

FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



FROM: ROBIN SWANN
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DATE: 29 DECEMBER 2020

Our ref – SUB-2329-2020

TO: PETER WEIR
Minister of Education

I am writing to provide an update on progress of the epidemic over the holiday period, and further to my previous correspondence about the opening of schools in January.

In line with the modelling of the expected impact of pre-Christmas relaxations case numbers have begun to increase rapidly in the post-Christmas period, – Rt for cases has risen to 1.4 – 1.8. Regrettably the consequences of this is inevitably an increase in hospital admissions, bed occupancy, ICU occupancy and deaths during January. Given that it will take some time for the impact of current restrictions to take effect, in the interim the hospital system is likely to come under severe pressure.

As an Executive we have sought to prioritise the education of our children. There can however be no doubt that the opening and closing of schools is likely to have an impact on transmission of the virus in the coming weeks. We will need to consider the balance of risks and harms: including the potential direct health risks to children and staff from COVID-19 and the wider impact of school opening on community transmission; and the direct risks to student mental health, wellbeing, development, educational attainment and health outcomes from school closure.

While children themselves remain at very low risk of severe disease, recent analysis has brought into clearer focus the importance of children in promoting the spread of the virus within households and the community. At present we are unclear about the extent to which the new variant of the virus is circulating in NI. If the new variant becomes the dominant form as in other parts of the UK it is likely to increase transmission of the virus by a further 40 – 70%. This recent analysis of the contribution of children in promoting the spread of the virus and the detection of the new variant has informed updated advice from the CMO and CSA, which has been shared with your officials. I understand they have also requested an urgent meeting to discuss the current plans for the reopening of schools on the 4th January.

Given the considerable pressures on the hospital system and the need to maximise the benefit from the current period of restrictions, there is a strong case for considering what additional measures can be taken around schools.

As Health Minister I fully appreciate the longer term links between educational attainment and health outcomes and that revisiting your Departments current position comes with significant challenges. We are however, now entering perhaps the most critical phase of our battle against the virus and I firmly believe that all options need to be considered in the next few weeks.

PD

Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health

