

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER

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Dear *Geraldine*

## **ENSURING EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY AND GOOD RELATIONS IN RESPONSES TO COVID-19**

Thank you for your email letter of 21 May on the above subject and your kind words on the work undertaken by the Executive in the past weeks.

A debt of gratitude is owed to all those who have worked tirelessly and altruistically to preserve life and keep society functioning; whether it be in health, education or other sectors.

My Oral Statement of 21 May 2020 to the Assembly Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 response, set out policies and procedures to meet the learning needs of our pupils, as best we can in the circumstances. My statement may be accessed at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/education-ministers-statement-northern-ireland-assembly-21-may-2020>

At Appendix I there is more detailed information on some of the policies and procedures; the following paragraphs represent a summary of activities.

### **Free School Meals payments**

In light of the school closures due to COVID-19 and the impact this would have on families whose children qualified for free school meals, a direct payment scheme was put in place to support families during this difficult period. Parents/guardians of children entitled to Free School Meals receive payments of £2.70 per child for every school day the school is closed as a result of the pandemic.

In view of the proximity to the Easter Holidays, the payments covered this two week period as well. Initially the scheme was designed to make payments to those families with bank accounts but, as it became clear that a number of families did not have access to bank accounts, the payment of cheques was established. Asylum Seekers were also recognised as being in a vulnerable group and the Department asked the Home Office to issue

payments via an Aspen card to ensure they received the same financial assistance for their children.

Recognising that some children would not benefit from the direct payment made to parents, the Education Authority (EA) youth services provided food to the most vulnerable through its "Eat Well/Live Well" programme which provided five day food boxes to young people most in need. These were distributed to 44 EA youth centres across NI and demonstrated the positive collaboration with key stakeholders to target those in need.

#### Digital Devices for Disadvantaged Children

While schools are providing distance learning support for children and young people there is undoubtedly variability in access to online provision and in the ability of parents to support those children and young people in their learning. For this reason, my Department is conscious of the potential for COVID-19 to give rise to differential impacts for some section 75 groups and is continuing to explore opportunities to ensure that a pupil's personal circumstances do not differentially impact upon their education. This includes ensuring that the section 75 duties are integrated into our policy development cycle in response to COVID-19 and that equality screening / equality impact assessments ensure that our policies take into account the needs and potential impacts upon section 75 groups.

As an example of a recent policy, I was pleased to announce on 21 May that help will be made available for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people to access our safe and well-resourced education technology infrastructure in Northern Ireland. This offers scope to lend up to 24,000 digital devices including laptops and tablets to pupils to support their home learning.

#### Restarting the Education System

Work has commenced to consider the practical implications of restarting schools when the scientific evidence is clear that it is safe to do so.

Priority 5 of the Department's Education Restart/Recovery Programme commits to the consideration and implementation of "new school day" arrangements, co-designed with practitioners and stakeholders. Underpinning this commitment is the need for provision of evidence-based guidance on all matters relating to the revised school day.

A "Practitioners Group" is being established and tasked with the consideration of practical issues and the development of proposed operational solutions that will underpin 'new school day' arrangements. Membership of the Practitioners Group will comprise school Principals, with representation across education sectors and phases.

Recognising that the experiences and needs of the pre-school/primary and post-primary phases are likely to be different, we will establish two "sub-groups" within the Practitioners Group.

The Practitioners Group will interact with a Consultation Group, the focus of which will be on wider engagement within the Department and external engagement with Trades Unions, Managing Authorities and bodies representing sectoral interests.

The outputs of this work will be detailed guidance to facilitate safe re-opening of schools, informed by medical advice and in line with the Executive's roadmap.

Any new arrangements will be considered for equality impacts.

#### Expert Group on Persistent Educational Underachievement

One of the priorities identified within the "New Decade, New Approach" (NDNA) deal was to establish an Expert Group to examine and propose an Action Plan to address links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background, including the long-standing issues facing working-class, Protestant boys. I am considering a Terms of Reference for the Group. The Expert Group will engage with stakeholders on issues including destinations, achievements and outcomes.

In the months ahead, our work in support of the public sector's response to COVID-19 will continue to develop, not just in relation to the pressure felt by the education Sector but also in collaboration and partnership with other Departments, on the related health, economic and social issues. During that time, we will monitor policies/activities for emerging or exacerbated inequalities and assess how they can be most appropriately addressed, either as part of the response to COVID-19 or subsequent measures. In all circumstances, the physical and mental health and well-being of the young people in our care and that of our staff must be the first consideration.

