

Ms

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Your Ref:

Our Ref

Date: 29 December 2020

Dear

NR

We are writing to provide an update on the progress of the epidemic over the holiday period, and to update our advice about the opening of schools in January.

Case numbers have begun to increase rapidly in the post-Christmas period, in line with modelling of the expected impact of pre-Christmas relaxations – Rt for cases has risen to 1.4 – 1.8. This increase will inevitably be followed by an increase in hospital admissions, bed occupancy, ICU occupancy and sadly deaths in January. It will take some time for the impact of current restrictions which came into effect on 26 December to take effect, and in the interim the hospital system is likely to come under severe pressure.

As advised previously, the opening and closing of schools is likely to have an impact on transmission of the virus and Rt, and policymakers will need to consider the balance of risks and harms: including the potential direct health risks to children and staff from COVID-19 and the wider impact of school opening on community transmission; and the direct risks to student mental health, wellbeing, development, educational attainment and health outcomes from school closure.

While children themselves remain at very low risk of severe disease, recent analysis has brought into clearer focus the importance of children in promoting the spread of the virus within households and the wider community.

- Children and young people are more likely to bring the virus into the household than those aged 17+.
- Young people (aged 2-16) are much more likely than those aged 17+ to be the first case in their household. In particular, those aged 12 to 16 are nearly 7 times as likely to be the first case in their household, compared to those 17+.
- 2 – 16 year olds are more than twice as likely to pass on the virus within their household compared to people aged 17+.
- Children aged 16 or under are less likely to get the virus from someone within their household compared to people aged 17+.

At present we are unclear about the extent to which the new UK variant of the virus is circulating in NI. We have identified only a small number of cases so far, however we are of the view that this variant is likely to have been in NI for some time. Should the new UK

variant becomes the dominant form (as it has in other parts of the UK) it is likely to increase transmission of the virus by a further 40 – 70%.

In these circumstances we believe it is necessary for us to strengthen our advice about school closure during January. We have, as you are aware, seen a number of substantial outbreaks associated with schools prior to Christmas and this risk will increase further as new variant virus begins to circulate more.

Given the considerable pressures on our hospital system and the need to maximise the benefit from the current period of restrictions, there is a strong case for considering what additional measures can be taken in relation to schools.

Improved attention to ventilation and mandatory wearing of face coverings are likely to have only a small impact. Purely from the point of view of virus transmission, the greatest benefit would be obtained from a move to distance learning for all children, with face to face teaching being maintained only for children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and children of essential workers. However, we recognise that there are other important educational and societal considerations that need to be weighed against this.

We would therefore ask that in addition careful consideration should be given to the other options which have been highlighted before, including an extension of the Christmas holidays, face to face teaching for key years only, alternate weeks of distance learning and face to face teaching, and half classes only to be taught face to face on alternate weeks.

We appreciate that all of these options come with challenges; however, we are entering a critical phase of our battle against the SARS-CoV-2 virus and we firmly believe that all options need to be considered in the coming weeks. Given the immediacy of the decisions now required and the potential implications we are available to meet you and DE colleagues as soon as is practically possible to ensure that you are in a position to fully brief your Minister. We understand that separately our Minister will be writing to Minister Weir.

Yours sincerely

PD

**Michael McBride**  
**Chief Medical Officer**

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**Ian Young**  
**Chief Scientific Advisor**

Cc  
Fiona Hepper  
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