

Appendix 1

Framework Plan for phased return of primary school education

1. Introduction – Phase 1 and 2

Following intensive engagement and input from primary and special education partners this framework is now being developed and agreed with all partners, including unions and management in order to achieve a phased return to in-school provision for children with special educational needs. This remains a high priority for all partners.

The Framework is an interim arrangement as the Department of Education (DE) and the education partners' work together to ensure that special schools and special classes can safely reopen in line with public health advice at the earliest opportunity.

The framework sets out three broad areas intended to support planning and clarify certain issues that have arisen since schools closed in late December.

Those areas are:

- A. Public health supports, messaging and risk mitigation measures in the classroom and in schools.
- B. An interim model for special schools including flexible provisions for management, staff and children (phase 1) and special classes in mainstream schools (phase 2).
- C. The sequencing and timeframe for re-opening special schools and special classes.

Section A

2. Public health supports, messaging and risk mitigation measures in the classroom and in schools.

The following actions must be implemented to support the phased return to primary schooling

Risk Mitigation Measures

1. COVID-19 Response Plans:

The **COVID-19 Response Plan** for the safe and sustainable operation of Primary and Special Schools have been re-examined by DE to ensure that they remain fully in compliance with the Government's Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19 and the 'Work Safely Protocol' which has been developed by the

Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation and the Department of Health with guidance documents provided by the Health and Safety Authority (HSA).

The 'Work Safely Protocol' is a revised version of the 'Return to Work Safely Protocol' containing the same elements and features of the original guidance but is updated to reflect the latest advice issued by Government and National Health Emergency Team (NPHET) to reduce the risk of the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace.

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/dd7fb-induction-training-for-reopening-schools/>

The list of required new additions/revisions are highlighted in the summary document '*Summary of additions to COVID-19 Response Plan required by Work Safely Protocol*' in section order as they appear in the school COVID-19 response plans. This list will make those changes easily identifiable, overall they do not introduce significant changes to the current school COVID-19 response plans.

2. A specific guidance note (Appendix 2) will issue to special schools (and schools with special classes) in advance of opening which will provide information on the infection prevention and control measures of particular relevance to those settings in line with the HPSC guidance.
3. Public Health has confirmed in discussion with DE and stakeholder representatives that while the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) is keeping risk mitigation measures in general under review in the context of emerging new variants that the infection prevention control (IPC) measures in place for schools since September are still considered highly effective for risk mitigation against transmission of COVID-19. The HPSC have not advised any change in the infection prevention and control measures in the context of the new variants.

Public Health position

4. The Deputy Chief Medical Officer at the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health, on 22nd January, clarified that a percentage of up to 5% of the national total school population returning to on-site provision is an acceptable amount of movement in the population and will not have any adverse impact on community transmission rates.
5. It has been further reaffirmed by Government that limited reopening for children with special educational needs is expected to take place in a phased way during February.
6. Weekly reports provided by the HSE on the results of mass testing of close contacts in schools consistently show low detection rates in adults in schools for COVID-19. In the last report before the Christmas break for week 51, overall 2,852 tests were carried out on close contacts in school communities, of these 4% (100) were on adults (18+) in

special education settings and less than 5 of those tests detected COVID-19, a positivity rate of 3%. These reports will continue to be produced and published in line with the phased reopening of schools.

7. Clear public health messaging will continue including the circulation and broadcasting via social media and other means of short videos focussed on the need to protect schools by staying at home if anyone has symptoms of COVID-19 or is a close contact of a confirmed case.

Information for parents

8. Short videos for parents from public health doctors will be circulated to reaffirm the importance of keeping COVID-19 out of education facilities by keeping symptomatic children at home. Parents should err on the side of caution in this respect and follow the school's sickness policy.
9. Parents of children returning in this phase will be asked by the school to complete the declaration form at the attached link:
This form is to be used when children are returning to the setting after any absence.
<https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/educationguidance/Return%20to%20Educational%20Facility%20declaration%20form.pdf>
10. Parent communications from the school should emphasise that there should be no congregation outside schools during this interim phase or at any stage, and that staff engagement should be requested through the school and will be provided by telephone or online.

School Planning and compliance

11. Details of the changes required to update schools COVID-19 response plans in advance of the proposed phased reopening are highlighted in the 'Summary of additions to COVID-19 Response Plan required by Work Safely Protocol'. These take into account updated protocols agreed with the Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF). The need for full compliance with the updated plans is emphasised.
12. Funding is in place to support implementation of all IPC measures required by HPSC including the provision of appropriate PPE for SNAs and Special Education Teaching staff. Any school who needs additional funding for PPE can get in touch with the Department.

13. It is agreed that the Lead Worker Representative or the deputy/assistant Lead Worker Representative should make themselves available if required to deal with any concerns arising re compliance with the guidance for the phased reopening.
14. Schools are being issued with an information note setting out time-bound temporary flexibilities in staffing arrangements in advance of the phased re-opening of special education.
15. In the case of special schools an information note and guidance setting out time-bound temporary arrangements for pupil attendance in advance of phased re-opening will be provided.

