

Northern Ireland Teachers' Council
c/o Gerry Murphy

(by email GMurphy@into.ie)

Rathgael House
43 Balloo Road
Bangor
BT19 7PR

10 January 2022

Dear Gerry

Thank you for the list of additional mitigation proposals from NITC received on 6 January. I have provided a response against each proposed mitigation below many of which will be covered today in the Assembly Recall Motion "Keeping Schools Open and Safe".

The Department has always adhered to the decisions of the Executive to keep schools open and followed public health advice in doing so and you will see reference to that in a number of mitigations in my response below. The Department has engaged again with PHA following receipt of your paper and they have confirmed that the public health guidance for schools remains valid. If the public health advice changes, then so too will the Department's guidance, as has been the case throughout this pandemic.

The Department does recognise the extreme staffing pressures at present and you will see below that we have agreed to a temporary suspension of PRSD for the remainder of this academic year.

I am also pleased to report that there has been a positive response to the appeal to recently retired teachers with over 120 new registrations on NISTR to date.

Following engagement with you on the daily staffing survey, I can confirm this commenced today and I would appreciate your continued support for this and the weekly remote learning survey, which will provide valuable information to inform the most appropriate response to this stage of the pandemic.

The Department appreciates that all school staff are working under extremely challenging circumstances to keep schools fully open. We acknowledge the contractual position of these staff but, as previously advised, we are asking for continued flexibility at this time.

This continues to be the most challenging of times for our education system and I value the continued close engagement with NITC as we all seek to deliver the best outcome for the education of our children and young people.

Yours sincerely



Mark Bailey
Director of Workforce

Response to NITC Proposed Mitigations

Mitigation 1 - Decisions around partial and full school closures:

The Executive's priority is to keep our children and young people in school and this has been widely reported in the press. This decision has been, and will continue to be, guided by medical and scientific evidence. There are no plans for mass closure or use of a circuit breaker in schools.

The Department published updated guidance on 6 December 2021 on the appropriate use of remote learning. This was enhanced on 7 January 2022 through provision of a range of resource materials on remote learning to further support schools taking this step. School leaders know their schools best and can decide when it is appropriate to move individual classes or larger groups to remote learning during the ongoing pandemic.

Mitigation 2 - Cover.

The Department appreciates that all school staff are working under extremely challenging circumstances to keep schools fully open. We acknowledge the contractual position of these staff but, as previously advised, we are asking for continued flexibility at this time. No member of staff is being asked to work outside of their contractual arrangements and any further cover provided is on a voluntary basis.

As you are aware, the EA wrote to all school principals on 14 December 2021 to advise that classroom assistants should not be asked to provide cover outside of the scope of their job description, which states the following points:

- Supervise groups of pupils, or individual pupils on specified activities including talking and listening, using ICT, extra-curricular activities, and other duties, as directed by the class teacher/officer.
- Provide continuity of adult care of e.g. supervising play and cloakrooms including hand washing, toileting etc.
- Such other duties as may be assigned by the principal / outreach teacher / education authority officer within the level of the post.

They also noted that Classroom Assistants should not be asked to provide extended cover.

Mitigation 3 - Contact Tracing

The Executive's current agreed approach to contact tracing can be found on [NI Direct](#). This is the agreed Executive policy, and applies to all close contacts, whether in school or more generally. At present close contacts, who are fully vaccinated and children of school age (including primary school age) should self-isolate until they can take a Lateral Flow Device test. If the test is negative they can end isolation, but should continue to take daily LFDs until the tenth day after the contact. Any adult who is not fully vaccinated should isolate for ten days as a close contact. Schools are not expected to undertake any close contact tracing. The

Department continues to engage closely with DoH and will respond immediately should this position change.

Mitigation 4 - PRSD

Performance Review and Staff Development (PRSD) is an important annual review process which every principal and teacher in grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland is required to participate in. It recognises the significant skills, abilities and experience of teachers and fosters their continuing professional development.

