

# CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)



## Education Restart – Guidance for Schools & Educational Settings in Northern Ireland January 2021

**From:** Education Restart Programme

**To:** All Schools,

**Date:** 6 January 2021

Dear Colleague

### Guidance for Schools & Educational Settings in Northern Ireland

Education Minister Peter Weir MLA has announced that in light of the current crisis in public health, the Northern Ireland Executive has agreed that the following necessary actions are proposed. These replace the actions set out in the letter to schools of 31 December 2020.

The Minister has stated that any disruption to schooling for a significant period of time will have a devastating impact on children's educational opportunities and future prospects, as well as being damaging to their mental health and well-being.

No matter how well managed or provided, removal of face to face learning and its replacement with remote learning impacts on children's educational experience, with a disproportionate impact on disadvantaged groups and vulnerable children. It should therefore be only contemplated as a last resort in extreme public health circumstances such as we are currently facing, and should be maintained for a period no longer than is necessary.

This decision does not suggest that schools are no longer safe places for young people. Instead, limiting attendance is about reducing the number of contacts that all of us have with people in other households. The Executive has correctly sought to prioritise education and the needs of our young people.

### Effective from : Thursday 7<sup>th</sup> January

- All mainstream education providers, including pre-school education settings, primary and post primary schools are required to provide remote learning at home to their pupils rather than face to face teaching in school, until the half term break in the middle of February.



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- Remote learning and the removal of face to face teaching should be temporary and last no longer than necessary, and therefore will remain under review by the Executive.
- Special schools to remain open as usual.
- Flexibility for post primary schools to allow some face to face revision classes in the first week of term for students taking GCSEs in week two of term.
- EOTAS provision to continue operating as normal with remote learning for those who do not attend.

In line with this announcement, this short update has been published to reflect recent changes in policy in relation to face coverings and attendance of clinically extremely vulnerable people in the workplace.

In addition, it clarifies concerns raised around special school settings and the number of parents required as key workers for pupils to be provided a place in school. The information in this update will be incorporated into the full DE Coronavirus Guidance for Education Settings in due course and issued to schools.

Staff should be working remotely where they can do so effectively and fully, but if required by their Principal / line manager to attend school for an essential reason they are expected to do so. Examples include support of vulnerable children or key workers and to conduct essential work which cannot be completed remotely. Required attendance in school would of course be subject to any personal medical or exceptional circumstances.

The Department's Continuity Direction to schools requires all schools to have due regard to the DE Coronavirus guidance in delivering education.

## **Provision for Vulnerable and Key Worker Children**

Vulnerable children and children of key workers to have access to schools for supervised learning. Vulnerable children include amongst others all statemented children.



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The Board of Governors and Principals are reminded that the Department's policy is that only **one parent** needs to be a key worker for a pupil to be allowed to attend school. As per the Continuity Direction, this means school provision is mandatory for children of key workers and this provision should operate over normal school hours.

These are the same provisions as were put in place during the first lockdown.

## Face Coverings in School

It is now compulsory for post primary pupils to wear face coverings in school and at drop off/pick up areas unless an exemption applies.

## Face Coverings on Home to School Transport

Since October, legislation has required all those of post primary school age to wear a face covering on public transport and dedicated school transport, subject to exemptions. While not mandatory for all other pupils, it is strongly recommended that they wear one if they are able to do so. However, while it is believed there has been an increase in usage in recent months, there are pupils still choosing not to wear one.

The Department, the EA and Translink will continue to promote the use of face coverings on school transport across a range of channels and schools are asked to reinforce the message to pupils wherever possible. **Principals are also asked to forward the enclosed letter from the Minister of Education to all parents on this issue.**

## GCSE Examinations – January Series

The priority has been to ensure that, if at all possible, exams should go ahead as planned, with the overriding aim that our students are not disadvantaged in terms of their qualifications compared with learners in other jurisdictions. We are preparing for all eventualities and CCEA have been asked to take work forward so that plans are ready to be activated in relation to the 2021 summer series should they be required. Work is therefore ongoing on this issue as a matter of urgency and I intend to provide further clarity in the next couple of days. Until and unless any announcement is made students should expect to continue to sit scheduled examinations.

## Childcare Settings

Childcare settings, including those based in primary schools, to remain open. Childminders also allowed to continue their provision



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## Free School Meals

Provision in lieu of free school meals will be made to those children entitled to free school meals while normally in school.

## Youth Provision

Generic youth provision will move to online under the discretion of management committees and EA Youth Service will continue to lead on targeted provision for vulnerable and at risk young people, including limited face to face work (with mitigations in place to limit the spread of the virus) where this is deemed appropriate, and to provide support under existing protocols to PSNI.

## Clinically Extremely Vulnerable Workers

Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) people who are working and are unable to do so from home are advised not to attend the workplace.

The Department would emphasise that this is advice only. People are free to make their own judgements about whether or not they should attend work, depending on the Covid-security of their working environment. However, the general restrictions which apply to everyone must be followed <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>.

Anyone who cannot attend work due to this advice will be eligible for Statutory Sick Pay, as was the case when shielding was introduced at the start of the pandemic. CEV people will receive a letter for their employer, and they do not need to get a fit note from their GP. If they need help from the benefit system please visit <https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit>.

This advice applies to clinically extremely vulnerable individuals only. Others living in a household with someone who is clinically extremely vulnerable are not advised to follow it, but should continue to stringently follow the guidance on social distancing, face coverings and hand hygiene.

## Vaccination for Teachers

The Minister has sought the agreement of the Executive in order to prioritise vaccinations for education staff who are in in face to face engagement with children. He has suggested that first priority be given to staff within special schools given the



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physical contact required there, followed by any other education staff engaging with children (such as key workers and vulnerable children). A further update will be provided when an Executive decision has been taken on this matter.

## Guidance Update

Schools are encouraged to review their existing COVID-19 measures and risk assessments and amend them as necessary to reflect the good practice set out in this guidance. The Department will provide revised guidance to reflect this position, and will update the Educational Continuity Direction issued on 3 January.

## DE Restart

Regards

**Education Restart Programme**

