

Schools reopening during COVID-19: A view from Public Health Scotland and the Scottish Directors of Public Health

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Situation

The Scottish Government Coronavirus (COVID-19): strategic framework for reopening schools, early learning and childcare provision¹ sets out a plan to restart school education for almost all children and young people in Scotland on 11 August 2020. This will consist of a blended model of in-school, in-community and in-home learning. Implementation of the plan for children to return to schools and other settings is dependent on both scientific and medical advice that it is safe to proceed and implementation of corresponding public health measures. This document sets out the balance of factors to achieve the ambition of restoring education in a safe environment for children's, staff and community health, and putting forward mitigating measures to maximise safety.

Background

Education is a critical determinant of health and health inequalities, with educational attainment providing opportunities for participation in the labour market, a way out of poverty and a means to address social inequalities in health outcomes. Given the critical role of education for current and future health and wellbeing of Scotland's children, whole-system action to return and maintain children in early learning and childcare and education is vital.

The key considerations underpinning the Scottish Government framework for reopening schools are:

- 1** Scientific and medical advice confirming that it can be done in a manner that is consistent with wider efforts to control the COVID-19 reproduction rate and protects the health of staff and pupils alike.
- 2** Comprehensive implementation of complementary public health measures, including adherence to 'test, trace, isolate and support' (TTIS) practices, the use of PPE where appropriate for all staff, and a range of other hygiene measures.

- 3 This paper provides an assessment highlighting some of the issues to be considered in relation to the decision to reopen Scottish schools.

Assessment

This rapid assessment provides an overview of key issues to support discussion and decision making around the reopening of schools and the role of public health. Due to time constraints, it is not a comprehensive review of literature covering all potential issues and no critical appraisal of the included evidence has been conducted.

1 What we know about the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people

Current evidence is mixed and continues to develop about the susceptibility to infection in children and young people. The most recent update from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) indicates that it is not possible to say with confidence that there is any difference in infection rates between different age groups among the community.² Emerging modelling evidence suggests that susceptibility to infections among the under-20s is markedly lower than adults and that interventions aimed at children, including school closures, might have a relatively small impact on reducing SARS-CoV-2 transmission.³ Data from the Netherlands supports this position.⁴

Children are likely to experience milder illness related to COVID-19, with severe illness requiring hospitalisation and intensive care and mortality rate.⁵ There are reports of a multi-systemic inflammatory condition associated with COVID-19 in children, a rare outcome but one subject to further research.

On balance, the risks to children (without underlying clinical vulnerability) associated with returning to school are limited. However, it is essential that those with duties of care toward children take a precautionary, safety-first approach and that education authorities and school management (in association with public health advice) monitor

closely the situation in schools so that policy makers, head teachers and management can address emerging issues rapidly.

2 What are the wider impacts on child health, wellbeing and learning of COVID-19 and associated control measures?

It is clear that the wider impacts on child health, wellbeing and learning have the potential to be significant. Children and young people are likely to experience worry, anxiety and fear, and in response may make increased demands on their parents or caregivers, who may be under undue pressure themselves (WHO, 2020).⁶

School closures have formed a key part of global control measures to contain the spread of COVID-19, affecting 90% of students worldwide.⁷ In addition to disrupted learning, closures of schools and community activities result in loss of access to opportunities for physical activity, play and social support key to children's mental wellbeing and development. Cognition, learning and behaviour can all be affected by grief and by exposure to such stressful and traumatic circumstances.⁸ School staff, community organisations and parents are both likely to need support and training to monitor and support children's mental health and wellbeing.

Building on Scotland's work to reduce childhood adversity and create secure, nurturing spaces and trauma-informed workforces and services will be critical. Emotionally supportive environments that provide opportunities for pupils and staff to support and promote their social and emotional wellbeing will be fundamental. Opportunities for children and young people to play and maximise opportunities for safe social connection in the context of infection-control measures and physical distancing are essential.

The economic impact of the pandemic will increase the number of children and families living in poverty, experiencing loss of employment, food insecurity and housing instability which are key drivers for childhood health and attainment inequality. These

impacts are likely to continue into the medium to long term.⁹ We may anticipate repeated interruptions to learning if there are further outbreaks and associated return to enhanced infection-control measures and restrictions on movement.