The Commission's advice note for public authorities on "Section 75 duties when developing COVID-19 related policies" was circulated to staff shortly after its publication.

I trust you will find this response helpful.

Personal Data

**Peter Weir MLA**  
**Minister of Education**

## APPENDIX I

### MORE DETAILED INFORMATION ON SOME OF THE POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

#### Special Educational Needs

For children with a statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN), a number of actions have been taken by the Department to ensure continued support during Covid-19 as set out below:

- Children with statements of SEN are included within the definition of “vulnerable” children as set out in the Departments: Vulnerable Children & Young People guidance issued on 10 April 2020 (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/guidance-vulnerable-children-and-young-people-10-april-2020>).
- Special schools remain open for children of key workers and vulnerable children to provide supervised learning and remote learning and support for children and parents/carers and remain in regular contact with families.
- All special schools have made arrangements for sustained remote contact and learning which is reflective of pupil age, developmental stage and SEN. Remote learning for children with a statement of SEN is currently being supported by individualised remote learning programmes prepared by schools based on the pupil's specific educational need. Where appropriate, therapy guidance is included in this.
- C-19 Link Officers are in constant communication with all schools and have the capacity to relay queries raised by schools in relation to statemented children to the relevant source.
- A joint Health & Education planning process has been established to consider how best to support children with complex needs who would normally receive support in Special Schools and from Health services.
- Initiated by the Department and co-ordinated by the Education Authority (EA), education organisations are working together to bring a range of high quality information, guidance and resources for schools and parents through the Continuity of Learning Project (CoLP). There are 4 phases within CoLP, Primary, Post Primary, Special Education and Irish Medium Education. In relation to pupils who have a statement of special educational needs, all phases within the CoLP are working to support all pupils, staff and families in the context of a continuing requirement for home-based remote learning and moving into a blended approach during the 2020/21 school year, acknowledging there is a need to ensure that support is available in the medium and longer term, building on what already exists and exploring best practice in blended learning approaches. These can be accessed at <https://www.eani.org.uk/supporting-learning>

#### Transitions: Preschool – Primary and P7 to Year 8

Open enrolment does not apply to pupils with statements of SEN.



Pupils with a statement of SEN are placed by the EA as a result of consultation with the Board of Governors of the school which best meets their needs. This includes placements at a Special School, mainstream school, including a Learning Support Centre (LSC), and an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) unit. Placements at mainstream schools are on supernumerary basis.

Those children with statements of SEN and profound multiple learning difficulties, severe learning difficulties with complex medical needs or severe learning difficulty with a statement of SEN already completed have been identified as priority groups within the statementing process for placement in the 2020-21 academic year.

Transitions from Pre-school to P1 and P7 to Year 8 post primary transitions have been prioritised within the statementing process for the 2020-21 academic year.

Children with severe learning difficulties and no statement of SEN have been prioritised within the statementing process for pre-school admissions for the 2020-21 academic year.

#### Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No's 3 & 5) Notice (NI) 2020

The Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No.3) Notice (NI) 2020, came into operation on 09 April 2020.

The Department issued a further Notice known as the Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No.5) Notice (Northern Ireland) 2020 for a period of 28 days which is due to expire on 4 June. A further Notice may be issued by the Department after 28 days, if required.

The Notice modifies the duties on the EA; Schools; Principals and Boards of Governors of schools; the Health and Social Care Authority and parents to a 'best endeavours duty' but only where the inability to comply with that original duty is attributable to the temporary closure of schools in Northern Ireland; or the reallocation of Education Authority or health and social care resources, to meet other essential services required as a result of the current outbreak of coronavirus in Northern Ireland.

#### Other support available

The EA has created a general page to support parents of children with Special Educational Needs at <https://www.eani.org.uk/special-education-resources> which also provides links to other available resources:

- Specific support is available through the EA Special Educational Needs (SEN) - Pupil and Early Years Support Services, who are working hard to continue to deliver high quality support to children and young people with SEN and their parents remotely via <https://www.eani.org.uk/services/pupil-support-services> at this challenging time.
- The Middletown Centre for Autism also provide a comprehensive online support service for children and their families which can be accessed via their website at <https://www.middletownautism.com> and social media.

