

**FROM: PETER WEIR MLA  
MINISTER OF EDUCATION**

**DATE: 5 January 2021**

**TO: EXECUTIVE COLLEAGUES**

## **Education Provision during Lockdown**

1. The Executive has correctly sought to prioritise education and the needs of our young people. Any disruption to schooling for a significant period of time will have a devastating impact on children's educational opportunities and future prospects, as well as being damaging to their mental health and well-being. No matter how well managed or provided, removal of face to face learning and its replacement with remote learning impacts on children's educational experience, with a disproportionate impact on disadvantaged groups and vulnerable children. It should therefore be only contemplated as a last resort in extreme public health circumstances such as we are currently facing, and should be maintained for a period no longer than is necessary.

## **CURRENT POSITION**

2. A range of measures within education settings aimed at curbing the spread of Covid were brought forward in Assembly statements on 21st and 31st December. These were produced following discussions with the Department of Health, and cognisant of the requirement that

schools could not reopen as normal in January. These included measures making face coverings compulsory in classroom settings in post primary schools, increased enforcement of face coverings on school transport, work with the Department of Health on widening the usage of test and tracing within schools, improved visibility of signage to parents on school gates, and targeted messaging to young people. Work has proceeded on these issues, and they will be ready to be implemented before any resumption of schools.

3. More significantly a package of measures has been introduced with regard to periods of remote learning. These were legally enacted on 3rd January, and specifically require
  - all mainstream primary schools and post primary schools would conduct remote learning for pupils for the first week of term 4-8 January
  - post primary schools are given some flexibility for face to face revision classes for the first week of term for students sitting GCSE exams in the second week of term
  - Pupils in years 8-11 would receive remote learning until the end of January
  - Vulnerable children and children of key workers (at least one parent) will be facilitated at school for supervised learning
  - Special schools to reopen on usual dates and remain open
  - Pre School education settings to reopen on usual dates and remain open
  - Childcare to remain open
  - Examinations required to be compliant with public health regulations

## **PROPOSED CHANGES TO SCHOOL RESTRICTIONS**

4. In light of the current crisis in public health, the following necessary actions are proposed. This decision does not suggest that schools are no longer safe places for young people. Instead, limiting attendance is about reducing the number of contacts that all of us have with people in other households.

- All mainstream education providers, including pre school education settings, primary and post primary schools required to provide remote learning at home to their pupils rather than face to face teaching in school until the half term break in the middle of February.
- Vulnerable children and children of key worker to have access to schools for supervised learning. Vulnerable children include amongst others all statemented children. Children of key workers would require at least one parent to be a key worker. These are the same provisions as were put in place during the first lockdown, which resulted in a very small uptake in places.
- Flexibility for post primary schools to allow some face to face revision classes in the first week of term for students taking GCSEs in week two of term.

- Remote learning requirements and the removal of face to face teaching should be temporary and last no longer than necessary, and therefore remains under review by the Executive
- Special schools to remain open as usual
- Provision in lieu of free school meals will be made to those children entitled to free school meals while normally in school
- Childcare settings, including those based in primary schools, to remain open. Childminders also allowed to continue their provision
- All currently scheduled examinations (the January series) should be facilitated to proceed. The arrangements and logistics for any examination must be fully compliant with public health guidance.
- While my priority has been to ensure that, if at all possible, exams can go ahead as planned in 2021, I have previously said that we are preparing for all eventualities. CCEA have been asked to take this forward and will be working with schools to ensure that plans are ready to be activated in relation to the 2021 summer series should they be required.
- generic youth provision will move to online under the discretion of Management Committees and EA Youth Service will continue

to lead on targeted provision for vulnerable and at risk young people, including limited face to face work (with mitigations in place to limit the spread of the virus) where this is deemed appropriate and to provide support under existing protocols to PSNI.

5. I am also seeking Executive agreement to priority vaccinations for education staff in face to face engagement with children - first priority to staff within special schools given the physical contact required there, followed by any other education staff engaging with children (such as key workers and vulnerable children).

### Public Health Guidance to Support Public Examinations

In order to ensure the health and safety of staff, invigilators and pupils during examinations, the Restart team working with Departmental policy leads, EA, CCEA and CCMS drew together guidance for schools and education settings in order that appropriate measures were in place to ensure consistent approaches across the education sector. This guidance was published on 19 November and is available [here](#).

The guidance aims to explain to schools and educational settings the mitigating measures to be put in place to provide assurance to both pupils and invigilators of examinations for their safety. It promotes appropriate social distancing and good hygiene practices before and after examinations, and encourages schools to put safe measures in place prior to commencement of examinations following current PHA advice.

#### Key elements:

- Schools, education settings and other exam centres must follow the public health advice in the:
  - a. Coronavirus (Covid-19) guidance for schools and educational settings in Northern Ireland
  - b. [More general guidance published by the Public Health Agency and available here.](#)

- Schools, education settings and other centres should also follow the [Instructions for Conducting Examinations](#) published on the Joint Council of Qualifications (JCQ) website for GCSE, AS and A level examinations. In the case of VTQ exams, you should follow the guidance specified by the relevant awarding organisation.
- Schools must have a detailed seating plan and details of all staff involved to facilitate test and trace.
- Arrival and departure from the exam hall must be strictly controlled and maintain the integrity of P7 class bubbles and social distancing requirements
- Frequently touched surfaces (for example, door handles, individual desks) should be cleaned after every examination with the usual cleaning products, including the backs of chairs where candidates may pull chairs out to sit.
- Exam rooms must not be set up face to face. Desks must be 1.25m distant for candidates within a bubbles and 2m distant from body to body for all other candidates and between bubbles. Ideally bubbles should be seated in separate rooms.
- Ventilation for the room must be considered (in line with existing DE guidance)
- Face coverings are recommended for all staff involved and pupils may choose to use them

- Examination centres should not allow candidates within any COVID symptoms enter the examination and have plans to deal with any candidates who begin to exhibit symptoms during exams
- Schools and education settings must continue to make reasonable adjustments for candidates with special educational needs and disabilities.

### **Transfer Test Provision**

In light of this guidance and the mitigations within the main Departmental Coronavirus Guidance for Schools and Education Settings, Transfer Test providers have been advised of the need to adhere to the public health legislation and to follow health and public safety advice and guidance issued by the Department. Host schools are also required to conduct and adhere to risk assessments carried out in accordance in line with appropriate health and safety legislation.

A wide range of protective measures are being put in place for the tests, including an acknowledgement from the two test providers that, within the host schools, 'existing primary school bubbles must be maintained within rooms', (AQE) and 'our plans include maintaining bubbles including more than one bubble from the same primary school' (PPTC).