

COVID-19 and Schools Update

12 May 2020

Introduction

1. The NASUWT - The Teachers' Union, in addition to the support we are providing to our members across the UK, are committed to ensuring that parliamentarians remain informed of developing challenges in schools and colleges as the country responds to the COVID-19 crisis.

Re-opening of Schools

2. On the 11th May the Government and the Department for Education (DfE) published guidance following the announcement by the Prime Minister on the 10th May of the potential for some relaxation of the current COVID-19 restrictions with regard to school opening from 1st June 2020.
3. The NASUWT has reviewed the guidance issued by the Department for Education and has serious and fundamental concerns with it.
4. The guidance is inadequate, incomplete and lacks detail on a number of critical issues relating to health and safety of staff in schools and colleges. It is inconsistent with Government guidance that has already been issued for other workplaces and workers.
5. The scope of the Government proposals for nursery and primary school reopening are particularly concerning and whilst the proposals for secondary schools appear more limited, in all circumstances we believe there are serious health, safety and welfare issues for staff and pupils which have not been addressed.

6. The NASUWT is raising these very serious concerns with the Secretary of State for Education and with officials within the DfE.
7. The challenge for the Government is how to ensure that Government guidance is followed and implemented and that there is an acceptance by schools of the priority which must be given to health, safety and welfare. Schools are used to operating with excessive freedoms and flexibilities, which has created a culture where some believe they are able to flout legislative provisions and where Government guidance is given little status or importance.
8. The Government may wish to trust schools to do the right thing but if they do not, if they fail to follow this guidance and accept and take seriously their legislative duties to provide a safe working environment, then this time the consequence will be that people will suffer serious illness and some will die.
9. The NASUWT, therefore, believes that the DfE must:
 - be unequivocal in making clear to schools its expectations with regard to the health and welfare of staff and pupils;
 - remind employers of their duties under the health and safety legislation and that these duties must be discharged fully; and
 - have a clear strategy of what action it will take if the guidance is not followed and staff and pupils are put at risk.
10. In a situation where the wrong decision will result in people becoming seriously ill and dying, there can be no compromise on health and safety. If this means that schools are unable to open safely before September because they are unable to make arrangements to safeguard their staff and pupils, then that position must be accepted. Unless and until the Government can demonstrate that schools will be safe for staff and children, all schools should continue to limit their opening only to vulnerable children and to children of key workers.

11. From the queries we have received from members since the Prime Minister's announcement it is clear that some schools have clearly misunderstood the Prime Minister's announcement and are providing staff with misinformation and misdirection as a result.
12. There is no change to the current COVID-19 restrictions for schools at this point in time. There should be no increase in the number of pupils or staff going into schools or requirement for any teacher not currently in school to go in to work at this time.
13. The Union is reminding its members there is no obligation on any schools to extend their opening arrangements. The 1 June 2020 is the date from when schools may be able to extend their opening arrangements. It is neither a fixed nor hard and fast date by which all schools must open and there is no requirement or obligation currently on any school to reopen to more pupils from that date.
14. The NASUWT is continuing to regularly survey its members' opinions and has been clear to the Government from the outset that the overwhelming majority of our members are opposed to any premature re-opening of schools and that members are also deeply concerned and anxious about the Government's preparations to extend the opening of schools.
15. The NASUWT has been consistent and clear in its view that, in a situation where the wrong decision will result in people becoming seriously and dying, there can be no compromise on health and safety. If this means that schools are unable to open safely before September because they are unable to make arrangements to safeguard their staff and pupils, then that position must be accepted.
16. Nothing that has been said by the Government or the DfE has changed the NASUWT's position that no teacher should be expected to go into a school that is not safe and until it can be demonstrated that it is safe to do so.

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