

**DRAFT V1.4 – For Discussion with DoH**

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MINISTER OF EDUCATION**

**DATE: XX February 2021**

**TO: EXECUTIVE COLLEAGUES**

**Options for Schools Return from 8 March 2021**

**Background**

1. On 21 January the Executive agreed that, in order to limit the spread of Covid-19 infection and protect the healthcare system, it should extend the current 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 and other educational settings. On 28 January the Executive agreed that the period of remote learning should also continue to 5 March, and be kept under review.
2. When we directed that each school and educational establishment, with the exception of Special Schools and targeted youth services for vulnerable and at risk young people, 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.
3. My paper of 28 January set out the detailed educational context in regard to the amount of time our children have been out of the classroom since March 2020.
4. While Youth Services also require clarity and prioritisation in relation to what is happening with their continued provision, I will bring a further paper short paper on Youth restart following further discussions with health.
5. We now need to take a decision on the plan for schools and other educational settings from 8 March, and communicate it as a matter of urgency to allow schools and parents to make the necessary preparations.
6. There are three broad routes available to consider.
  - a. Continue remote learning for a further period with the duration to be agreed.

- b. Return all schools and pre-schools to full time face-to-face learning on 8 March or as soon as possible thereafter.
- c. A phased return on 8 March with agreed priority cohorts, such as key year groups and/or exam/assessment years coming back first, with all pupils back by 22 March or as soon as possible thereafter.

### **Covid in Schools – Key Public Health Messages**

- 7. Throughout the pandemic to date, and since schools returned in September 2020, PHA and Health officials have worked closely with my officials and the education sector, to ensure our guidance to schools is fully reflective of the latest public health position.
- 8. PHA has provided very helpful information which we have shared with the schools' Practitioners' Group, the Special Schools' Strategic Leadership Group and trades unions representatives. There a number of key points which are worth repeating in this paper. Evidence suggests that children are less affected by Covid, both in terms of prevalence of infection and severity of illness. They also "shed" the virus (i.e. are contagious) for a shorter time. Evidence shows that schools are not centres for the spread of the virus, but rather infection rates in schools reflect community prevalence, and that schools were not a major driver of the second wave of infections seen from October.
- 9. Evidence from ONS studies nationally also shows that education staff are not more at risk than the general workforce, and that the numbers of asymptomatic cases in adults and children is similar.
- 10. There is evidence that transmission within schools does occur, but this tends to be on a small scale. The World Health Organisation has reported that schools staff are the most likely to be the index (or first) case, and that transmission within schools is most likely to be between staff. In relation to new variants of the virus, they are more infectious in general across all age groups, but not more so in children.
- 11. The PHA has drilled down into the cases reported by schools in November and December to determine the most likely source of transmission. Of the c1,500 cases (Circa 0.4% of the school population) where information is available around 65% acquire the infection outside school. The rate of pupil to staff transmission is very low.
- 12. The scientific evidence therefore indicates that schools are not unsafe places.

## **Current Position - mitigations**

13. The guidance made available to schools contains a number of non-pharmacological interventions, and these mitigations were further strengthened in December 2020. There are now additional requirements for all staff and post primary pupils to wear face-coverings both in school and on all school transport. As an additional mitigating measure the Education Authority will be carrying out checks on school transport to ensure compliance with mask wearing. Additional signage will be provided to all schools to place prominently at the school gate to encourage people to comply with the key public health messages on social distancing, etc. There are also plans for a prominent promotional campaign to promote the use of face coverings on school transport.
14. Special schools and EOTAS are open for all pupils as normal and this would remain the position under all options in this paper. The experience of special schools so far has been that attendance levels have reduced to around 50%. However several schools have faced significant staffing issues, presenting operational challenges and a move to part time provision. This is kept continually under review by my Department.
15. In terms of additional mitigation measures the Executive has agreed a vaccination programme for priority staff. My officials are also working with the Public Health Agency and the Education Authority to develop a weekly asymptomatic testing programme for all special school staff and pupils, which will roll out fully from 22 February. In the context of the Health Minister's recent paper on asymptomatic testing my officials look forward to further engagement with Health colleagues on additional management strategies such as the feasibility of a wider schools testing programme.
16. Mainstream school provision is currently limited to providing supervised learning for the children of key workers and vulnerable children, in order to contribute to the reduction in overall community contacts, to reduce the rate of infection and ease the burden on our health services.