The Department is acutely aware, however, of the intense staffing pressures at present and the additional workload associated with PRSD. It is for that reason that the Minister and Management Side of the TNC have recently agreed that PRSD will be paused for the 2021-22 academic year with the intention that it will restart again in September 2022.

Formal correspondence confirming this position will be issued to NITC in due course.

Mitigation 5 - Air monitoring and quality.

CO₂ Monitors

CO₂ monitors have a role to play, but they are not in themselves a solution. They simply give an indication of air flow in a room. If a room is identified with a low level of ventilation, the school should contact the EA Maintenance Helpdesk and a Maintenance Officer will attend the school within 24 hours.

The EA has secured 11,500 CO₂ monitors and approximately 95% of schools in NI have now been provided with monitors. A further 5,000 monitors have been ordered. The EA has taken delivery of some of these additional monitors and has commenced distribution to any school that is still to receive monitors, or has requested additional monitors.

The EA has established a Ventilation Working Group and a Ventilation Remedial Works Team and is continuing its programme of window surveys across the estate to identify deficiencies and remedial action. To date, 38 Schools have been identified as requiring partial window replacement schemes, these works will be completed by end of financial year at a total estimated cost of £1m. The programme of window surveys will continue and work identified to improve ventilation as a result of these surveys will continue to be prioritised.

Enhanced Guidance in relation to ventilation and the use of CO₂ monitors was issued to schools on 7 December 2021. The DE Covid guidance also contains ventilation advice to schools.

In the event that either the CO₂ monitor identifies a deficiency, or a school has a concern over ventilation, schools are advised to contact the Education Authority (EA) Maintenance Helpdesk for further advice. If the advice provided does not rectify the situation, a site visit will be undertaken by EA Maintenance which may result in remedial works being undertaken to address the situation. The remedial works may

include the repair and/or replacement of windows and/or the installation of an air ventilation system. In brief the process is as follows:

- Schools registers call on EA Maintenance Helpline.
- An EA Maintenance Officer will attend the school within 24hrs (the next day) following a call to the maintenance helpline.
- During the visit the Maintenance Officer will identify remedial work required (e.g. a repair and/or replacement windows/installation of an air ventilation system/air filtration unit).
- Any work arising from the visit will be treated as '**Priority Immediate Response**' and is afforded the highest priority by the EA.

These actions are consistent with those being taken in other jurisdictions.

Air Filtration

The reference to 7,000 air filtration units reflects the position in England, which equates to one unit for every three schools there. On 4 January, the EA placed an order for an initial supply of 100 Air Filtration Units (HEPA), which are scheduled for delivery this week and can be deployed quickly.

The supplier has indicated that 85 units will be delivered in the first batch during week commencing 10 January 2022, which will be deployed to areas where specific remedial action to improve ventilation is either not possible or will have a lead time to address. The remainder of this initial order is expected by end of the same week.

The EA is prioritising the response to ventilation in schools. As set out above, schools with concerns about ventilation are advised to contact the EA maintenance helpline for advice/support on the best approach for their individual circumstances. An EA Maintenance Officer will attend the school within 24hrs (the next day) following a call to the maintenance helpline. During the visit the Maintenance Officer will identify remedial work required (anything from advising to open windows through to replacement windows, or filtration).

Any work arising from the visit will be treated as '**Priority Immediate Response**' and is afforded the highest priority. In some cases where an area of poor ventilation has been identified, it may be appropriate to consider the use of an air cleaning unit as an additional mitigation whilst further remedial work is undertaken to improve ventilation.

The most recent position from the UK Government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) is that "There is currently very little evidence that air cleaners are an effective control to prevent COVID-19, however the principles of air cleaning suggests that they may be useful in some cases." SAGE also recommends that air cleaners should never be used as a substitute for ventilation. It is on this basis that air filtration units will be deployed if efforts are unsuccessful in accessing natural ventilation in a classroom.

DfE in England is working with DoH on a study into the use of air filtration in education settings (Bradford Study). We are advised that whilst the results of this

study will not be available until June 2022, early indications are that there is some merit in the use of filtration as one of a number of measures to improve ventilation in schools. However, it is important to note that the expert advice from SAGE and HSENI continues to be that air filtration units should not be a replacement for air ventilation and thus EA continues to support schools in improving the efficacy of air ventilation through the use of CO₂ monitors and ventilation remedial works.

