



# **Contingency Planning for a Wider Re-Opening of Schools in the Academic Year 2020/21**

**MAY 2020**

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**NORTHERN IRELAND  
TEACHERS' COUNCIL**

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**Northern Ireland Teachers Council (NITC) offers the following key issues for consideration in relation to planning for the 2020/21 school year, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. We acknowledge the Pathway set out by the NI Executive for easing Covid19 restrictions in a 5 stage phased and gradual manner. However, we also recognise that the reopening of schools, when safe to do so based on public health advice, will take place in the context of continuing restrictions to prevent the spread of the virus, and that measures must be put in place to ensure that schools are safe for all members of the school community.**

**This document identifies the key issues of concern to the members of the recognised teachers' unions who make up the NITC which will require consideration in advance of schools reopening and in order to provide ongoing support to schools during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is envisaged that these issues would be considered in the context of a working group with key relevant stakeholders. In view of the particular issues related to nursery, primary, post primary and special schools, the NITC believes that the Department would be greatly assisted in this work by engaging with NITC and other stakeholders via a dedicated working group. The proposals in this paper and the pathway back to a more normal school provision which will need to be informed by the advice of public health experts and relevant health and safety and employment legislation**

**We acknowledge the extensive contribution of our members in drawing up this document. It also draws on available published information and advice from government and our colleague unions at home and abroad. (See Appendix 1.)**

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# Principles Underpinning a Return to School

**NITC proposes a number of principles governing the operation of schools/ education provision during the Covid-19 period, including that:**

- Priority must be given to the safety and physical/mental health and wellbeing of staff, pupils and parents in primary schools;
- Schools must ensure that staff and children’s wellbeing is supported;
- A collaborative approach to developing and implementing procedures and protocols at a regional level, recognising the variance in context between schools of different types and in socio-economic settings, is essential. Individual schools cannot be asked to develop their own guidance;
- Key decision makers should approach the health, safety and wellbeing of all with compassion and understanding and within the framework of the relevant legislation;
- Adequate resources, both physical and financial, will be allocated to schools by the Department of Education (DE) to implement the comprehensive health and safety measures required for schools to operate safely.
- There must be an acknowledgement that for the duration of the public health crisis, there will be a need to accommodate a changed school environment. This must be taken into account by the ETI, DE, the Managing Authorities and other related arms-length bodies. It will be necessary to continue the suspension of school inspections and new system level initiatives for the period of the crisis.
- Due to the probable reduction of available teachers when schools reopen, for a variety of COVID-19 related reasons, a scheme to employ teachers available through NISTR should be developed to allow schools to access a pool of substitute teachers ready for deployment to schools, across all sectors and geographical locations, at short notice. This should be funded centrally.

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- It will be important that, in terms of school support staff, a similar scheme is made available to ensure pupils and teachers will have access to adequate support to work in a safe and secure environment.

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# Need for Public Health Advice

**We believe the following public health issues should underpin preparations in advance of the reopening of nursery, primary, post-primary and special schools:**

- that comprehensive public health advice which is easily accessible and understandable is provided to parents and teachers confirming it is safe for schools to open;
- that a comprehensive risk assessment will have been carried out in each school and that measures to control risk are in place. Where the necessary measures cannot be implemented a school must not open. All risk assessments should be consulted on with, and made available to, all staff and in particular, workplace trade union representatives and health and safety representatives.
- the need to ensure that prior to any proposed reopening of schools, comprehensive testing and contact tracing systems are in place to contain future outbreaks of Covid-19 and provide reassurance and protection for staff, parents and pupils. As teachers will be at greater risk of infection on return to school, we seek priority and regular access to testing for all school employees as part of a community testing programme;
- decisions on how many children and staff a school can safely accommodate must be made in line with recommendations of public health experts and the HSENI, in consultation with the Board of Governors of the school;
- clear and unambiguous guidance on the appropriate levels of personal protective equipment for use in different settings in schools, including special schools, and agreed supply lines for the provision of such equipment by the Education Authority NI (EA) to schools; and
- clear and unambiguous occupational health advice for teachers and other staff in schools, including pregnant women and those in at risk categories.

For these reasons, we believe that public health expertise will need to be available to the DE and the stakeholder group.