## **Transport and Meals**

17. 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. Under the options below a full home to school transport service would operate. Eligible pupils should only use school transport where they have no alternative means of transport available. The wearing of face coverings for post primary pupils on school transport will continue to be mandatory and strongly recommended for all other pupils, and to ensure compliance with the wearing of face coverings the EA will carry out spot checks at pick up points/drop off points and on buses.

18. Where it is possible for children to socially distance on school transport, they should do so. 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 I would propose, subject to Department of Finance approval, that payments in lieu of free school meals 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.
19. 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 in time which is critical to mapping a way forward. An early decision is therefore critical.

### **Options for Schools after 5 March**

Continue remote learning for a further period, duration to be agreed.

20. For those pupils who are in key assessment and transition years Y12-14 and P6, this outcome would 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 their educational progression. It will also reduce the time available for schools to gather up-to-date evidence core to alternative awarding arrangements.
21. This option would also have a negative impact across all cohorts, while remote learning has progressed and developed well since last year, we still accept that it is not a longer term replacement for face to face classroom teaching. We also know from a range of studies that school closures disproportionately impact on children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
22. The current provision for children of key workers and vulnerable children will need to continue under this option.
23. **Due to the significant impact both educationally and in regard pupils' overall wellbeing, I do not believe that this is an acceptable way forward.** With the Easter Holiday commencing for most schools on 26 March, such an approach will mean children are unlikely to return to the classroom prior to the Summer Term commencing in mid-April and will have not attended school for around four months – a longer duration than the lockdown in Spring 2020. There is a recognition from Executive Colleagues that a return to face to face education is a key priority and the time children spend out of school should be minimised.

**Option 1: Return all schools and pre-school to full time face-to-face learning on 8 March or as soon as possible thereafter**

24. 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 long term substitute for classroom teaching. Face-to-face learning is the optimal educational approach. Whilst many pupils have engaged well with remote learning, undoubtedly some will have found it much more difficult. Many practical play-based and active learning experiences cannot be effectively replicated remotely. Also, although schools are open for supervised learning to children of key workers and vulnerable pupils, there is no doubt that some of these vulnerable pupils who are not attending school will not be engaging with learning, further adding to their challenges.
25. As well as learning benefits, there are also mental and physical health benefits of attending school and maintaining social contact. Physical education for example is a core element of the statutory curriculum and we know many children and young people are not undertaking regular activity whilst schools are closed. My Department has invested in mental health resources, and the Engage Programme which is primarily designed for use in school and presents issues when operating remotely, however both will be able to support a return to school.
26. Returning to school will increase the level of social interaction, but we must consider if there is scope to prioritise the education system to allow a return. It is important to note the potential long term impacts of this disruption to learning, in terms of achievement and societal outcomes, which will have an impact on future public finances and which must be addressed when children return to school.
27. There are clear benefits to all pupils from a return to full time classroom learning as soon as possible, considered in the light of the evidence available to us on safety in schools, and further taking note of the comprehensive mitigations which guidance sets out, from a purely educational point of view this would represent my preferred option though I accept this may need to be balanced by wider public health imperatives.

**Option 2: A phased return on 8 March with agreed priority cohorts, such as key year groups and/or exam/assessment years coming back first, with all pupils back by 12 April or as soon as possible thereafter**