Vaccinations

16. The Department of Education has engaged with the Department of Health on the vaccination schedule who have confirmed that those essential to Education are estimated at this time to be in the first one third of the population captured by the Vaccine Allocation Strategy. The Department has further engaged with the Department of Health requesting that consideration is given to school community as the vaccination programme is rolled out in order to accommodate front line school staff (i.e. those working with SEN students) within the vaccination programme at the earliest possible opportunity.

School Public Health Risk Assessments, testing and tracing

17. The Department has confirmed with Public Health that:
 - the enhanced/ augmented Public Health schools teams will be available to fully support schools that are opening in this interim phase,
 - full contact tracing and bulk fast-track testing within the school setting will resume immediately for schools as they reopen,
 - the numbers to contact teams or alert HSE are still in use and will be available to respond to special schools and classes in this interim phase.

HSE has also confirmed that close contact testing has resumed in the community.

18. Detailed data in relation to transmission of COVID-19 within school settings will continue to be published and made available to DE and stakeholders during this interim phase. Reports also contain the numbers and % of confirmed cases by age group and week in the overall population.

19. In all instances where COVID-19 is positively confirmed in a school age child in community testing (referred by G.P) or as part of close contact testing in the community, Public Health are immediately notified and a Public Health Risk Assessment is initiated with the school by local HSE public health Schools Teams. Where COVID-19 is detected in an adult in the community, either through symptomatic or close contact testing and when initial contact tracing confirms that they work in a school setting, Public Health are immediately notified and the Public Health Risk Assessment is initiated with the school by HSE School Teams in a similar way. A principal may also notify the HSE Schools Teams directly if s/he is notified by a teacher or other staff member, however this is not necessary as the process described above will take place in any event.
20. The current position of the HSE is that serial antigen or PCR testing is not recommended as a public health measure to keep schools safe. The HSE has examined the use of rapid antigen testing in different settings and the logistical requirements to implement such testing. The World Health Organisation does not currently recommend the use of antigen testing in schools. The HSE will continue to use the more accurate PCR tests for testing all index cases and close contacts within the school community and will prioritise the mass swift queue PCR testing which has proven highly effective to date. This position will be kept under review. Currently serial testing is recommended only in settings where is evidence of significant COVID-19 transmission taking place and in healthcare settings where all results are backed up by the more accurate PCR tests.

PPE

21. Revised HPSC guidelines for SNAs published on 7 January 2021 recommended surgical grade masks for all SNAs '*Guidance for Schools Regarding Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) Supporting Children and Young People with Additional Care Needs in the Context of COVID-19*'. The Department is confirming this level of PPE should be provided for all Special Education teachers also.
22. Certain staff working with children who require Aerosol Generating Procedures will be provided with PPE in line with HSE advice as set out at this link:
<https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/healthwellbeing/infectcont/sth/resources/aerosol-generating-procedures.pdf>
23. The Department confirms that funding for all required PPE is being provided for the coming school term. Any school who needs additional funding for PPE can get in touch with the Department. In addition any issues relating to supply should be raised immediately with DE at the following covid19_alert@education.gov.ie

24. Masks and visors should be donned and doffed and disposed of as demonstrated in videos available at <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/infectionpreventionandcontrolguidance/ppel/>

Temporary time-bound staffing arrangements

25. In recognition of the reduced attendance of pupils in in-school provision at any one time during the first and second interim phase of reopening (special schools and special classes), DE has set out the temporary flexibilities that may be utilised by schools to provide for the provision of remote learning to pupils at home by staff working remotely from their home. This in no way constitutes a precedent for high risk or other staff being facilitated for remote working in subsequent phases.
26. All flexible arrangements must be approved by Board of Management (BOM).

Childcare

27. Childcare facilities remain open to provide childcare for children of essential workers. The Department of Children has provided FAQs and information on subsidies that may be available for education sector staff is available on www.ncs.gov.ie. Greater flexibility in the use of existing parental leave days has also been put in place during this limited interim phase.

Classroom ventilation

28. Updated guidance on ventilation in schools has been provided by DE. Schools will be reminded that this should be applied in all interim phases and when schools reopen in full. Guidance is available here: <https://assets.gov.ie/85177/d9643a37-5254-483e-a72e-d2a08ae36d46.pdf>

Other supports to schools by DE

Inspectorate

29. The COVID-19 helpline has a dedicated option to contact the Department's Inspectorate. This line is open 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday and when schools return on a phased basis, the Inspectorate will prioritise any engagement with those schools who have commenced in-school teaching and learning. This team has access to Inspectors from the special education area who will be available to engage with schools on any aspect of the education provision where their advice and support is sought. The guidance documents, which the Department Inspectorate played a key role in developing set out

the materials which teachers can use to support students during this period. The Inspectorate are available to assist schools in working through these materials and will provide advice on how best to use them in the return to in-school teaching and learning.

NEPS

30. The NEPS resource “**Supporting the Wellbeing of Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) Returning to School**” has been revised to support the school community as schools reopen following the current period of school closure. This very comprehensive resource is targeted at supporting the planning and preparation for the transition back into school and to support re-engagement when the students return to the classroom. Separately queries and requests for advice with regard to the return to school can be facilitated either through contacting the assigned NEPS psychologist directly, or the local NEPS office. Contact details for NEPS local offices are available through the contact link [here](#).