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# A Safe Environment for Staff and Pupils

- Schools must have **adequate notice** of reopening, including a period where the Board of Governors and staff can make the necessary preparations;
- Schools must refresh risk assessments, in light of updated guidance
- **Appropriate guidance and resources** must issue to schools from the DE, Department of Health, HSENI and Managing Authorities, followed by an assessment by the Board of Governors and the relevant management authority to ensure that measures are in place **to prevent the spread of the virus**, including:
  - **Cleaning and Hygiene**
    - That a thorough deep clean of the school building, carried out by suitably trained cleaning professionals, takes place prior to the school reopening, and that an appropriate and robust cleaning regime is in place at regular intervals to prevent the spread of the virus;
    - Clear and unambiguous guidance must be provided to school cleaning staff about cleaning practices which meet the advice of public health and which will instil confidence in the school community. Funding for additional cleaning will be required;
    - That appropriate facilities are in place to accommodate good hygiene practices, e.g. access to warm water, soap, hand gel, disposable paper towels, pedal bins and hand dryers. Additional funding and in many cases, a significant adjustment to normal school routines will be required.
  - **Physical Distancing**
    - A clear acknowledgement that it is not possible to observe physical distancing in a nursery, primary, special schools and LSC setting as it is in shops, factories and other workplaces, particularly among younger children and some children with special educational needs. However, appropriate measures should be in place to maximise physical distancing, including providing for smaller class groups, floor markings, removal and

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or rearrangement of furniture, arrangements for assembly and dismissal of pupils, arrangements for playing, one-way access systems, access to toilets etc.

- Transport to schools presents a particular challenge for some sectors, particularly Special Education and Post Primary. Safety of drivers and pupils must take priority at all times. Unique difficulties will present in ensuring adequate social distancing on schools' buses and in taxis. Adequate measures, including the provision of appropriate PPE and hand sanitising facilities must be available to all users and providers of public transport.
- It may be necessary to have a reduced pupil intake on school reopening unless social distancing is viable. In post-primary schools priority should be given to those year groups who are studying for external qualifications.
- Guidance and checklists should be provided to schools to assist in putting these measures in place. Appropriate signage and visual reminders should be provided to schools to remind pupils, staff and essential school visitors of good practice in preventing the spread of the virus.
- Parents should be made aware that admission to the school should be by appointment only. Schools will have to put in place procedures for the arrival and dismissal of pupils to take place outside the school building, in a safe space.
- A restriction on visitors is put in place, and that arrangements are in place for controlled access for essential visitors. A list of essential visitors, and procedures for dealing with them should be supplied to schools.
- In Post Primary settings the regular movement of large numbers of pupils through confined spaces where social distancing is a practical impossibility such as corridors, stairs and so on, must be given serious consideration. Measures must be in place to reduce the numbers of pupils moving around schools at any given time.
- Post primary arrangements for the facilitation of teaching and participation in practical classes will require strict guidelines to be safe.
- Provision of lunch must be safe and adequate social distancing in place in canteens. Extension of lunch breaks, staggered breaks, distribution of

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lunches to rooms rather than gathering of pupils in the normal way should be considered.

- Staff and pupils to be supplied with appropriate protective equipment (e.g. masks) which are recommended by public health advice. The cost of this should be centrally funded, at no detriment to the school budget.

- **Preventing / Dealing with a case of Covid-19 at school level**

- There should be a clearly stated responsibility on the part of all stakeholders to notify schools of any change to health, especially in relation to Covid-19.
  - A defined response structure must be in place for responding to a suspected case; such a structure must be open and transparent.
  - Where a member of staff exhibits Covid-19 symptoms, they should immediately inform the school management, and remove themselves from the school premises. In order to facilitate such a swift removal of a member of staff, schools should have at least two additional staff, funded centrally, to ensure that pupil safety, and adequate social distancing can be protected.
- Where the Board of Governors or Managing Authority believes, following an assessment, that the school cannot provide a safe environment for staff and pupils during the current pandemic, they must determine what steps would need to be taken to establish one. If all appropriate actions have been taken, including having sought advice from the HSENI/ DE and the school cannot provide a safe environment, then the school must remain closed. In this case, the school will continue to support pupils learning at home until such time as the Governors believes it is possible to comply with the requirements to reopen the school in a safe way following the completion of a new risk assessment.
  - Covid-19 provisions must be included in a school health and safety statement (with an agreed wording provided by the Department of Education well in advance of a school reopening) for parents; and
  - that an induction process, using different media, be developed for both parents and staff to ensure that all are aware of the measures in place in schools to



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prevent the spread of the virus. Both parents and staff should be required to engage with the process in advance of schools opening.

