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Chief Executives
Directors of Education

By email

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Dear colleague

Even in these testing times, our focus has been to deliver an education system in Scotland which raises attainment for all, closes the attainment gap, and enables all children and young people to fulfil their potential. We have a moral imperative to ensure that all young people in Scotland receive a first class education in their local school. We remain united in our determination to achieve our ambition of increasing access to high quality funded early learning and childcare, because we know that is a cornerstone to improving outcomes for all children, especially those growing up in more disadvantaged circumstances.

The steps we have taken in Scotland to contain the virus and protect lives are unprecedented and have changed life as we know it. We do not underestimate the significant impact that those restrictions have placed on everyone, not least the children and young people of Scotland, and we are incredibly grateful for the dedication shown by all of those working in our education system, practitioners and carers, and the resilience shown by children, young people and their families.

Whilst we are clear that we don't want restrictions to be in place any longer than they need to be, the decision on when and how to re-open schools, and early learning and childcare settings will not be taken lightly. There are many complexities to consider including, but by no means limited to, reducing transmission of the virus, how to keep children, young people and our education and childcare workforce safe, and the practicalities of implementing requisite health measures.

The COVID-19 Education Recovery Group, which we have led together, includes local authorities, parent representatives, trade unions and others, was set up to consider all practical options and provide advice on the purpose and priorities for reopening schools and early learning and childcare settings. The Strategic Framework being published today has been jointly developed with the Group, with crucial support from key partners across the education system. We are grateful to all those colleagues who have contributed already to the Group and its supporting workstreams.

This Strategic Framework provides direction for the whole of Scotland to enable consistency and equity in a national approach for children and young people that is underpinned by local planning and delivery. We are asking local authorities to prepare Local Phasing Delivery Plans, which will outline what the principles and expectations set out in the Strategic Framework will look like in their area. We are aware that many local authorities are already engaged in significant planning for the re-opening of schools and ELC which is helpful. No staff should return to settings however, until it is advised that it is safe to do so by the Scottish Government.

Local Phasing Delivery Plans in relation to school re-opening

Local authorities should look to maximise their capacity for pupils to benefit from in-school learning while ensuring a high quality nurturing and learning environment for children through innovative approaches which may include expanding the 'learning estate' as well as the learning workforce. This may include, for example, making use of available community buildings and additional supply staff or deploying probationer teachers where they can have the greatest impact on maximising children's time in school. The General Teaching Council for Scotland is working with ERG partners to develop contingency plans to mobilise additional workforce capacity – including retired teachers or those registered but not currently teaching – where this is required.

Local Phasing Delivery Plans should make consideration of:

- The needs of pupils with additional support needs and vulnerable children
- The emotional, physical and mental health and wellbeing of learners
- The speed and ease with which phasing could be reversed if the situation deteriorates and health requirements suggest it is necessary
- Increased in-school learning time for all, working towards the resumption of full-time in school provision when possible
- Provision of critical childcare for key workers (incl wraparound and out of school care)
- Provision of support in transition, for example from ELC into P1 and P7 into S1
- Provision for family groups
- How the blend of in-school and in-home learning will work across the local authority and in each establishment. This will include a calculation of how many children can be safely accommodated in school at any one time, based on the physical distancing and enhanced hygiene procedures set out in the strategic framework.

All of the above should sit alongside a full risk assessment around the operation of school buildings (and any temporary additions to the school estate) to ensure that they are compliant with all health and safety requirements. There will need to be local communication with parents/carers supported by strong national messaging on the return to school.

Timetable

Subject to public health guidance, as advised by Scottish ministers, teachers and other school staff should be returning to schools at some point during June, to plan and prepare for the new blended model of learning to be implemented from August.. The timings are explicitly contingent on scientific and medical advice that it is safe to proceed and that there is implementation of complementary public health measures such as Test, Trace, Isolate and Support (TTIS) and enhanced hygiene measures.

The start date of the new term will be standardised to 11 August 2020 (only for the purposes of managing Covid-19), which will mean an earlier than planned start for some schools.

SNCT will give advice to LNCTs on how to manage this locally and how to reach agreement on when lost holiday time should be taken back.

The timetable for phasing will continue to be informed by scientific and medical advice regarding the rate of transmission, but a working assumption that the blended model will last until at least the end of the calendar year should be used in the first instance.

Critical Childcare Provision

Critical childcare will need to continue throughout May, June and the summer break to ensure ongoing provision for key worker and vulnerable children. As recovery progresses, the use of dedicated childcare hubs for all provision may reduce, where possible reopening more settings so that children can access ELC and childcare in their usual environment.

Early Learning and Childcare

The Strategic Framework is intended to ensure that children and families can access safe, high quality ELC and childcare as early as possible. Quality of experiences and the wellbeing of children and families remain at the centre of our decision making.

The Framework describes the age-appropriate public health measures which will be put in place to support the reopening of ELC and childcare. Working in this way may reduce capacity in individual services. Authorities have discretion over how to allocate capacity in line with the principles set out in the Framework, in a way that reflects the local Getting It Right For Every Child practice model. Meaningful and genuine partnership working with the ELC and childcare sector including childminding services will be vital to make the best overall use of capacity in a local area.

Daycare of children services, including nurseries, playgroups, childminding services and out of school care services, will be advised when it is safe to prepare for reopening in accordance with the approach laid out Scotland's route map through and out of the crisis, also published today. As per the steps taken at the time of closing provision, the Scottish Government will communicate this formally to all local authorities and sector representative bodies, and providers will be informed directly by the Care Inspectorate.

Next steps

Next week guidance will be published providing further advice on practical implementation measures for schools. Specific guidance will be produced for the ELC and childcare sector.

To support and enable this work, Scottish Ministers have today given an Educational Continuity Direction to all education authorities, under powers in the UK Coronavirus Act 2020, to provide important clarity on the expectations of education authorities during the current public health emergency. This Direction, expected to be the first of several Educational Continuity Directions required over the coming months, applies for 21 days and will be reviewed no later than 10 June 2020. The Direction and associated guidance are attached to this letter.

The Direction provides a legal basis for key steps outlined in the Strategic Framework. It also makes provision in relation to a number of statutory duties on education authorities, recognising that in the current situation authorities cannot fully comply with a number of these duties, providing legal clarity with regard to the effects of any failures in this regard.

It is recognised that there are likely to be additional costs associated with the implementation of the measures set out in the framework and the more operational issues developed through the workstreams. To ensure that delivery of the required changes is manageable and sustainable, an assessment will be made of any net additional costs that are expected to be incurred in relation to both schools and ELC. The Scottish Government will work closely with Local Government to understand and address financing as work progresses.

As we begin to consider the transition back to school-based learning, the Scottish Government and COSLA look forward to working constructively with all partners to continuously monitor and review the support in place, and ensure that children and young people's wellbeing and learning is prioritised in these challenging times.



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