

13 December 2021

Our ref: 211213 McIlveen M/PR/LB

Michelle McIlveen MLA
Minister of Education
Rathgael House
43 Balloo Road
Rathgill
Bangor
BT19 7PR

Dear Michelle,

January 2022 Reopening

The NASUWT notes with the utmost concern the statement by the Prime Minister on 12 December that "no one should be in any doubt, there is a tidal wave of Omicron coming".

In light of the evidence emerging daily regarding the impact of the Omicron variant, the latest modelling which suggests that case numbers, hospitalisations and deaths will continue to increase throughout January, and the raising of the Covid threat level to Level 4 in England, I must urge you now to consider the immediate introduction of additional education measures to help slow the spread of Covid-19 and to minimise further disruption to education.

In addition to wider community-level measures, we believe that additional measures will be required within schools and colleges now and as they return after the Christmas break.

Since schools returned after the summer the NASUWT have called for the strengthening of control measures within schools. Since then, the forecast scientific trajectory for the Omicron variant has worsened significantly and available evidence strongly points to the need for additional control measures to be in place now and through the start of next term.

The NASUWT urges the Executive to act immediately and to not delay critical decisions until the commencement of the school and college holiday period. We ask you to avoid a repeat of the confusion and chaos which last year impacted negatively on public and parental confidence and hampered the hard work of teachers and school leaders in their preparations at the start of 2021. An immediate announcement from the Executive on additional measures for schools is, we believe, essential before the majority of schools close for the Christmas break.

Such additional measures we would ask you to consider would include:

- Staggering the return of pupils to all schools at the start of January 2022;
- Providing additional onsite testing facilities and resources for pupils throughout the period between January and the February half-term 2022;
- Publishing further guidance advising schools to update risk assessments in light of Omicron, in consultation with staff and trade unions, ready for wider reopening in January;
- Publishing further guidance advising schools to cancel or postpone non-essential activities or events, to move to online staff and parental meetings, and to mandate staff working from home where appropriate, during this period.

The NASUWT believes that these measures, together with wider Government measures including on vaccinations, are proportionate and responsible, and will contribute to our shared aim of minimising further disruption to children's education.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Patrick Roach', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Dr Patrick Roach
General Secretary