

January 2021

To Chief Executive, Education Authority

Dear Ms Long

COVID-19 – Attendance at schools

We are at a critical situation across the UK. The percentage of people testing positive for the coronavirus (COVID-19) is continuing to increase, and during the most recent week, the Office for National Statistics estimates that 1,122,000 people had the coronavirus, equating to around one in 50 people. More than 80,000 people in the UK have now sadly died from COVID-19.

Northern Ireland has entered a third lockdown and schools have been directed to close to everyone except for the children of key workers and vulnerable children. The clear purpose of this lockdown is to substantially reduce contact between people and therefore reduce the infection rate of COVID-19, which is up to 70% more transmissible. We trust that you will agree that all children, wherever possible, should stay at home and be supported through a programme of remote education. This will help schools to reduce potential transmission of COVID-19 by minimising the numbers of pupils and staff on site.

The NASUWT is particularly concerned with the position in special schools, which all operate under the direction of the Education Authority (EA). The NASUWT expects that there will be clear communication to parents that physical attendance is not required and that where children can be taught remotely, they should be taught remotely.

The Department of Education (DE) guidance to the EA guidance for schools reflects the Northern Ireland Executive advice to employers that staff should work from home where it is possible to do so. However, the Union is concerned that while the EA has issued this advice to mainstream schools, it has failed to do so for special schools and Education other than at school (EOTAS) centres. Currently, teachers and support staff are being required to attend work for activities where there are no children present and the work could be done at home. This needs to be corrected urgently by the EA to ensure that school leaders and governors do not find themselves held liable for acting on the basis of this information.

The NASUWT also expects that every school should have undertaken a health and safety risk assessment to support both the provision of onsite education and the provision of remote education. The conduct of risk assessments is the responsibility of each employer and we ask that you confirm the steps you have taken, as required, to ensure that such assessments have been conducted, in light of the new risks presented by the new strain of coronavirus.

The NASUWT asks that you immediately act to communicate with the parents and staff in all schools to encourage them to keep children at home and to stay at home.

I look forward to your full support in this matter and I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely



Dr Patrick Roach
General Secretary