

**PERMANENT SECRETARY**  
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Dear Principal

Firstly I want to pay tribute to you and your staff for the leadership you have shown in these very uncertain times. We are all working in an ever changing environment and the support and care you provide to our children and young people is of critical importance and valued.

It is difficult to overestimate the challenges that our society as a whole is facing as a consequence of the Covid-19 outbreak. The effects are being felt acutely in all aspects of social and economic life.

As Permanent Secretary of the Department of Education I accept and take personal responsibility for the fact that it is not possible to provide definitive guidance immediately on every issue that arises and every action that should be taken. This is because of both the scale and complexity of the issues that we are addressing, most of which we have never before encountered, and because events are moving so extraordinarily quickly, which often means that circumstances for which we are trying to make provision on a given day are out of date within 24 hours, or even less. I can assure you that this causes me as much frustration as it causes you, and I recognise the difficulties it creates for you. I apologise for that. There are many people across the whole system, not least in our schools and other educational settings, who are working extremely hard under considerable pressure on all of these issues.

You have seen the recent correspondence from the Education Minister in relation to the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on the education sector. Included in that correspondence was reference to the requirement for the provision of 'supervised learning' for children of key workers in order to ensure vital services are maintained across Northern Ireland over the coming weeks and months. Of the five or six major issues that we are addressing as a consequence of the closure of schools generally to pupils, this is the most complex, and asks much from our teaching and non-teaching colleagues who work in the sector.

The rationale for this is quite simply to ensure that as a sector we do what we can, in a way that is safe for pupils and staff, to help sustain the continued operation of vital services that are needed to keep society functioning.

The purpose of this communication is to outline the work that we require school principals to undertake to take forward this action.

In the first instance I should explain that the definition of key worker will be flexible and dependent on the circumstances 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 pre-school 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 children of these key workers who are covered are children up to the end of Year 10 as well as our vulnerable children. Vulnerable children is defined currently as those children who are in need of protection, or in need, as defined by the Children (NI) Order 1995. Further guidance on this is attached.

In order to provide for supervised learning centres, schools are asked to contact staff and prepare to open on Monday 23 March to provide a supervised learning environment for the identified children. In arranging for staff to return, school leaders should be aware of the Public Health Agency's advice in relation to 'at risk' groups. The health and safety of our staff is of paramount importance and therefore PHA guidance must be adhered to.

The Department recommends that schools use their existing digital communication channels to inform parents of the arrangements. Schools are advised, where possible, to ask parents to respond if they are in a priority group and need to avail of this assistance, in order to estimate the numbers of children attending on Monday. We may ask principals to give a read out on the numbers attending each day, but further communication will issue on this.

Given that there may be uncertainty over school meals provision, you may wish to recommend that any children who intend to come to school are sent with a packed lunch.

Flexibility is key, and you should exercise this, for example if a staff member wishes to bring their own children into school, rather than to another school, this may be facilitated. Further guidance will issue next week to aid you going forward.

Schools should also consider the needs of other schools in their area. For example, if a school does not have sufficient staffing levels to open, school leaders should liaise to explore whether staff can be shared between schools or children from more than one school can be accommodated on the same site. Schools should also be aware of PHA advice when determining the number of children allocated to each room.

At this stage, the requirement will be that schools will be open during existing school operational hours. This will be kept under review.

I understand that normal home to school transport will not operate from Monday. There will be separate public communication about this involving the Education Authority and Translink. The consequence of this is that any parents/carers who wish their child to attend school will be expected to make their own arrangements for transport.

In conclusion, I want to echo the Minister's words in relation to the vital role education leaders and communities have played, and will continue to play, at this time of crisis. We appreciate that school leaders and communities are being asked to work to deliver solutions in unprecedented times.

We will keep all these arrangements under review and will communicate all changes as swiftly as possible. As the position becomes clearer, and in light of experience of operating these arrangements, we will work with school leaders and update guidance on an ongoing basis. We have attached a FAQs document and will place this on the Education Authority and Department websites. A link will follow. This document will change and evolve as we move through the coming days and weeks and you will be informed of any major changes on an urgent basis.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "D A Baker". The letters are cursive and slightly slanted to the right.

**DEREK BAKER**