## Wellbeing of Children and Young People

The wellbeing of children and young people continues to be a high priority for the Department of Education (DE) and we recognise the need to ensure that support for the wellbeing of our children and young people is enhanced during the Covid-19 period.

DE is working with the Department of Health, Department for Communities and the Department of Justice to develop a cross-departmental/inter-agency plan to ensure that the needs of vulnerable children will continue to be met over the period of the pandemic. This will include engagement with both charitable and statutory partners.

The following measures have been put in place to provide communication and support for our children and young people at this time:-

- The EA have put in place a contingency plan for the Independent Counselling Service for Schools which will continue to provide counselling to existing and new post primary pupils either by telephone or video call. The Critical Incident Support Team will also be available if required.
- The EA have created a 'Stay Connected Initiative' online, the purpose of which is to provide an engagement service to remotely support young people who are self-isolating as a result of Covid-19. Within the first four hours of going live the site registered 1450 views.
- Additionally, schools have themselves purchased the 'Pupil Attitudes to Self and School' (PASS) assessment tool or equivalent in order to identify individual emotional needs in children and young people where concern has been raised, and we also have reports of schools currently prioritising the wellbeing needs of pupils and a number have also created a self-care toolkit containing links to apps, some of which deal with potential bereavement owing to Covid-19.
- DE is aware of the difficulties faced both now, with the low numbers of vulnerable children currently attending school, which can put pressure on families and at the other end when reintegrating them back into school with all other pupils. This applies particularly to those who have experienced trauma such as looked after children and the EA has developed a process to support this.
- In April DE launched, with INEQE Safeguarding Group, a Safer Schools App, a digital safeguarding and communication toolkit for school staff and parents/carers in Northern Ireland for the Covid-19 period. This will provide a wealth of relevant information on a regular basis, not only on Covid-19 but more importantly to support the wellbeing of staff, parents/carers and children & young people. More recently the Safer Schools App for children and young people was launched which will provide pupils with access to advice on a range of digital issues, including safeguarding on social media platforms, bullying, sexting and emerging online trends during the Covid-19 period. Pupils receive different content depending on their year group.
- In addition to the above DE provides funding of £266,000 per annum to support the Foyle based Childline. NSPCC Childline operates twelve counselling bases throughout the UK,

two of which are based in Northern Ireland (NI), in Belfast and Foyle. Although a high proportion of calls to the NI helpline come from children in NI, calls can also be rerouted from other regions in the UK.

Before the Covid-19 crisis DE had been working collaboratively with DoH, the Public Health Agency, the Health and Social Care Board, the EA and other Government Departments to develop a Framework for Children & Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education.

This work is still progressing, the main emphasis of which is to support schools to promote emotional health and wellbeing at a universal level, through a holistic, multi-disciplinary approach, and providing early and enhanced support for those children and young people who may be at risk or showing signs of needing further help, and recognising that schools alone are unable to provide such support.

We do appreciate that the Covid-19 crisis creates a different dimension to mental health and emotional wellbeing, and will be considering how best we can ensure that all children and young people are supported when they do return to school, being mindful that many will be facing higher levels of anxiety and distress and will need help with the transition back to school and help to cope with the impact of the prolonged absence.

### **Continuity of Learning programme**

Within my Continuity of Learning programme there is a specific work stream to consider, and make plans to meet, the particular needs of pupils in the Irish-medium sector where high numbers of children come from socially deprived backgrounds.

### **Pre-School Education Programme (PSEP)**

The full funding associated with the Pre-School Education Programme (PSEP) will continue to be provided to all funded settings for the remainder of the academic year, in order to help ensure that settings are equipped to provide support for all their pupils at this time.

Although pre-school settings are closed to pupils, they remain open for staff to facilitate supervised learning for vulnerable children and those of key workers in the same way that schools are.

All pre-school education settings are required to continue to support their pupils' learning at home. All settings have been provided with a list of resources that may be useful to support remote learning, and resources are linked on the EA and Getting Ready to Learn (GRTL) websites at <https://www.eani.org.uk/educational-resources-newsletters> and <https://gettingreadytolearn.co.uk> respectively. Many settings have found creative and innovative ways to make remote learning as successful and engaging as possible, as demonstrated in the examples included in the most recent Getting Ready to Learn Bulletin. In addition, a new parent tab has been created on the Getting Ready to Learn website which gives parents direct access to useful resources to support their child's learning and development at home.

