

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER

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Dear Koulla

PREPARATIONS FOR THE RE-OPENING OF SCHOOLS

Thank you for your letter of 10 August 2020 in relation to preparations for the re-opening of schools.

I welcome your support regarding the Executive's announcement on the full-time return to school for all children and young people from the end of August. My primary objective has always been to achieve maximum face-to-face in class teaching time for all pupils, where safe to do so, at the earliest opportunity. However, this does not represent a return to business as usual. We are still operating in a pandemic and therefore the return to normal patterns of operation and attendance will be accompanied by a range of hygiene and public health protocols in order to lower the risks associated with the infection and spread of COVID-19.

The revised guidance has been developed for education settings, to support a safe reopening of schools in line with the Northern Ireland Executive's *Coronavirus Executive Approach to Decision-Making*¹ published on 12 May 2020. This updated guidance is based on the scientific evidence as at 8 August 2020. It will be kept continually under review as the science and public health guidance changes.

The aims of the revised guidance are to:

- provide clarity with regard to practical approaches for a safe reopening of schools; and

¹ <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/execoffice/executiveour-approach-to-decision-making.pdf>

- in so doing, promote consistency of approach across Northern Ireland, whilst ensuring appropriate local flexibility for education settings and staff to adapt and adopt approaches that best suit their communities' needs and seek to maximise the safety of staff, children, young people and their families.

The guidance is written with a view to providing a framework for the restart of schools, with a return of priority cohorts from 24 August 2020 (as previously advised) and a return for all children and young people during the week commencing 31 August 2020. Public health advice at the time of school opening will always prevail over this guidance.

The guidance, part of an overall Restart Programme, has been co-designed by the Department of Education, school leaders and key partners and has been supported through consultation and sharing with Managing Authorities, trades unions and sectoral support bodies. It has been informed by advice provided by the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Advisor based on the scientific and public health advice available at the time of writing. It should be read and applied in conjunction with the latest public health guidance².

This revised guidance, provides useful information on key risk mitigation strategies to maximise the safety of pupils and staff while guaranteeing their access to education. These include but are not limited to regular cleaning, adjusting physical layouts in classrooms, use of segmentation (or bubbles) and ensuring maximum distancing between older pupils (within the age group and with others) and with adults (with other adults and with pupils). It is neither practical, nor indeed would it be helpful, to be prescriptive about the arrangements that every school must follow – flexibility will be key to facilitate planning by schools that best meet local circumstances. Nonetheless, practical, evidence-based guidance on matters relating to the new school day will provide the structure within which safe-planning may proceed.

The New School Day guidance, published on 13 August 2020 included reference to special schools, children with special educational needs and children who are clinically vulnerable. The Joint Health & Education Oversight Group met on 13 August 2020, and were content at the level of input from medical professionals to the guidance. Group members will consider the document further and feedback to the Department over coming days particularly in relation to supporting those children with complex clinical needs. The Special Schools Strategic Leadership Group have also been involved in drafting of the guidance, however at a meeting on 18 August 2020 to consider aspects of implementation that may be specific to Special Schools it was agreed that supplementary guidance for Special Schools would also be made available. I can advise that this will be published week commencing 24 August 2020.

The guidance highlights that risk assessments of individual settings should be undertaken to ensure that health and safety legislation and guidance is fully adhered to. To support this, the Education Authority has developed good practice risk assessments which have been shared across education settings.

² <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/coronavirus-covid-19>

The guidance sets out when and how PPE should be used in line with PHA guidance and advises that the Education Authority is leading on procurement of suitable quantities of PPE for educational settings. It also stresses that educational settings should develop a clear procedure for what staff should do if a pupil starts to display symptoms of COVID-19 when at school, including guidance on the appropriate use of PPE adhering to the above PHA guidance.

The guidance makes a clear distinction between PPE and face coverings. Public Health guidance³ recommends that face coverings are used in particular circumstances especially in enclosed spaces where social distancing is not possible. It also strongly recommends that all pupils, regardless of age, should wear a face covering on all buses, trains or taxis for the journey to school where it is appropriate for them to do so and they are able to handle them as directed. The guidance also accepts that staff and pupils may wish to wear them but that schools should also be aware that some persons (including children) are exempt from wearing face coverings. This will naturally be kept under continuous review and be led by PHA guidance.

Guidance is also provided on school uniforms including asking schools to consider allowing children to come to school in their PE uniform or for younger children to simply wear trainers on relevant days to minimise the need for changing.

The revised guidance outlines the processes that will be established to manage local outbreaks and provides links to the appropriate PHA guidance for what steps to take in the event of an outbreak in a school or other localised setting. The guidance is also more explicit in terms of ensuring that any child who has COVID-19 symptoms is not left alone. We have revised this paragraph to strengthen the procedures around supervision and the wellbeing of the child.

The guidance provides clarity on protective bubbles for all year groups. You cite the young people in Years 11-14 in your letter and I can assure there is guidance on what schools should do in respect of these year groups.

I note your comment that rapid testing of pupils and teachers is critical. Section 8 of the revised guidance is as advised by the Department of Health and PHA.

The revised guidance sets out clear processes for children and young people traveling on school and public transport and draws a clear distinction between the guidance for those using dedicated school transport and those using public bus/train services.

I have already confirmed my intention that school meals will be available in schools from 1 September 2020. This is particularly important for pupils entitled to free school meals for whom this might be their only meal that day. It is likely that initially there will be a reduced choice of menu available however the aim is to provide hot food menus offering a choice, served in school canteens dining halls as before.