Learning at home

The Children's Parliament 'How are you doing survey' (8–14 year olds) reports that children are increasingly bored and worried about doing school work and learning at home,¹⁰ and that there is a need for more support for children's learning at home using a blended model.

Unexpected temporary school closures and reduced instruction time are likely to reduce educational achievement in the long term, with children from disadvantaged backgrounds more likely to be affected.¹¹ A recent report from Australia suggests that remote learning is less effective than in-school learning, widening the attainment gap at triple the rate of regular schooling.¹²

Many households have less access to resources to support education and online learning, such as limited data access or lack of access to IT equipment. The additional costs of remote learning have been higher for our low-income families,¹³ impacting on parents' ability to support their children's education at home. Affluent families in England report more access to resources to support learning and more time spent on educational activities.¹⁴ Sustained and enhanced support will be needed for children and their families living in poverty or other disadvantaged circumstances so that they thrive on return to school.

The Scottish Government has committed to extend funding for the Scottish Attainment Challenge at current levels beyond the lifetime of this parliament and into 2021/22. Over £250 million in Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) will be made available to schools over 2020/21 and 2021/22.¹⁵ Local authorities and schools will have the flexibility to redirect Attainment Scotland Funding to help mitigate the impacts of school closures on our most disadvantaged families.

Prioritising the physical, mental and emotional wellbeing of children and young people is essential, with a particular focus on mitigating the potential for lifelong impact of disruption to development, education and increased poverty. Further collaboration between Scottish Government, local authorities, public health, the education and community sector at local and national levels could support the most effective use of these funds to benefit the most children and reduce inequity. Therefore, while schools will continue to manage PEF monies, its use must extend to wider community learning and family support.

3 What do we know about the impact on parents?

Lockdown has resulted in enormous pressures on parents' time and financial situations. A recent Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) survey highlights that parents in England were providing childcare for nine hours of the day,¹⁶ combining this frequently with other activities, including work. This pressure has been higher for women, who are more likely to have lost their job, been furloughed and carrying a higher burden of household responsibilities. The IFS survey suggests women are combining work with childcare and home education responsibilities at a higher level than their partners (47% of their work hours vs 30% for men).

Single parents are facing even higher pressure, with women again facing a more significant burden, with the loss of formal and informal childcare provision and the impact on their ability to work. One Parent Families Scotland has highlighted key issues that single parents have reported. Financial concerns include benefits and sanctioning, economic uncertainty, debt and increased poverty. Other problems include having sole caretaker responsibility, lack of support for learning and childcare, loneliness, isolation and mental health issues, alongside challenges accessing food, healthcare, pressures on family relationships and problems with contact with non-resident parents.¹⁷

As schools reopen, services such as out-of-school care and childcare may remain limited. Restoration of these to pre-COVID-19 levels will reduce the pressure on parents to work and provide childcare. Encouraging employers to enable staff with children to work from home unless being at the workplace is essential to their job would allow parents to provide blended learning support and childcare care while reducing their social contact and the consequent risk of exposure and onward transmission.

4 What do we know about the impact on education staff and their views on the reopening of schools?

In May 2020, the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) surveyed its members to ask them about the challenges of delivering education remotely as well as in school hubs. The survey also asked about teacher wellbeing, and what would be required to return to school and the implementation of a blended learning approach. Over 26,000 members responded (60% of the membership).¹⁸

Overall most were happy about the management of the transition to online and remote learning. Members feel reasonably confident about managing the next academic year of teaching with social distancing measures still in place and the increased use of online learning. Most were not involved in any aspect of school hubs (65%). Those who had felt that they have been successful in the delivery of childcare and learning opportunities. A majority of staff felt it had been challenging to maintain a separation of the working day from home life while working remotely (61%).

Ninety percent of respondents said that greater clarity over how the next academic year of teaching will be delivered would be the most critical element to building confidence, followed by having time to prepare, and support from their school and local authority. Some highlighted the challenges of social distancing, even with smaller class sizes, and the need to access PPE for all staff working in schools.

Approximately 70% of the responding members agreed that challenging home circumstances was a pivotal barrier to home learning. Other barriers were poor or no internet connection (57%), no access to technology at home (64%) and not enough one-to-one support of the kind they would normally be given by support staff (70%). Around 30% of members regarded poor mental or physical health as a challenge, and this was higher for those working in special education. Sixty percent of members felt that remote schooling was not meeting the social and emotional needs of children. Meeting the needs of children with additional support needs is highlighted as particularly challenging.