Pre-school settings have been advised that they should continue to make the necessary arrangements to provide primary schools with transition information in relation to pupils transferring into Primary school for the 2020/21 academic year. Pre-school settings have



been asked to follow their usual processes as much as possible, basing their report on observations during the period the child attended the pre-school settings. Where possible, commentary on progress made through remote learning should be added, but it is acknowledged that this will not be possible for every setting.

### **Targeted Early Years Support**

The Department provides funding for a range of intervention programmes to support children in the early years who might otherwise perform less well within education. To ensure continuity of support throughout the COVID-19 period, funding for these interventions has continued in 2020/21:

#### **Sure Start**

Departmental funding continued as normal in 2019/20 for the Sure Start Programme and these arrangements have followed through in 2020/21. The Sure Start budget for 2020/21 has been increased by £1.45m to c£27m to maintain services at existing levels within (at least) the 25% most disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland.

The 38 Sure Start projects have put in place a range of alternative support mechanisms - prioritising the most vulnerable children and their families. Under Health and Social Care Board administration, all Sure Starts projects are providing families with teleconference or live streaming story times and delivering play resources to doorsteps to support families to continue their child's development, home learning and reading during the Covid crisis.

To provide additional support to families during the current Covid period, children who reach the normal cut-off age of four years, can continue to receive support from Sure Start until September 2020.

#### **Pathway Fund**

The Pathway Fund supports children (0-4) in disadvantaged circumstances and who are at risk of not achieving their full potential in education. The Fund has continued for 2020/21 at the same level as for 2019/20 (c£3m) and Letters of Offer have been issued by the Fund administrator, the Early Years Organisation (EYO).

In response to Covid-19, recipient settings have identified innovative, alternative ways to support children such as the use of online platforms and technology to continue work within the home environment. Learning packs and resources which focus on children's emotional health and wellbeing have been developed. Continued outreach and support has been provided for parents including food packs, baby essentials and online/ telephone support.

DE has applied to the DoF Covid-19 fund – to support sustainability of the sector during the current, exceptional circumstances. If successful the remaining (32) eligible Pathway groups which met the quality threshold can be funded.

#### **Toybox Project**

The annual budget for the Toybox Project has continued at £356k in 2020/21, ensuring continuity of support to Traveller and Roma children (aged 0-4) in Northern Ireland.



Toybox is aimed at reducing social and educational inequalities experienced by Traveller and Roma children in nine key areas across Northern Ireland, through engagement with Sure Start and pre-school/nursery and by encouraging parental involvement.

During Covid-19 the Toybox Project has implemented a number of innovative arrangements to engage with Traveller / Roma children during the challenging period. Examples include provision of support and advice through telephone and social media calls and videos, sharing online support resources via social media pages, engagement through interpreter services and the use of video conferencing with Traveller families.

#### **Childcare Unit:**

Given the challenges of Covid-19, the Departments of Health and Education have worked together to develop a Covid-19 Childcare Support Scheme - a package of measures in response to the concerns raised by the childcare sector and the demand for an appropriate range of childcare services for vulnerable children and key workers. Vulnerable children for the purposes of the Scheme are

A child **currently known to social services**, who is:

- i. in need;
- ii. in need of protection (on the child protection register); or
- iii. Looked after.

The definition includes young carers, disabled children and those with Statements of special educational needs.

#### **Children and Young People's Strategy**

The Children and Young People's Strategy was published in December 2019 and is currently progressing to the Executive with the intention of securing its adoption by the Executive and laying it before the Assembly as soon as the current situation permits. The Strategy provides the Executive's overall long term strategic direction and outlines how departments will work collaboratively to improve the wellbeing of children and young people in Northern Ireland.

The Strategy includes commitments to address educational inequalities including those experienced by children and young people from socio-economically disadvantaged families, and those who are newcomers to Northern Ireland or from the Traveller or Roma communities. More broadly, the Strategy sets out a number of commitments aimed at ensuring children and young people live in a society in which equality of opportunity and good relations are promoted.

The Strategy will therefore ensure that as well as being addressed as part of the Covid-19 response, issues of educational inequality will remain a priority in the longer term.