

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER



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Dear Colleague

LETTER FROM MINISTER FOR EDUCATION TO EDUCATION SECTOR

You will be aware that yesterday afternoon the First Minister and deputy First Minister announced a radical package of measures that the Executive is taking immediately to deal with the unprecedented challenges facing our society as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. Further announcements will follow. Amongst other things, the First Minister and deputy First Minister announced that schools will close to pupils at the end of the school day on Friday 20 March.

This was a hugely difficult decision, and it will have wide-reaching repercussions not only for learners and their families and for staff who work in the sector, but for our whole society. Along with my colleagues in the Executive and many others in the public, voluntary, community and private sectors, we will be working hard to mitigate the worst of those impacts.

I am writing to provide more information about the implications of this announcement for the early years, schools, youth and wider education sectors. I would stress again that the position on COVID-19 is exceptionally fast moving and that I will continue to provide updates as further information emerges and further decisions are taken. I am endeavouring to bring you as much clarity as possible, as quickly as possible. I can assure you that many people across the sector are working tirelessly on these issues.

First of all, may I say again that my Executive colleagues and I are extremely grateful to all those who work in the early years, schools, youth and wider education sectors for their tremendous efforts at this very difficult time. The issues that we are facing have never before been encountered, and all areas of society are being presented with difficult challenges. As ever, the health and well-being of the young people in our care and all our staff is our priority.

Coverage of the Closure

The announcement of the closure of schools to pupils from the end of the school day on the afternoon of Friday 20 March will apply to schools in all sectors, Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) settings, all statutory nursery settings, all pre-school education provided

in non-statutory settings funded under the Pre-School Education Programme and all statutory/generic/non-targeted youth settings. The position on closures will remain in place until further notice.

It is important to note that even though schools will be closed to pupils, they will remain open for staff so that they can access resource materials and make arrangements for remote learning as appropriate, to facilitate provision for vulnerable children and those of key workers, and be available to carry out other duties that principals may require of them.

Salaries

All employees will receive normal pay across the range of circumstances that we are facing whether they remain in the workplace, are working from home or are unable to carry on working due to circumstances beyond their control. Substitute teachers and non-teaching staff (including temporary and fixed term employees) will also receive their normal pay for the period of time that they have been engaged to work. Contingency arrangements are being put in place to ensure that the payrolls can be processed and payments made.

The Department's funding for all non-statutory pre-school education settings funded under the Pre-School Education Programme will continue as normal. Departmental funding will also continue as normal for targeted early years interventions including Sure Start and the Pathway Fund.

Guidance issued this morning to Sure Start projects from the Health and Social Care Board which administers Sure Start on behalf of the Department of Education. It advises of a stand down of normal services. Sure Start management will consider the individual circumstances in their area and determine the level of service which can be provided to Sure Start children and families. Where practically possible alternative forms of support, e.g. via telephone and online resources, will be provided. This will prioritise the most vulnerable families.

Youth Services

Youth services will seek to continue to provide for those young people who are vulnerable, and most in need of services, on a bespoke basis. The Education Authority Youth Service will take forward key actions, which includes providing support to these young people through existing statutory and community partnerships.

I am also advising all voluntary youth providers to cease all generic/non-targeted provision from the end of the school day on Friday 20 March. This includes uniformed organisations, church based organisations and others whose youth work is delivered by volunteers. I would ask that the organisations should work closely with the Education Authority to ensure the needs of vulnerable young people continue to be addressed.

Salaries for all staff who work in these settings will continue as normal, including those paid daily or providing planned substitute cover.

Examinations

I know that many young people are understandably concerned about what will happen in relation to their upcoming exams. In line with my Ministerial colleagues in England and Wales, following advice from my officials and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessments (CCEA) and with full consideration of the what is in the best interests of our young people, we will not proceed with GCSEs, AS and A levels this summer. Our priority will be to ensure that students receive fair and equitable results that reflect their hard work and enable judgements to be made about progression to study or employment or other avenues. We will also work with the Further and Higher Education sectors to ensure the arrangements we put in place will allow them to operate admissions processes as efficiently as possible.

CCEA will therefore continue to work with other awarding organisations to develop a robust process for awarding grades. The plan is to use a combination of prior achievements, internal teacher-assessed tracking information, predicted grades and analysis and modelling of existing data trends to provide the necessary assurance about the robustness, accuracy and fairness of the grades being awarded.

I will provide more details about these arrangements when the examination professionals have concluded their work.

Children's Welfare

The Executive is committed to ensuring continuity of provision for children and young people who may be vulnerable or who currently avail of free school meals through our schools. For some of these children and young people, a school meal may be the only healthy meal they receive each day. Therefore I am working closely with my colleague the Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey, to put in place alternative arrangements as soon as possible.