A vital issue for EIS members is their caring responsibilities, managing these on return to school, and the expectations on staff who have these. Fifty-four percent of respondents said that they had a caring responsibility for their children, another family member or someone else. Twenty percent report physical or mental health conditions that would prevent their return to schools and 30% have childcare issues. Balancing their caring responsibilities and blended learning is going to present a challenge to many education staff.

The EIS has articulated three conditions to be met before schools can reopen:

- 1** Established capacity to 'test, trace and isolate'.
- 2** Significant operational changes in place to ensure implementation of all health guidelines (for example effective social distancing, enhanced hygiene routines, and ongoing risk assessments in place).
- 3** Transparent and shared evidence that the spread of infection is under control and that schools and educational establishments are safe places to work.

Ninety-five percent of the members responding to the survey (over 20,000) agreed or strongly agreed with these conditions.

The National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) is currently surveying teachers' experiences regarding school reopening.

We should not underestimate the challenges that our colleagues in education are facing in delivering their education role when schools reopen. They face a context of both a potentially reduced workforce (due to care and health issues) and adoption of the public health measures that will be required for schools to reopen safely.

Prioritisation of education staff for key worker places for childcare may enable them to manage the blended approach. Anecdotal and social media evidence around parental views suggest rising concern about children being out of school. Collaboration with public health at local and national levels in the plans for schools to reopen and support for operational changes and public health measures will be vital.

5 Public health measures to support the reopening of schools, ELC settings and youth work in Scotland

Comprehensive public health measures will continue to be required to minimise the spread of COVID-19, monitor cases in the education setting and detect the spread of any outbreaks. Key measures which schools and other settings can put into place include:

- 1** Physical distancing and small, consistent groups.
- 2** Ensuring appropriate measures are put in place for those who are clinically vulnerable and extremely clinically vulnerable (pupils and staff).
- 3** Ensuring that those who are symptomatic or diagnosed with COVID-19 and those isolating following exposure are following current guidance on remaining at home.
- 4** Environmental and respiratory hygiene measures, including cleaning and personal hygiene.

Wide-ranging guidance for education authorities and schools has been produced by the Scottish Government to support a safe, phased reopening of schools. The guidance is non-statutory but aims to promote national consistency. This should be applied in conjunction with the latest Health Protection Scotland guidance, the Strategic Framework for Reopening Schools and ELC and the framework document Coronavirus (COVID19) – a framework for decision making alongside advice from the Chief Medical Officer for Scotland.

All schools should be aware of the Test and Protect (Test, Trace, Isolate and Support) strategy and the associated requirements. Education and community staff may have a central role to play in not only meeting the learning needs of children but also in providing an effective support mechanism to ensure that barriers to education do not impact on ability to isolate.

The surveillance structure will be supportive in assisting local communities to stay safe.

Pupils and staff who are clinically vulnerable must follow current Scottish Government guidance to keep themselves safe and are supported to do so. Children and young people living with a clinically vulnerable adult or child should have an individual risk assessment conducted and support measures put in place to support their education.

The current default position for physical distancing in schools and community settings is that individuals (or, in some limited circumstances, small groups with consistent membership) should be supported to stay 2 m apart wherever practicable and appropriate. If the number of cases of COVID-19 continues to decline and evidence about the susceptibility of children and young people to infection evolves, these requirements may be amended or lessened, enabling more children to return to full-time education more quickly. Changes to public health measures including physical distancing will require clear and timely communication to education authorities, unions and education staff. We recognise that the evidence and risk assessments in this matter for policy and practice are under active consideration.

In parallel to reopening indoor learning, enhanced use of the outdoor environment and other community facilities would enable more children to benefit from more hours in formal education and play. Collaborative work with other suitably skilled professionals, for example, youth work organisations and organisations providing play opportunities could enrich the learning experiences of children, provide increased staffing capacity and enhance emotional support to children and young people.