As this is a highly technical area, the Minister has written to the Health Minister to ask for his department's views on the merits of air cleaners to prevent COVID-19, in particular HEPA filters.

In summary, the Department's Covid guidance provides schools with detailed advice on ventilation matters. The EA is prioritising the response to ventilation in schools and has a structured and thorough approach to responding should schools identify concerns with ventilation in a classroom and any remedial works that are necessary will be afforded the highest priority. Over £2 million pounds is being invested this year on ventilation works, including the provision of CO₂ monitors, window replacements and air cleaners. If there is demonstrable requirement for more units, we can assure that more will be ordered.

Mitigation 6 - Engage programme:

The Department has agreed that, where necessary, substitute teachers who are currently being used by schools to deliver the Engage II Programme can be allowed to cover staff absences in their school to ensure that face-to-face teaching is maintained. The Minister has written today to schools and other educational settings to consider whether substitute teacher(s) could be more effectively used to offset the impact of teacher/staff absences in the short term.

No decision has yet been made on whether to extend the Engage Programme beyond the 2021-22 academic year.

Mitigation 7 - Masks.

Public health advice on face coverings in schools is that a medical grade mask is not required, and that face coverings are not advised in primary settings. DE continues to rely on public health advice. This can be found in the current [DE guidance](#).

Mitigation 8 - Public Health Primacy:

The issue of staff contracts has been dealt with in the response to mitigation 2 above in relation to cover.

School staff are required to follow PHA guidance in relation to testing and isolation.

Information on risk assessments is included in the EA Absence, Pay and Staffing Guidance Related to Coronavirus (Covid-19), a revised version of which, to reflect the current arrangements, is currently with NITC for comment and will be published shortly.

The Department endeavours where possible to issue information to school principals during school hours. However, given the current pandemic situation, this is not always possible but I can assure you that we are mindful of only issuing information late on a Friday or out of hours when there is no other alternative.

Mitigation 9 - Finance:

The EA wrote to schools as part of the 2021-22 financial planning process to advise them to separately record and identify additional expenditure as a result of COVID-19. This will enable the EA to capture COVID-19 related costs to ensure that it has no impact on a school's year-end financial position.

The Department, in conjunction with the EA, will continue to monitor the position across schools and the wider education sector this financial year.

Mitigation 10 - Encouraging sub-teachers.

The Department is currently actively engaging with the employing authorities and sectoral bodies to determine if there is potential for staff, who were previously qualified teachers, to return to school for a temporary period of time until pressures have eased.

With regard to retired staff, a letter was issued to almost 800 recently retired teachers on 21 December 2021 asking them to consider temporarily returning to the classroom to help support teaching colleagues and our children and young people through this very difficult time. This was followed by a general call to all retired teachers, which was issued via Twitter on 23 December 2021. There has been a positive response to this communication to date, with over 120 new registrations on NISTR since the appeal.

There are currently no plans to issue any further correspondence to retired teachers in relation to pension concerns. The rationale for abatement of pension, for retired teachers in the Northern Ireland Teachers' Pension Scheme, is to ensure that they do not earn more in retirement than they would have if they remained in employment. If pension plus substitute earnings are greater than the "salary of reference" (the salary on which the pension was based uprated for inflation), the pension is abated. There is significant scope for a retired teacher to work before they reach the point of exceeding their salary of reference and abatement of pension takes effect so this should have a limited impact on them in the short to medium term.

Mitigation 11 - Data transparency.

Pupil absence data, which is collated each week through SIMS, is currently published and available to NITC and other education trade unions.

Daily staff absence data will be collated for a limited period of time. The results of the survey, which commenced on 10 January will be published on the DE website each day.

In addition, you are aware following your meeting with myself and Suzanne Kingon last Thursday that remote learning data will be collated on a weekly basis with effect from 10 January 2022. This will be shared with NITC.