³ <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/covid-19-information-public#face-coverings>

Some schools may wish to consider staggered break and lunch times, if this can be accommodated. Schools and school caterers should work closely to agree local solutions to ensure the safe delivery of school meals. As far as possible, children, young people and parents/carers should be involved in these discussions.

You recommended that ETI should assess the effectiveness of the education that children have received during lockdown and as schools re-open. The ETI has advised that inspection was paused on 18 March ahead of the decision to close schools on 20 March. In the initial days when schools were preparing for closure and then when they were closed the cross-organisation link officer role was established to allocate schools across ETI inspectors, Education Authority, CCMS and CSSC officers. For ETI, the link schools were a subset of District Inspector (DI) allocations. DI activity/contact has continued across pre-school, youth, FE and training; additionally there are schools/settings that have continued contact with their District Inspector as well as the link officer. District Inspectors (including those undertaking a link officer role) have provided support, advice and guidance to schools throughout this period.

Since schools closed, ETI has been working with the Minister and Department of Education, and has remained committed to supporting school staff, parents and pupils offering bespoke advice, guidance and assistance. This has allowed ETI to identify challenges and many examples of creative practice associated with remote learning during school closure.

When schools closed, ETI published advice for schools and parents on remote learning highlighting the importance of maintaining a sense of routine for the children and young people. In June, ETI published curricular guidance to support planning for remote moving to blended learning across pre-school, special, primary and post-primary; and examples for approaches taken towards safeguarding while children are educated remotely. ETI is also working towards publishing curricular challenges and approaches facing Learning Support Centres; and considerations for planning and self-evaluation in the academic year 2020-21.

When schools re-open, in the first instance, the class teacher will be best placed to assess the effectiveness and impact of remote learning for their children and young people.

School inspections will continue to be paused for a period of time when schools re-open to all children and young people. During this period, ETI District Inspectors will support schools by providing advice, guidance, sharing practice and exercising their challenge function as necessary in the best interest of our children and young people.

ETI is planning to publish a roadmap for recovery and transition through to a resumption of inspection (outlining a staged approach with an important role for the District Inspector while inspection continues to be paused through to the resumption of inspection).

I can assure you that the Department and the Education Authority have established robust mechanisms for allocating digital devices to those children and young people

who are in the most need of them. You may be aware that on the 21 May, I announced plans to provide digital devices to our most disadvantaged and vulnerable learners at key transition points in their education who do not have access to devices to support online learning. This process is now well underway.

Since the beginning of lockdown many schools have lent devices to their pupils from existing stock. Over 3,500 new devices, which had been ordered prior to the move to remote learning, were received at the start of June and are now being distributed to schools. The procurement of up to a further 8,000 machines is ongoing and these will be available from the beginning of September.

In July, I also announced that free Wi-Fi and mobile connectivity would be provided to children and young people, who may not have had access during lockdown. This includes supporting the provision of an initial quantity of up to 2,500 Mi-Fi devices, which is a mobile connectivity solution to support those children who are not within a BT Wi-Fi hotspot. The Department has also provided 8,300 Wi-Fi vouchers for disadvantaged children with up to eight month's internet access.

In relation to your point that Temporary Modification Notices must be revoked before schools' re-open, the Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No.10) Cancellation Notice (NI) 2020 will be made on Monday 24 August 2020, restoring full statutory duties to children who have, or may have, Special Educational Needs.

I note your concerns in relation to the pupil behaviour policy set out on the previous guidance. Whilst the new School Day guidance does not cover the issues raised, DE can confirm that all schools have a statutory responsibility (Articles 3-6 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 (as amended)) for developing their own good behaviour and discipline policies, including any sanctions that may be taken. These policies should be made available to the parents of all pupils when registering at a school. All schools must also have a scheme, prepared by their managing authority, which sets out the procedures to be followed when suspending or expelling pupils, this includes the statutory duty to comply with the Special Education and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005. In this context for pupils identified with special educational needs their identified disability or special needs should not be the underlying reason for a suspension or expulsion, without the school having justification to do so.

My Department has been as flexible as possible in allowing the approximately 50 participating schools to design and deliver Summer School support that meets the needs of specific groups of children going into Years 5, 6 or 7. The aim is to support the development of confidence and self-esteem of pupils from economically disadvantaged areas during the summer and secure general improvements in pupils' numeracy, literacy and capacity to learn. We intend to conduct an evaluation of the Summer Schools in September and we are currently working with the EA to consider our detailed information requirements for this. We anticipate asking schools for data on the children participating in the intervention alongside feedback on its effectiveness and the extent to which it was welcomed by children, families and the school.

As part of our effort to address the impact of lockdown the Department is helping schools, through the Engage programme, to support all pupils but particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds who would most benefit from additional support to engage with learning. The programme will enable all primary and post primary schools in Northern Ireland to secure additional teaching resources.

Finally, I want to thank you for the offer to meet with you to discuss the issues in your letter. You will appreciate that there are many demands on my time and I regret that on this occasion I am unable to meet. However, I look forward to continued engagement with your office in relation to ensuring the welfare and education of our children and young people are at the forefront of our strategies and policies going forward throughout this crisis and beyond.

I trust that you find this information useful.

Personal Data

**PETER WEIR MLA
MINISTER OF EDUCATION**