

Date: 16 October 2020

Your Ref:

Our ref: 201016/Williamson G/PR/FC

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP
Secretary of State
Department for Education
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NASUWT

The Teachers' Union

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Dear Gavin,

I am writing to you again following the further recent announcements by the Prime Minister of further national restrictions in response to the significantly increased threat to public health from the Coronavirus pandemic.

With levels of virus transmission increasing significantly, we are concerned that you have failed to address the implications and risks for schools and colleges.

The NASUWT is seriously concerned that the additional measures introduced by the Government are insufficient to adequately protect the health and safety of those working and learning in schools and colleges.

We note that whilst the Government has again stated the need for people to work from home if possible and to minimise social contact, no corresponding advice has been provided to those who work in schools who you appear to expect to continue working as normal.

We are deeply concerned that your Department has still failed to issue any advice to school and college employers in recent weeks, or taken any additional steps in the face of increased Covid-19 risks, to ensure that all school and college employers update their risk assessments and control measures in consultation with employees and unions. The Health and Safety Executive has a critical role to play in inspection and enforcement. However, it must also be the case that clear and unequivocal advice is issued to school and college employers to ensure that they take the appropriate and necessary actions in relation to the health and safety of the workforce, including the physical and mental health and wellbeing of teachers. Teachers are at breaking point due to the demands that are being placed on them. If the provision of education to pupils in schools or who are being educated remotely is to be maintained for the remainder of the autumn term, it is imperative that urgent action is taken to deliver support to the profession and to ease the burdens on teachers and headteachers.

Education recovery will not be possible without the continued contribution of teachers. However, there is widespread evidence of Covid-19 transmission within schools and recognition from the scientific advice that schools do constitute a risk for Covid-19 transmission. There remain significant problems with the test and trace

system, with many teachers continuing to report to us difficulty in obtaining a test. Furthermore, there is widespread misinformation and confusion regarding the rules governing self-isolation of pupils and staff in schools.

The NASUWT is extremely disappointed that you have sought to prioritise the introduction of statutory directions in relation to the provision of remote education but have thus far refused to make determined efforts to ensure compliance in respect of workforce health and safety matters.

The NASUWT again reiterates our serious concerns about the risks to teachers who are vulnerable to Covid-19 transmission, including teachers who are pregnant, or who are clinically extremely vulnerable, or who have underlying conditions or who are from higher risk groups (e.g. BAME teachers) who are working in schools and who are already extremely concerned and anxious about their safety at work. We are concerned that teachers in these groups are at a heightened risk due to the increased incidence of Coronavirus transmission, together with the lack of social distancing within schools and the absence of PPE within schools and classrooms.

The NASUWT has noted that the Schools Minister in his letter to me dated 5 October 2020 stated that:

'Where schools apply the full measures in our guidance, the risks to all staff will be mitigated significantly, including those who are extremely clinically vulnerable... The measures set out in the guidance provide a framework for schools to put in place proportionate protective measures for children and staff... This includes the public health advice schools must follow to minimise the risks of coronavirus (COVID19) transmission... This system of controls is a set of measures that all schools must implement for prevention and response to infection. When implemented in line with a revised risk assessment, these measures create an inherently safer environment for children and staff where the risk of transmission of infection is substantially reduced. While we expect this will allow most staff to return to the workplace, we advise those in the most at-risk categories to take particular care.'

Despite the assurances from the Schools Minister, we remain concerned that no corresponding guidance has been published and no compliance measures have been identified by your Department to ensure that your guidance is being followed consistently and applied rigorously by schools. We are also clear that many school and college employers continue to operate on the basis of outdated risk assessments produced when Covid-19 transmission levels were at their lowest immediately prior to full reopening in September. This presents a serious risk to our members working in schools, especially those who are vulnerable to serious illness or death as a result of Covid-19 transmission.

In my letters of 14 September 2020 and 23 September 2020, I asked for your response to a number of urgent matters regarding covid-safe practices in schools. I am concerned that no response has been forthcoming from you on the measures you will be taking to address:

- (i) the lack of additional funding for schools which is leading to schools to make critical decisions (e.g. in respect of cleaning, PPE, etc.) on the basis of cost rather than health and safety considerations;
- (ii) the depletion of staffing numbers in schools which is resulting in serious operational difficulties for schools in maintaining safe working practices at all times;
- (iii) the heightened risks to health for vulnerable teachers (including teachers who are otherwise categorised as clinically extremely vulnerable, pregnant teachers, older teachers, disabled teachers and teachers from particular BAME backgrounds) following your guidance on those who may return to work in schools;
- (iv) the lack of social distancing within schools, the absence of PPE and other effective non pharmaceutical interventions;
- (v) the failure of the test and trace system to keep up with the demands on it;
- (vi) how your Department will have regard for the practical and logistical challenges within schools to meet the Government's demands for covid-safe working practice;
- (vii) the need for further guidance and compliance measures to be taken by your Department to ensure that schools adopt and maintain covid-safe working practices;
- (viii) the need for your Department to implement appropriate measures to ensure compliance across all schools;
- (ix) the data on which the Department is relying with regard to virus transmission and the number of confirmed Covid-19 cases involving pupils and staff in schools since 1 September 2020;
- (x) the Government's advice in respect of teachers who are unable to access childcare due to local lockdown restrictions and/or where their child's school/bubble is required to self-isolate;
- (xi) the support and assistance the Government intends to provide to supply teachers who are unable to obtain work as a consequence of how schools are applying your Guidance on covid-safe working practice.

Once again, we continue to await your response to these extremely serious and urgent matters.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Patrick Roach
General Secretary