28. This can take a number of forms. Since my paper of 28 January, officials have engaged with the DE Practitioners Group and Trade Unions, to further examine the issues.
29. Experience from practitioners has been that it is extremely difficult to deliver face-to-face teaching for part of a cohort, while delivering remote learning for another. Combined with the need to continue to provide supervised learning for key worker children and vulnerable children, this blended approach will be both educationally and practically very challenging.
30. 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.
31. Within this option I therefore propose a four stage return for pre-school and schools, as follows:
- a. Stage 1 – on 8 March all pre-school pupils, and P1 – P3 to return full time, for face to face teaching.
  - b. Stage 2 – on 15th March – Qualification years 12-14. Needed to reflect the critical nature a minimum of two weeks of assessment before Easter to facilitate GCSE, AS and A' levels.
  - c. Stage 3 – on 22nd March – Remainder of primary school children
  - d. Stage 4 - 12th April – (post Easter) remaining school years (Years 8-11).
32. This prioritisation reflects at Stage 1 the need for our youngest pupils to return to school/pre-school and the fact the youngest children are also the lowest risk groups in terms of virus transmission and illness. In Stage 2, the return of years 12-14 in the absence of the majority of pupils in the school, the return of only those pupils who are completing qualifications (including a small number of Year 11 pupils who require GCSEs to facilitate extended learning at Key Stage 4) will also enable more effective social distancing. Stage 3 allows the return of the remainder of primary school pupils for 1 week before the Easter break again reflecting lower transmission risk and prevalence. Stage 4 is then a return to almost normality in school settings.
33. The existing DE Coronavirus for Schools guidance on bubbles within primary groups will continue to apply. The current provision for children of key workers and vulnerable children will continue under this option but breakfast clubs, school trips, inter school sports and after schools activities would be held off on until 12 April.
34. It is likely that schools will require additional resources to implement Stage 1-3, to facilitate the continuation of the key worker/vulnerable children provision, and

particularly in post primary schools to support the dual approach of remote learning in parallel with face to face teaching. The temporary engagement of substitute teachers is one potential solution, funded by the Executive's recent allocation to Education for Covid support in this financial year.

35. The stage approach gives certainty to schools and parents, while providing a further period of reduced community contact.
36. Targeted early years provision, including the Sure Start programme, has been mirroring the schools' closure arrangements to date, ensuring focus on support for vulnerable children. This non-statutory provision will also need to be considered when the way forward for schools is determined and my preference is for this to be opened at Stage 1
37. School related activities such as after school clubs, inter school sports, day trip and overnight trips have not been considered as part of this paper. Rather, they will form part of the wider executive consideration of societal restrictions.
38. Restart of youth services does not form part of this consideration and will be the subject of a separate paper to the Executive.

## **Engage Programme 2 / Covid Recovery**

39. Given the on-going impact of Covid-19 in preventing face-to-face teaching, it is clear that schools will need to offer additional support for children and young people during the next academic year. Feedback on the first year of the Engage programme indicates that it is an appropriate way for schools to address the ongoing effects of remote learning on pupils' learning and engagement and on their emotional health and wellbeing. It provides schools with additional teaching resources to allow one-to-one, small group and team teaching support to help pupils most in need to be ready to successfully engage with classroom teaching. I would therefore wish the programme to continue for another academic year.
40. The programme will retain its focus on socio-economic disadvantage given the ongoing concern about the potential for further widening of the disadvantage gap. If funding allows, I would consider broadening the programme to a range of educational settings not currently included. This might include pre-school education and other early years settings, Special schools, and Education Other Than At School settings.
41. Following previous Executive agreement in principle on a new Engage programme, that further detailed costings and proposals will be brought back on

this, but it is likely to comprise the existing Engage programme being rolled forward to the final term (April-June) 2021, an Engage 2 programme for 2021, some summer activity covering voluntary academic and wellbeing interventions and some recovery funding on health and wellbeing. For covid recovery to be maximised for our children and young people this would involve work with other Departments as well.

## **Conclusion**

42. 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.
43. Those year groups engaged in learning for key qualifications must be prioritised in our return planning, so that they have maximum opportunity to acquire the knowledge, skills and understanding required for progression to the next stage of education, employment or training. Also the early years in pre-school and primary school are vital for children's development.
44. 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, for the earliest full return to classroom teaching.
45. I must also stress that very clear feedback from practitioners, unions, parents and pupils has been that once a decision is taken to return to school, no further periods of wholesale remote learning should take place, recognising that it may be necessary in limited cases in response to local in-school issues, as was the case in the period up to the end of December.

## **Recommendation**

46. I favour a full return of all pupils to full time classroom learning on March 8 or as soon as possible thereafter, for the reasons set out in this paper though as noted previously I accept this may need to be balanced by wider public health imperatives. Schools remain a safe environment, and we have worked closely with Department of Health and PHA colleagues to ensure that mitigations are in place, and these have been strengthened further ahead of return, and from an educational point of view this would be the preferred option



47. If the public health position is such that Executive colleagues consider that my preferred option is not feasible at this point in time, then a short staged approach, as set out in Option 2, should be considered.
48. I do not support any continuation of the current remote learning arrangements, and would rule that out as a longer term option.