Increased use of outdoor learning by adapting the model of outdoor nurseries and use of community greenspace could also provide a mechanism for safe learning, play and physical activity. Play is essential for the social, emotional, cognitive and physical development of all children.¹⁹ Play and play therapy can help children to build resilience and manage difficult emotional circumstances. Outdoor youth work is not a new phenomenon and there is evidence to support its use to enhance learning.²⁰ Recent research has also demonstrated the impact of youth work on young people's educational attainment, wellbeing and employability and therefore this should be seen as part of any return to education for young people.²¹ There are a series of accredited awards that are already used by schools and local youth work providers such as Youth Achievement and Dynamic Youth Awards that provide additional opportunity for accredited learning whether at school, at home or outdoors.

Encouraging active transport to school, reducing parking around school areas and staggered times for drop-offs and pick-ups of children provide an opportunity for increased physical activity and reduced risk of transmission at key points of the day.

6 The need for ongoing review and assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people's health and learning

The evidence base around the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people is still emerging. We must monitor the effect closely and respond if risk increases or poorer outcomes are detected. Ongoing monitoring and research should take into account both

epidemiological evidence and the broader consequences of COVID-19 on child health, educational attainment and future positive destinations for young people.

Recommendations

- The risks to children (without underlying clinical vulnerability) from infection and severe consequences of the disease associated with returning to school are limited. It is essential that those with duties toward children and staff wellbeing adopt a precautionary, safety-first approach and that education authorities and school management (in association with public health advice) monitor closely the situation in schools so that policy makers, head teachers and management can address emerging issues rapidly.
- To ensure consistency, all local geographical areas should be encouraged and supported to adopt the measures set out in current Scottish Government guidance on reopening schools.
- Public health support for education planning for the safe reopening of schools, local delivery plans and implementation of Scottish Government guidance and associated public health measures is essential. Public health services in local areas will be in place to ensure an effective test and protect service, offering advice on monitoring and prompt response to concerns.
- Mechanisms for collaborative action should be prioritised from local to national levels to provide clarity of communication, swift action where necessary and minimisation of disruption to future education.
- Changes to public health measures, including physical distancing, will require clear and timely communication to education authorities, unions and education staff.
- Children are likely to need additional social and emotional support. School and community staff and parents may need support and training to monitor and

support children's mental health and wellbeing. Creating secure, nurturing spaces and trauma-informed workforces and services will be critical.

- More children and families will experience poverty, food and housing insecurity. Sustained efforts to address poverty through maximising household income and resources and offering additional support to reduce the impact at local and national levels will be necessary and need to be sustained.
- Collaboration between the Scottish Government, local authorities, public health and the education and community sector at local and national levels to support the most effective use of attainment funds to benefit the most children and reduce inequity. This will require a commitment and response to findings that supports pupils in proportion to their needs, alongside consideration of enhanced support for this group over the summer. Local plans should include arrangements for return to both formal and informal learning, including youth work to support children and young people.
- When safe to do so, restoration of childcare and return to school full time will reduce the pressure on parents to deliver learning, childcare and work. This development also recognises the teachers as parents, carers and in other social and community roles.
- Single-parent families and those with children with additional learning needs face even more significant challenges and should be prioritised for additional support, such as full-time school/childcare placements where possible.
- Encouraging employers to enable staff with children to work from home unless essential would allow parents to provide blended learning support and childcare while reducing their risk of exposure to COVID-19 and onward transmission.
- Balancing their caring responsibilities and blended learning is going to present a challenge to many education staff. Prioritisation for key worker childcare places would be beneficial.

- The specific concerns of education staff and associated unions, parents and parents' organisations over schools reopening should be addressed as a priority.
- Enhanced use of the outdoor environment and other community facilities, and extended or split days (noting evidence from some international countries), would enable more children to benefit from more hours in formal education, youth work and play.
- Encouraging active transport to school, reducing parking around school areas and staggered times for drop-offs and pick-ups of children provide an opportunity for increased physical activity and reduced risk of transmission at crucial points of the day. Staggered extended days would help with school bus capacity issues.
- Collaborative work with other suitably skilled professionals – for example youth work organisations and organisations providing play – will enrich the learning experiences of children, provide increased staffing capacity and enhance emotional support to children and young people. This should be part of local plans.
- Ongoing review of the evidence base and monitoring of the effect of COVID-19 on children and young people's outcomes is essential.

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