

Joint Statement on the re-opening of schools and other educational settings

The Scottish Directors of Public Health and Public Health Scotland jointly welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to ensuring that children and young people return to childcare and education as part of the phased approach to lifting current restrictions. We are committed to prioritising support for the public health measures required to do this. Reopening schools and other settings will require action to support infection control measures and to address the broader impacts on health and wellbeing of children and young people, parents and education staff.

Education provides a fundamental mechanism for addressing inequality, poverty and to improve health and wellbeing. As the UNESCO-supported International Commission on the Futures of Educationⁱ highlights, 'massive efforts will be necessary to make sure the 2020s do not become a decade of lost opportunity'. Whole system action is vital to return and maintain children in early learning and childcare and in education settings, as will be support for those providing it, whether in school or other settings such as youth work. Without the benefits of both formal and informal education, we cannot achieve our goals of improving the health and wellbeing of the Scottish population and reducing our enduring health inequalities.

The Scottish Government Coronavirus (COVID-19): strategic framework for reopening schools, early learning and childcare provision sets out a plan to restart school education for almost all children and young people in Scotland on 11th August 2020 with plans for a blended model of in-school and in-home learning as required. Implementation of the plan for children to return to schools is dependent on both scientific and medical advice that it is safe to proceed and implementation of corresponding public health measures. We agree that it is essential that a precautionary approach is adopted and that we monitor the situation in schools closely so that emerging issues can be addressed rapidly. Clear

communication and collaboration between public health and education from national to local levels will be pivotal to the success of this approach. The views and engagement of children, young people and their families is essential.

Early learning and childcare and schools will reopen in the context of the significant economic and social impact of the crisis and the tremendous pressures on children, parents and staff time and resources. To mitigate these impacts, we support the Scottish Government's ambition to resume normal schooling as soon as it is safe to do so. Home-based and online learning has been an essential tool to buffer the impact of the crisis on education, but it is likely to increase inequalities over time. We underline our desire for most, if not all children to be back in school full time as soon as safely possible to ensure continuity and quality of learning using innovative approaches defined locally, such as staggered days and additional school care over the summer for our more vulnerable children. To facilitate this, we would support the restarting of community-based youth work, where informal education takes place, in advance over the summer period where safe to do so. Ongoing review of the evidence, guidance and action are essential to inform public health measures.

In closing, we reaffirm our commitment to support the Scottish Government and to work alongside the childcare, education, and youth work sector in Scotland to return our children and young people to formal and informal education as quickly and safely as possible.

On behalf of

The Scottish Directors of Public Health

Public Health Scotland

24 June 2020

ⁱ UNESCO (2020) Protecting and Transforming Education for Shared Futures and Common Humanity A Joint Statement on the COVID-19 Crisis. en.unesco.org/futuresofeducation/news/international-commission-releases-joint-statement-education-and-covid-19-crisis