Similarly, I am conscious that there are a number of vulnerable children and young people in our education system. I am working with my colleague the Minister for Health, Robin Swann, to put in place arrangements so that they will have access to the services that are necessary for their well-being. The Education Authority is also developing contingency arrangements to maintain the provision of counselling services for children and young people.

Remote Learning

It is important that, during the period that schools are closed to pupils, we continue to make provision so far as possible for their continuing learning, whilst acknowledging the constraints within which we are operating. I know that school leaders will pull together at this time and sharing and cooperation across sectors has never been more important. Schools are already making provision for this through arrangements for on line learning and the preparation of lesson packs, and a wide range of valuable and innovative mechanisms are being put in place. I want to build on this excellent work and have asked my officials, including the inspectors from the Education and Training Inspectorate, to work closely with school leaders and others to identify what more can be done to support these efforts and ensure that best practice is widely disseminated and applied.

Extended Schools Programme

For staff involved in the Extended Schools programme, with schools being closed to pupils, many of these programmes are unlikely to take place in their current form. However, there may scope for schools to deliver different types of support where possible, taking into account staffing levels and the needs of the pupils and families in their communities.

3rd Sector Organisations

The Department funds a number of 3rd sector organisations who work closely with schools to progress and support children's learning. Many of them will be concerned about next year's budget (from April 2020 to March 2021). No budget decisions have yet been taken in respect of 2020/21. We will be in contact as soon as possible regarding budget allocations.

Provision for Key Workers

The aim of closing schools to pupils was taken to reduce the number of children in schools to enhance the effectiveness of our response to the Covid-19 outbreak. However, during this time we need to continue to facilitate those children who are vulnerable, or those young people up to the end of Year 10 whose parents are critical to the Covid-19 response who would otherwise have no other option but to stay at home to ensure safe supervision of their children. Guidance on the vulnerable children will be provided. Key workers are those who are maintaining essential public services during the Covid-19 response. The definition of key worker will be flexible and dependant on the circumstance and requirements over the course of this critical period. There will be flexibility shown on the definition of key workers to ensure all those who need support receive it. The list is not prescriptive. However, to give some guidance the following outlines the broad categories of what would be defined as a key worker;

- **Health and Social Care.** This includes doctors, nurses, midwives, paramedics, social workers, home carers and staff required to maintain our health and social care sector.
- **Education and childcare.** This includes nursery and teaching staff, social workers and those specialist education professionals who will remain active during the Covid-19 response.
- **Public Safety and national security.** This includes civilians and officers in the police (including key contractors), Fire and Rescue Service, Prison Service and other national security roles.
- **Transport.** This will include those keeping air, water, road and rail transport modes operating during the Covid-19 response.
- **Utilities and Communication.** This includes staff needed for oil, gas, electricity and water (including sewage) and primary industry supplies to continue during the Covid-19 response, as well as key staff in telecommunications, post and delivery, services and waste disposal.
- **Food and other necessary goods.** This includes those involved in food production, processing, distribution and sale, as well as those essential to the provision of other key goods (e.g hygiene, medical etc).
- **Other workers essential to delivering key public services**
- **Key national and local government** including those administrative occupations essential to the effective delivery of the Covid-19 response.

The aim is to keep the number of pupils coming into schools to a minimum. However, there will need to be some flexibility to ensure our key workers are supported. It is impossible to assess at this stage what the exact demand will be in relation to number of key worker children who will need to attend school. Therefore we will monitor this closely, working with Schools and other providers over the course of next week and to help make further decisions around staffing and other requirements moving forward.

Along with colleagues in the Education Authority, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and the teaching and non-teaching trade unions, my officials are working urgently to develop detailed operational arrangements so that schools can remain open on Monday 23 March and beyond for the children of key workers, whose parents need them to be in an educational setting so that they can perform their vital jobs. In doing so, we will work with all education settings to ensure compliance with the public health guidance in their premises. Therefore, unless there are reasons to the contrary, staff should be available in education settings on Monday.

A full list of key worker categories will be published tomorrow. Children who do not fall into these groups should remain at home.

I appreciate that these are entirely unique arrangements, required by the need to respond to the current emergency, and we will be continuing to engage with school leaders, the trade unions and school managing authorities to refine these arrangements in the days and weeks ahead in light of the practical outworkings of these.

Conclusion

I would repeat that my Executive colleagues and I pay tribute to the staff who work in the sector, and their trade union representatives, for the whole-heartedly constructive and co-operative manner in which they have lent their support to the wider effort to respond to the enormous challenges posed by the COVID-19 outbreak.

I am sure that by continuing to work closely together we can make a very significant contribution to the overall plans to address this threat to the well-being of our society.



PETER WEIR MLA
Minister of Education