NCSE

31. The dedicated phone line which the NCSE currently operates for schools is continuing and calls from special schools or schools with special classes will be prioritised for engagement with an NCSE advisor on any aspect of support during this period. SENOs will also be available to support parents where children are experiencing any challenges in returning to school.

Section B

3. An interim model for special schools including flexible provisions for management, staff and children (phase 1) and special classes (phase 2).

The first phases of re-opening will provide for on-site provision for children with special educational needs, initially in special schools (phase 1) and then shortly afterwards in special classes in mainstream schools (phase 2).

This section sets out the agreed model which is underpinned by the following principles:

- On-site provision for children in special schools and special classes for specified periods of time;
- Managed flexibility for staffing arrangements and;
- Temporary flexibility and choice for parents during the period of partial opening only.

Phase 1 - Special schools

1. When special schools reopen, all staff, including all teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) who work in special schools should return to work, other than in circumstances provided for in updated staffing circular, or where staff are on approved leave.
2. In circumstances where staff members cannot attend due to illness, substitution arrangements will apply. Subs may be needed for exempted staff too including from supply panels.
3. Whereas all special schools will reopen from Thursday 11th February 2021 with all staff members attending school, the Department is conscious of the fact that special schools (notwithstanding the lower pupil teacher ratios provided for) have significant numbers of staff and pupils attending the school. This increases the overall number of persons in special schools. Therefore, in order to reduce the number of persons on the school premises at any given time, for the period of this interim arrangement special schools may provisionally reduce the attendance of pupils at their school at any given time, by up to 50% of the total school enrolment. This may be done by providing for pupils attendance on alternate days.
4. School transport services will fully operate with the continued additional hygiene and other measures that were introduced on school transport services at the start of the school year. With regard to children who may travel on an individual service and whereby any such child will be attending on alternate days we ask that schools liaise with their local Bus Éireann office to advise them of the days that the child or children will be attending school. Bus Eireann local offices are engaging with local HSE school teams to ensure that any concerns on school transport are addressed.
5. Parents have been asked to notify schools three days in advance where they would prefer not to avail of the service during this interim phase. Public health guidelines are being implemented on the SEN transport scheme, however where parents would prefer not to use the service during this interim period, DE will make temporary grants available for transport. Parents can resume using their tickets when schools reopen in full.
6. Schools have been given some flexibility to facilitate remote working for staff members.
 - If a parent does not want their child to attend the school during this interim phase, and where there are staff members working from home they will continue to support remote provision for that child. The child will not be marked absent but the parent must inform the school in good time of their intentions.

- Staff members working from home must also support children remotely on the alternate days where the child is not in school.
7. Those on flexible arrangements or on approved leave can be substituted.
 8. Principals of special schools are being provided with contact details of principals of supply panel base schools for the duration of the interim programme. Supply panel teachers must give priority to special schools for the duration of the interim programme. Guidance on this will be provided by DE to principals of base schools.
 9. If an issue arises, a school may only temporarily cease on site provision on the advice of Public Health and with the permission of DE.
 10. School inspectors working with HSE school teams will be available to assist and advice principal teachers during this interim phase. Enhanced teams will be in place to ensure full support for schools as they open.

Phase 2 – Special schools and classes - primary

1. All special classes, including early intervention special classes for children with autism or hearing impairment, in primary schools will reopen on Monday 22nd February 2021. In the meantime school staff and BOMs will familiarise themselves with the guidance and liaise with parents.
2. Schools have been given some flexibility to facilitate remote working for staff members during this phase. Where a parent does not want their child to attend the school during this interim phase, staff working from home will continue to support remote provision for that child. The child will not be marked absent but the parent must inform the school in good time of their intentions.
3. Staff on approved leave and where necessary on flexible arrangements can be substituted. However, in such circumstances and where mainstream schools have special classes which also have additional SNA provision in their schools, they should assign one of their other SNAs temporarily to the special class in the first instance.

4. Similarly, schools may temporarily redeploy another member of the teaching staff to the special class to maintain the operation of the special class if the special class teacher is on leave.
5. The substitution arrangement will then apply to the reassigned SNA/mainstream class teacher.
6. As primary schools are partially reopening for the provision of in-school learning for special classes on Monday 22nd February 2021, schools have capacity to utilise the whole of the school premises, as required. Enhanced cleaning regimes should resume when schools reopen during this phase.
7. Accordingly, all pupils who attend special classes should be encouraged to return to these classes and attend for the full school day and the full school week as normal, subject to temporary arrangements which may be facilitated during this interim period only.
8. If an issue arises a school may only temporarily cease on site provision with the permission of DE and on the advice of PH.
9. School inspectors working with enhanced HSE school teams will be available to assist and advice principal teachers during this interim phase.

4. The sequencing and timeframe for re-opening provision.

Phase 1 - Special schools will reopen from Thursday 11th February 2021

Phase 2- Primary Special Classes will reopen from Monday 22nd February 2021

Discussions will continue about further reopening of Primary Schools during February.