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# Teacher Return to Work- Conditions of Employment Issues

Teachers will understandably be very nervous about a return to work. They have been working in their homes providing support for pupils learning, caring for their families and perhaps having suffered bereavements and other stress as a result of the Covid-19 emergency. They must feel reassured that they are returning to a safe workplace, as outlined above.

Therefore, before any movement to return to any additional classroom teaching, to accommodate a wider definition of key workers as workplace activity gradually increases, teachers will require clarification in relation to some conditions of employment matters including and beginning with:

## **Risk assessment**

HSENI has produced an example risk assessment which shows the approach HSENI expects a small business or workplace to take when carrying out a risk assessment for Covid19. This can be amended for schools.

## **Shorter School Day**

Consideration may need to be given to a shorter school day. This could be staggering times for all pupils and staff and would give extra time for the cleaners to clean those areas used during staggered breaks in the school day. Teachers may also be able to utilise this additional time to produce additional home/school learning activities.

## **Access to Covid-19 support**

GUIDANCE ON ABSENCE RELATING TO CORONAVIRUS ADVICE FOR MANAGERS AND STAFF issued by DE in March 2020 should remain in place until the pandemic is over and PHA guidance has been withdrawn on social distancing and so on.

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## Teachers in at risk groups (*nidirect, government services 12/05/2020*)

An employee should self-declare where he/she considers that they have an underlying health condition and there is a high risk of serious illness from Covid-19. Teachers aged over 70 without any underlying condition and teachers with underlying health issues should seek advice from an appropriate medical practitioner and should act on the advice given.

High risk includes those who are suffering from:

- chronic (long-term) respiratory diseases, such as [asthma](#), [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease \(COPD\)](#), emphysema or bronchitis
- chronic heart disease, such as [heart failure](#)
- [chronic kidney disease](#)
- chronic liver disease, such as [hepatitis](#)
- chronic neurological conditions, such as [Parkinson's disease](#), [motor neurone disease](#), [multiple sclerosis \(MS\)](#), a learning disability or [cerebral palsy](#)
- diabetes
- problems with your spleen – for example, [sickle cell disease](#) or if you have had your spleen removed
- a weakened immune system as the result of conditions such as [HIV and AIDS](#), or medicines such as steroid tablets or chemotherapy
- being seriously overweight (a body mass index (BMI) of 40 or above).

Where the employee is not ill but considers that they have an underlying health condition the employer should prioritise alternative working arrangements e.g. working from home. Such teachers should be permitted to work from home. Clarification will be required in relation to the process for teachers in this group, and how schools can operate if a significant cohort of teachers are in this category.

- **Teachers who are pregnant**

Following the Chief Medical Officer's advice on 16 March 2020 that all pregnant women are classed as a precaution in a vulnerable group, we understand that it must be an anxious time for these teachers, in their public facing role. Pregnant women who

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do not have an underlying health condition still fall into the vulnerable group and if a safe place of work cannot be guaranteed, should be encouraged to work from home. (*nidirect, government services 12/05/2020*) Teachers will require further clarification as to how Covid-19 related concerns will be dealt with in this context.

- **Teachers with childcare responsibilities**

While creches and childcare facilities are scheduled to reopen in advance of schools, there may be disruption to teachers' childcare arrangements due to capacity issues in schools/ childcare settings and the cocooning of grandparents/ others who may be providing care for children. We note that this issue has been very contentious for unions representing health care and other essential workers who cannot work remotely during the crisis. Given the demographic of teachers, and the requirement that an adequate cohort of teachers will need to be in attendance in schools to facilitate pupils attending. NITC recommends that schools have substitution costs for Covid related absences met by DE for the duration of the pandemic.

- **Teachers living with / caring for vulnerable people with underlying health conditions**

Currently, the HSENI advises that those caring for at risk people should follow the advice on protecting yourself from Covid-19 (staying at home, seeking medical advice if unwell, practicing good hygiene and social distancing). Such teachers should be permitted to work from home.

- **Staffing Issues**

It's clear that the changes which will be required to ensure that schools reopen will require a full level of staffing, including substitution for all absences. In addition, and in line with DE/HSENI guidance, certain categories of teacher, e.g. those in at risk groups will need to be accommodated with working from home. A scheme to employ teachers available through NISTR should be developed to allow schools to access a pool of substitute teachers ready for deployment to schools, across all sectors and geographical locations, at short notice. This should be funded centrally.

