

COVID-19 and Schools

March 2020

General Issues

1. On 16th March 2020 the Prime Minister Boris Johnson made a public announcement which underlined the deepening gravity of the situation with regard to COVID-19 and the national and global crisis we are facing.
2. Unfortunately, his statement failed to give the clear and definitive directions necessary to enable individuals, organisations and services to be confident in the decisions they are making or to provide the reassurance and assurance that people need at this time.
3. It is very unhelpful to those who are trying to plan and maintain continuity of service that all of the announcements continue to be couched as guidance or advice. This is simply serving to increase anxiety and uncertainty.
4. The NASUWT has to date been advising our members in the context of the advice issued by the UK Government and Public Health England. However, the lack of clear information with regard to the steps to protect teachers, headteachers and other staff working in schools in the context of commentators constantly referring to the threats posed by children carrying COVID-19 is causing chaos and confusion and placing intolerable pressure on all staff in schools and their families.
5. The NASUWT has consistently raised a series of concerns since this national crisis began to unfold and whilst we have sought not to second guess the science and medical advice and have worked to support

members in the increasingly difficult situation, the lack of specific information for schools understandably has created a rising sense of panic.

6. Schools are struggling with ever diminishing staffing levels and are being driven to make arrangements for changes to staff working conditions which have the potential to compromise the health and safety of staff and pupils. This situation cannot be allowed to continue.
7. The UK Government working with governments and administrations across the UK must now make a definitive decision about the steps being taken to protect the school workforce and the closure of schools.

Varying advice across the UK

8. As a UK-wide trade union, the NASUWT is concerned that rather than a co-ordinated approach being taken by the devolved nation governments with the Westminster Government it is increasingly evident that separate actions are being taken in relation to schools and this is causing chaos and confusion. There are teachers who work across borders in all of the devolved nations and it is essential that there is consistency of approach at a time of national crisis.
9. We urge the Government to seek to secure a consistent approach and as the situation develops for decisions to be made and guidance issued in a timely way. The constant speculation about what the Government may or may not do is adding to the anxiety and stress that those working in schools and managing them are facing.

Special Schools and alternative settings

10. The NASUWT believes that in the absence of a decision by the Government regarding closure of schools there is an urgent need for further guidance to staff in special schools and settings and alternative

provision where physical contact between staff and pupils is part of daily programme of work and where some pupils are unable or refuse to follow instructions with regard to hand washing and personal hygiene. We believe that staff and pupils in these settings may be at greater risk and therefore specific tailored advice is necessary.

11. As a minimum, and in the absence of school closure, the NASUWT believes Government guidance should state that in such settings, there should be routine monitoring the temperatures of pupils to ensure that any pupil displaying symptoms is isolated as soon as possible. Guidance should also be explicit that if a risk assessment indicates a pupil poses a significant risk that cannot be adequately controlled in the school, then schools are able to require these pupils to remain at home.

Supply Teachers

12. One group of staff may be facing a disproportionate impact as a result of school closures, self-isolation procedures and other associated arrangements and that is supply teachers who provide such a valuable service to schools.
13. The majority of supply teachers have no direct employer and if they work for any agency are usually classed as self-employed. If they are required to self-isolate there is the potential that they will not have access to sick pay provision and they may also suffer an adverse impact as a result of school closures in terms of being able to secure work.
14. The budget announcement on 11th March 2020 contained two provisions which may be helpful to supply teachers, if they are able to access them, and that is the reference to easier access to benefits and the fact that those on contributory Employment and Support Allowance will be able to claim from day one instead of day eight. The NASUWT would welcome more detail about how supply teachers would be able to access these benefits.

15. We would also like to know if the Government will be contacting and advising the agencies which employ supply teachers about their sick pay arrangements and taking steps to ensure that there is no detriment to the supply teachers on their register.
16. The NASUWT is deeply concerned about the potential loss of earnings supply teachers may suffer. Many supply teachers need to obtain a set amount of supply work per month to be able to cover their mortgage and other essential expenditure.
17. The NASUWT would welcome particular consideration to be given to how Government is able to support these teachers and would welcome the opportunity to discuss this with relevant officials as a matter of urgency to be able to provide some reassurance to our supply teacher members who are understandably very anxious and concerned.

Race-related Incidents

18. In recent weeks, and in a context of increased public concern and anxiety, the NASUWT, regrettably, been made aware of examples of hysteria and unacceptable behaviour which has included verbal and physical abuse of some pupils and school staff on grounds that appear to be racially motivated.
19. The NASUWT is committed to providing advice, assistance and support to members who experience verbal and physical abuse in the workplace, including where such matters are triggered by fears relating to the spread of Coronavirus. However, in some instances, NASUWT members from black and minority ethnic backgrounds (especially teachers of Chinese origin) have been subject to “jokes”, banter, racist name-calling, intimidation, and, in one instance, groups of pupils have been engaged in game-playing including an unsavoury game of tag named after the Coronavirus.

20. Given the increasing number of race-related incidents reported to the NASUWT in recent weeks, we believe the Government should consider extending the guidance that has already been issued by the Department for Education to address this issue.
21. The NASUWT has published advice on its website for victims of racist abuse, reminding schools of their responsibilities to challenge and address all forms of racism, eradicate racist incidents and to deal with the perpetrators of such incidents. Our advice makes it clear that all schools and colleges are bound by legislation to protect staff and pupils from racial discrimination, harassment or abuse and should have reporting mechanisms for incidents of harassment, bullying and discrimination, including arrangements for reporting such incidents directed against staff.
22. However, the reports we have received suggest that some schools may be unclear about their responsibility to secure a positive learning and working environment for all pupils and staff, which is inclusive, tolerant and welcoming of diversity. We believe that schools should be encouraged to take a proactive role in promoting an inclusive environment for all learners and for the workforce, whilst also dealing appropriately and robustly with incidents when they occur.
23. We urge the Government to communicate with schools and provide guidance and support for school leaders, particularly at a time when sensitivities appear to be heightened. Schools, working with parents, will want to ensure that they can deal with issues sensitively and proportionately whilst at the same time taking appropriate remedial action when incidents arise.

Insurance

24. The NASUWT has become aware that some schools, following the Government's advice to cancel school trips abroad are being told by their insurers that they will not be compensated as the Government has merely 'advised' rather than instructed schools to cancel such trips. We believe that the Government must take steps to ensure that schools are not

financially disadvantaged because they have followed sensible Government advice.

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