Consideration is particularly being given to limited resumption of targeted youth services over the summer period for young people at risk and to support PSNI in tackling anti-social and civil disobedience as well as youth people at risk from paramilitary activity and those experiencing mental health issues.
37. In addition, it is usual that parents will be seeking to purchase uniforms over the summer months in preparation for the new school year. Specific arrangements will also be required for retailers who specialise in school-wear so parents / carers can prepare for the new term taking cognisance of social distancing requirements and current public health advice.

### **Proposed timescales and Schools Recovery Road Map**

38. Timescales and progression along a recovery road map will depend upon circumstances, compatibility with both the broader health situation and specific guidance, scientific advice and the overall Executive Strategic Plan:
- Current situation of limited school provision of supervised learning for children of key workers and vulnerable children, with education delivered for all pupils with remote learning provision (May/June);
  - If the Executive widens definitions of key workers at any point, these similarly to be catered for via supervised learning provision within schools, and continued efforts to provide accommodation at school for more vulnerable children. This is likely in practice to have minor impacts on the number of children in school (May/June);
  - Beyond these provisions, schools will not be open for general education for the remainder of this academic year;
  - Engagement with stakeholders, planning and implementation of detailed work on how a phased reopening of schools could operate. This will also focus on a wide range of issues and actions, not simply within the classroom but on arrangements for such matters as PPE, testing, social distancing, transport, canteen provision etc., with clear guidance needed from a medical and scientific standpoint. There will also need to be consideration of issues concerning curriculum content, what activities/sports are incompatible with any “new normal”, and specific provision in connection with special education (May-August);
  - Summer provision, working alongside other Departments, through development of a range of options, with prioritisation given to provision for children of key workers and vulnerable children, what role can be played by the community and voluntary sector, private sector (e.g. those who traditionally provide breakfast clubs / after schools clubs and summer schemes) and subject to medical and scientific advice, and observing social distancing, what other limited schemes can be considered and permitted. Specific provision for

**OFFICIAL – EXEC UTIVE**

## **OFFICIAL - EXECUTIVE**

sale of school uniforms, and any subsidiary activities related to the new school year (July/August);

- On a phased basis, in compliance with social distancing (e.g. limited class numbers) and meeting all other necessary health requirements, a return to school in late August of some key cohorts of pupils, such as significant educational years e.g. transition year from primary school (year 7); start of GCSE/ A Levels (years 11&13). This is in line with what is being considered in other jurisdictions (late August);
- In line with all these considerations a phased return of all pupils to school, with education being delivered for every pupil via a mixture of some school attendance and remote learning (from start of September);
- If medical and scientific advice develops clearly to indicate that it is safe for younger children to fully attend school without risk to themselves or others, or requiring different provisions of protection, then consideration of full return to school for younger cohorts of pupils. This would be entirely contingent on clear emerging evidence and advice, and in any event could not happen before autumn at the earliest;
- Separate consideration on timings and actions will need to be made for the issues faced by the childcare sector.

### **Financial Implications**

39. The Department will monitor the impact of the pandemic, disruption and education restart on education budgets and consider appropriate action, as required.

40. These steps have been developed in accordance with the Executive Approach to Decision Making and will be subject to further refinement as I engage with stakeholders.

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