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It will be important that, in terms of other essential school support staff, a similar scheme is made available to ensure pupils and teachers will have access to adequate support to work in a safe and secure environment.

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# School Leadership Issues

As the day to day managers of all schools, principals (in conjunction with their senior leadership teams) will play a central role in implementing, explaining and managing the procedures to be adopted at school level. It is vital that guidance on procedures is issued centrally, that it is sufficiently clear, be implemented consistently in all schools and provide protection for principals. Briefing and training for principals will be required. This is not a time for emphasising the autonomy of schools or relying on Boards of Governors and their representative bodies to take responsibility on an individual basis. The Minister of Education and DE have provided guidance throughout the Covid-19 crisis and must continue to do so in the context of schools reopening.

Boards of Governors will also require additional financial and human resources in order to run their schools in the changed context and to compensated for additional employment expenditure caused by covid-19.

In nursery and primary schools, teaching principals will not be able to manage the changed reality and teach their classes at the same time. Arrangements, including additional substitute teacher employment must be made available for teaching principals to allow them to attend to the additional responsibilities which will fall to them. Additional substitute employment will also be needed by school managements in post-primary settings, this too must be centrally funded.

School leaders spend a great deal of time responding to the demands of the DE and other agencies, in terms of reporting and accountability. This should not be a priority in the initial phase of school re-opening, allowing principals to attend to ensuring the health and well-being of their pupils and staff, and the educational needs of their pupils as a main priority.

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# Pupil Learning and Welfare

During this crisis our members have, through their efforts to remotely teach pupils from home and accommodate vulnerable and key workers' children, exhibited a deep concern for their pupils and their welfare. While teachers have made huge efforts to support pupils' education, teachers are aware that all pupils have not been living in the same circumstances while schools are closed. When schools reopen, additional resources and supports will be required, in schools, to address social, emotional and behavioural needs which have not been addressed, and indeed may have been exacerbated during the school closure. These needs will be particularly acute for vulnerable pupils, pupils in receipt of free school meals and pupils in special schools and Learning Support Centres within mainstream settings.

Teachers will need to utilise their professional discretion to adapt and meet the educational needs of their pupils. All pupils will require additional support in the area of mental health well-being. Areas of the curriculum which are more difficult to support on a remote basis will need additional time. If pupils have reduced time in school as a result of social distancing measures, schools will need to prioritise curricular areas to meet the needs of their pupils. In addition, there may be a requirement for the continuation of learning at home for some pupils with particular health conditions. Teachers should be trusted to exercise their professional judgement, under the guidance of their principal, and with advice from the managing authorities.

The current period of school closures has laid bare the unequal availability of the necessary hardware and access to broadband that disproportionately affects families living in situations of socio-economic deprivation. Fully funded access to the necessary hardware and internet is required where remote learning continues as a result of schools having to meet the necessary social distancing requirements and being compelled to ask students to continue with remote learning.

It is essential that the content of specifications and associated assessments for qualifications delivers in Years 11, 12, 13 and 14 are reduced to reflect the loss of

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teaching and learning time that has already occurred and is likely to occur as the pandemic continues.

The unregulated Transfer tests must be suspended indefinitely not merely delayed as is proposed.



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# Conclusion

The NITC is keen to ensure that our members can be confident that, when they return to school on a full-time basis, their return will be to working environments where every precaution and practical step has been taken to protect both themselves and their pupils from Covid-19. We seek firm assurances that schools are not reopened prematurely and then might face a second period of enforced closure which would only compound an already difficult situation. The entire NITC membership is up for the challenge of re-starting the formal school system but expects that its views will be taken account of and its concerns addressed in the interest of safe return to work for our members, non-teaching colleagues, pupils and wider society. We look forward to discussing all of these issues thoroughly in any consultations over the coming weeks.

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# Appendix 1

## Reference Material

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/information-and-services/health-and-wellbeing/coronavirus-covid-19>

<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>

<https://www.hseni.gov.uk/news/coronavirus-covid-19-and-hseni-contact-details-updateo>

<https://www.eani.org.uk/sites/default/files/202003/GUIDANCE%20ON%20ABSENCE%20RELATING%20TO%20COVID%2019%20-%202020.3.20%20.pdf>