

From: NR
Restart Programme

Date: 26 January 2021

To: Peter Weir MLA
Education Minister

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Sub: XX/

Draft Executive Paper to discuss options for the return of schools after half term.

Issue: The Executive will have a detailed discussion on Thursday 28 January about the next steps for schools after half term.

Timescale: Urgent

Financial/Resource Implications: N/a

FOI Implications: This submission is not likely to be disclosable, as the potential measures are considered to be future policy.

Statutory Duties Implications: None.

Presentational Issues: Will attract media attention. Lines will be provided as necessary.

Recommendation: That you note the content of the submission, and agree to issue the draft Executive Paper available at Annex A.

Background

1. The Executive will have a detailed discussion on Thursday 28 January 2021 on the situation regarding the next steps for schools after half term, following the decision taken on 21 January to extend current, wider restrictions to 5 March.

Detail

2. You have asked for an Executive Paper which will consider three options:
 - i. Categorising education as the top Executive priority and returning to full-time face-to-face learning for all pupils post half term.
 - ii. Rolling over our current arrangements for a further two weeks until 5th March.
 - iii. Some form of phased return/ short period of blended learning, with a focus on exam years or more generally on key years.
3. The paper examines the options and seeks to provide detail on the impacts, both educational and more widely, for each.
4. When a decision is made, we would seek to communicate the position urgently to all schools and parents, and then engage with the Education Practitioners Group and the TUS consultative group to consider the impacts and necessary actions. We wish to ensure that the sector is fully informed, and involved in preparations for the next phase from half term.

Recommendation

5. That you consider and approve the draft Executive Paper at Annex A.

NR

cc (by e-mail)

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Annex A

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

DATE: XX January 2021

TO: EXECUTIVE COLLEAGUES

Options for Schools Return Following Half-Term

The Executive has decided that pre-school education settings, primary and post primary schools will be required to provide remote learning to pupils until the half term break in mid-February. Specifically it was agreed that:

- Vulnerable children and children of key workers will have access to schools for supervised learning.
- Remote learning requirements and the removal of face-to-face teaching should be a temporary measure and will last no longer than necessary, and therefore it will remain under review by the Executive.
- Special schools are to remain open as usual.

On 21 January the Executive agreed that in order to limit the spread of Covid-19 infection and protect the healthcare system, to extend the current wider societal restrictions until 5 March 2021. In that context it was agreed that I would bring forward a paper to consider the next steps for schools.

When we directed that each school and educational establishment, with the exception of Special Schools, should move to remote learning after the Christmas holidays, the aim was to return to face-to-face teaching for all pupils as soon as the public health situation permitted.

As context, our children lost more than 3 months face to face learning in the last academic year (April, May, June and some of March) and lost 1 more week in October (extended holiday) with 6 further weeks to mid-term, and an extension to 5 March would result in 2 further weeks. That is a total of around 22 weeks face to face teaching since the outset of the pandemic. The school year comprises 37 weeks so in essence children have lost over half a school year of face to face in-class teaching as a result of Covid-19.

None of the above takes into account any amount of time children will have spent out of school due to COVID through being sent home as a potential contact for 14 days at a time.

The benefits of children being taught in the classroom have been rehearsed many times in this forum, and I will not repeat them again in this paper. **However, we need to take a decision on the plan for schools after half-term, and communicate it as a matter of urgency to allow schools and parents to make the necessary preparations.**

There are three broad options available to us.

1. Reopen all schools to full time face-to-face learning immediately following the half term break, in the week commencing 22 February – the default option, based on the decision of 31 December.
2. Extend the current education arrangements until 5 March, to be reviewed in mid-February.
3. A phased or blended return for some pupils after half term, until 5 March with agreed priority cohorts, such as transition or exam/assessment years coming back first.

Each of the options has advantages and challenges, and we need to be guided by the scientific advice on the impact of the options on the public health situation. The scientific evidence indicates that schools are not unsafe places, and my Department has worked closely with health professionals to develop guidance and mitigations for school settings.

The reason that only Special Schools are open for all pupils, and mainstream schools are only providing supervised learning for key worker and vulnerable children, is to contribute to the necessary reduction in overall community contacts, to reduce the rate of infection and ease the burden on our health services. All options would see the position with Special Schools remain unchanged from the Executive's decision of 31 December. The experience of Special Schools so far has been that attendance levels have reduced to around 50%. However despite this, several schools have faced significant staffing issues, presenting operational challenges and have moved to part time provision, kept continually under review by my Department.

I have previously raised the importance of early access to vaccination for school staff, and in particular the classification of special schools staff as care workers, so they can be included in this phase. Early vaccination of special schools staff, combined with a programme of weekly testing, which DE, Education Authority and PHA officials are working on at present, would give that sector confidence that we are taking all steps to ensure staff and pupil safety.

For the wider cohort of school staff, if they could be accommodated as a priority in the vaccination programme, it would facilitate a smooth re-opening of schools, and add a further layer of certainty. If this could be completed in time for a reopening in early March, we could fast track the return to classroom teaching.

The Engage programme is being delivered with the objective to limit any long-term adverse impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on educational standards by supporting pupils' learning and engagement on their return to school through provision of high quality one to one, small group or team teaching support in every school in Northern Ireland. Feedback to date has been positive and I intend bringing forward a further paper for Executive consideration.

