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Your ref: 211213/Somerville S A/PR/LB
Our ref:

16 December 2021

Dear Dr Roach

Thank you for your letter of 13 December requesting that additional measures be brought in for schools now and for their return in January, in light of developments with the Omicron variant. You also referred to your letter of 25 November, which I responded to recently.

Following last week's meeting of the Covid-19 Education Recovery Group (CERG) I wrote jointly with COSLA Cllr Stephen McCabe to all Directors of Education to provide an update on the latest situation regarding the Omicron variant. This was due to the significant clinical and public health concerns about the potential impacts of the virus. It is clearly vital that we treat this situation very seriously and start to plan for the days and weeks ahead.

That letter emphasised again the vital importance of adherence to all current mitigations within education and ELC settings as part of our cross-society efforts to slow down the transmission of Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), including the new Omicron variant.

As the First Minister has made clear, Omicron is spreading very rapidly in Scotland. A key aim is to ensure that schools stay open if at all possible, to minimise further disruption to education. However, it is vital that schools are safe for pupils and staff.

We have taken a precautionary approach to school safety throughout the pandemic, in recognition of the unique school environment. We have retained many of the mitigations that were removed in wider society, to ensure that staff and pupils can continue to learn in-person as safely as possible. For example, we continue to ask staff to maintain distancing from pupils, and we have continued to require face coverings to be worn in all areas of secondary schools by pupils and staff. We also ask all staff and secondary pupils to take

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lateral flow tests regularly—including during holidays and before returning after holiday breaks.

At CERG last week, we discussed the merits of reinstating some of the protections that were present within schools and ELC settings last year and have since been removed. While we hope that such caution is not needed, we need to recognise the gravity of the situation and be prepared for all possible scenarios.

The Advisory Sub-Group for Education and Children's Issues met yesterday to provide further advice on how schools can operate safely in the new year. We believe there is a need to update guidance documents for schools return in January and we are working with partners to develop that and will look to provide the sector with as much information as possible, ahead of schools going on their winter breaks.

As part of that, we are reviewing our guidance on ventilation and CO2 monitoring to ensure it remains up to date and in line with the latest scientific advice, engaging with the Health and Safety Executive and expert representatives from the relevant SAGE sub-group. The feedback you, and other stakeholders, have provided is being taken into consideration as part of that process. In the meantime, as I set out in my previous response, our current guidance makes clear what actions local authorities should take to ensure an appropriate balance between good ventilation and user comfort.

With regard to asymptomatic testing, we have provided regular advice to local authorities over the past few weeks to ask that they ensure schools have ordered sufficient at-home testing kits to provide fresh supplies to staff and secondary pupils ahead of the end of term. This is so they can continue testing over the holidays and, importantly, test just prior to returning after the festive break. We recently updated procedures around test kit logs and implied consent that are intended to make it easier for schools to hand kits out proactively.

While we continue to keep all options under review, we do not currently intend to ask schools to undertake in-school testing on return – our judgement is that this would place significant burdens on school staff to plan and implement such measures at a time when we acknowledge that they are already under great pressure. We intend instead to strengthen our communications around the importance of at-home testing, and would welcome your support for encouraging your members to participate and – importantly – to record all results, whether positive, negative or void. User feedback suggests there is currently significant underreporting of at-home testing.

As has been the case throughout the pandemic, we need to ensure that our planning strikes the right balance between the competing risks and harms. We know that all children and young people will have been affected in some manner by the pandemic – with some bearing greater weight than others – and protecting their welfare remains our top priority.

Our focus is on the wellbeing and learning of children and young people during this challenging period. We know that omicron is a serious threat and we need to do all that we can to ensure that schools and early years settings can stay open when it is safe to do so, with as little disruption as possible.

Both CERG and the Advisory Sub-Group are closely monitoring developments and will continue to review the latest data and developments relating to the Omicron variant.

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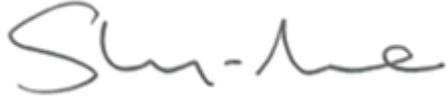
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As I said in Parliament on Tuesday I'd like to reaffirm my thanks to all those who are involved in Scottish education for their on-going work. School leaders, teachers, school support staff, children, young people, their carers and families are making sure that learning continues despite Covid-19.

Yours sincerely



SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE

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