

School and college reopening during the pandemic

Ensuring the safe reopening of schools and colleges is our priority. We know that the best place for children and young people to be educated is in school/college. This is vital not only for educational progress but also children's wellbeing. However, we must also ensure that the disruption and interruption to children's education is minimised and we are therefore committed to ensuring that the risk to further widespread school closures is avoided. The safety of teachers and the wider workforce in schools must also be paramount. After all, children's learning and progress depend on teachers.

Our priorities for the safe full reopening of schools and colleges focus on the need for clarity of expectation, consistency of application and measures to secure the confidence of the workforce, parents and the public. Taken together, we believe that the following measures will enable the safe and sustainable reopening of schools and colleges when national restrictions are lifted.

The Northern Ireland Executive must now:

1. Demonstrate that decisions are led by the scientific evidence and advice

- Provide evidence of significant and sustained reductions to the R rate – nationally, regionally and locally. Wider reopening must be managed and safe to those in schools and should not compromise wider public health.
- Publish conclusive scientific evidence on the risks of in-school virus transmission.
- Provide transparency regarding data sharing on COVID transmission rates amongst pupils and staff at individual school/college level and at local authority/area level.

2. Ensure effective and consistent action against the spread of the virus

- Give good notice to enable schools to prepare to reopen fully. There must be no last-minute decisions and no surprises, and all guidance should be published in good time.
- Implement a staggered plan for reopening to give time for local and national public health teams to monitor the impacts of reopening in a cautious and measured way and to reduce the risk of a further surge in community-level virus transmission.
- Put in place measures to ensure the readiness and compliance of schools/colleges for reopening, including stronger advice on essential safety measures.
- Ensure that schools/colleges are given sufficient time to undertake the essential implementation of COVID-safety training of staff during normal working time to ensure the effective and consistent implementation of risk control measures.
- Provide additional funding to meet the additional COVID-safety costs incurred by schools and colleges (including for cleaning, materials and additional staffing) and to ensure that safety measures remain paramount at all times.

3. Ensure the same protections for teachers and support staff as for workers in other occupations

- Publish further national guidance, jointly developed with school and college workforce representatives, taking into account any planned phasing for the return of pupils and providing clarity over the teaching and learning activities that will be undertaken.
- Put in place clear, accessible and responsive systems to enable teachers and parents to report to an appropriate independent body their concerns over COVID-safety.
- Provide for effective inspection and enforcement arrangements to address non-compliance with Executive guidance.
- Ensure that clinically extremely vulnerable staff continue to stay at home, pending any further changes to general shielding guidance.

4. Ensure effective controls are in place to minimise the spread and impact of COVID-19

- Ensure stronger adherence with essential non-pharmaceutical interventions (such as handwashing, cleaning, and two-metre social distancing between adults).
- In view of uncertainty around new variants, put in place stronger mitigations and control measures, such as: ventilation monitoring; enhanced use of face coverings in schools by adults in all settings and by secondary age pupils; optional use of face coverings by pupils in primary schools; two-metre social distancing between secondary age pupils; and use of rotas or other measures to limit occupancy levels, provide enhanced physical distancing and prevent overcrowding.
- Ensure stringent adherence to essential mitigations (such as social distancing, face masks) to ensure that home-school/college transport is COVID-secure.
- Establish effective and competent mass asymptomatic testing arrangements for staff and pupils, in addition to maintaining an effective test and trace system.
- Give priority access to COVID-19 vaccines for teachers and education staff, phasing the roll-out of vaccinations in settings that are the first to open fully, and to reduce the risk of further school/college closures when schools reopen fully.

5. Ensure that appropriate risk assessments and controls are in place

- Require schools and colleges to update their risk assessments prior to wider reopening, in consultation with the workforce and trade unions.
- Build confidence for return by requiring the publication of school/college risk assessments and control measures on school/college websites.
- For vulnerable teachers and those in higher risk groups (such as pregnant and BAME staff) or with underlying health conditions, provide a clear and well-publicised right to individual risk assessments that appropriately reflect the risks for these groups.

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