The ongoing provision of home to school transport and Free School Meals will depend on which option is chosen. However it is expected that the general principles around transport and free school meals will continue to apply. Where children can use alternative means of travelling to school they should do so and the wearing of face coverings for post primary pupils on school transport will continue to be mandatory. Where it is possible for children to socially distance on EA and dedicated school buses, this will continue to apply. Normal public transport rules will continue to apply to children using public transport. For children entitled to free school meals, where schools are closed to specific cohorts of children, and remote learning is in place, then payments in lieu of free school meals will continue to apply to any child (normally entitled to free school meals) who is learning remotely and cannot attend school as a result of the restrictions.

My officials will need sufficient time to engage with the sector to make preparations for whichever option we select, and I will wish to fully engage education practitioners and union representatives in that process. This will provide a level of certainty and lead time which is critical to mapping a way forward. An early decision is therefore critical.

Option 1: Reopen all schools in the week commencing 22 February.

This would enable pupils to restart their full time face-to-face learning at the earliest opportunity. While remote learning is being delivered across the sector and the level of engagement by pupils is encouraging, it is recognised that this is not a substitute for classroom teaching. Also, although schools are open for supervised learning to vulnerable pupils, there is no doubt that some of these pupils will not be engaging with learning, further adding to their challenges.

For pupils more widely we recognise the mental and physical health benefits of attending school and maintaining social contact, as well as the learning benefits. My Department has invested in mental health resources, and the Engage Programme, but none is a substitute for a return to school.

Returning to school will undoubtedly increase social interactions, but with the remainder of the restrictions extended to 5 March, we must consider if there is scope

to allow a return after half term, by which time 3 more weeks will have passed. It is important to note that there are long term impacts due to loss of learning, in terms of achievement and societal outcomes, which will have an impact on future public finances.

Option 2: Extend remote learning to 5 March.

This would require two further weeks of remote learning after the half term break. The points made above refer. My aim, in the event that this option is preferred, is to return to full time face-to-face teaching for all from that date, subject to the prevailing public health and scientific advice. For those pupils who are in key assessment years, this decision will further reduce the time available to receive face to face teaching and learning. Whilst alternative awarding arrangements will be in place for learners in key examination years, it is important that these pupils are given the opportunity to acquire the skills and knowledge required for progression.

Option 3: Phased return after Half-Term.

This can take a number of forms, which would need to be agreed in consultation with sectoral professionals and Trade Unions.

Options could include:

- Opening all pre-school and primary schools for full time face-to-face learning with post-primary schools continuing with remote learning, to 5 March.
- Re-opening for selected priority year groups to return (eg key assessment years/transition years), and everyone else remote learning until 5 March.
- All schools returning on a blended learning basis – split between classroom time and remote learning, to reduce numbers physically in school to allow more distancing, and to reduce wider social contacts. This would be until 5 March, to be reviewed.
- Any further combination of the above.

Experience from practitioners has been that it is difficult to deliver face-to-face teaching for part of a cohort, while delivering remote learning for another, and combined with the need to continue to provide access to vulnerable and key-worker children, this blended approach will be both educationally and practically challenging.

We must also be cognisant of the impact that a further period of remote learning will have on parents – some of whom will be required to continue working, but will not necessarily be included as key workers. The economic consequences of this also need to be considered.

Conclusion

I have always sought to be guided by the prevailing public health advice and scientific evidence, while recognising the priority the Executive has placed on Education, and all the benefits that brings, not just in the short term, but also for longer term societal and economic benefits.

Those year groups engaged in learning for key qualifications (Years 11-14) must be prioritised in our return planning, so that they have maximum opportunity to acquire the knowledge, skills and understand required for progression to the next stage of education, employment or training. The primary years preparing for transition are also a key focus. We will need to invest in catch up resources to allow children to make up for the loss of face to face teaching over these two academic years. Core loss to the foundations of education, if missed now, could have a longer detrimental impact on children.

I have set out above some of the key considerations we must bear in mind when reaching a decision. We must ensure that any further measures we agree are in place for the shortest time possible, consistent with the prevailing public health position, and we must be confident that our decision allows us to make robust plans, in a definite timeline, to the earliest full return to classroom teaching.

We must be in a position by the next formal review of the regulations on 18 February to consider the longer term steps for education, as part of a strategic consideration of how education, society and the wider economy transition out of the current restrictions. This must include a clear understanding of the vaccination programme's impact on overall risk, the position of school staff as priority workers, and the potential for a programme of regular mass testing in schools.

Recommendations

1. In light of the uncertainty of the ongoing public health situation, and the co-ordinated approach to reducing overall community contacts, reluctantly, the recommendation is that the Executive adopts Option 2 to extend remote learning for all educational settings including pre-schools, nurseries, primaries and post primaries until 5th March, in line with other Executive restrictions. Special Schools will remain open and mainstream schools continue to provide supervised learning for vulnerable children and the children of key workers. Childcare settings and childminders will also remain open. As with other restrictions, this decision will remain under review by the Executive.
2. In line with the Executive's overriding commitment to prioritise the education of our young people, the aim should be to begin to restart face to face teaching in the week commencing 8th March, on either a full, blended or targeted year

group basis, with particular focus on those students in public examination years. However, any resumption of face to face teaching, in whatever form, will be dependent on the wider prevailing public health situation.

3. Given the disruption to schooling in 2020/21, the Executive commits in principle, to the further roll out of the Engage Programme, aimed at enabling student catch up, for 2021/22, resourced by COVID funding. A further paper will be brought to the Executive.