

Date: 28 December 2020

Your Ref:

Our ref: 201228/Williamson G/PR/LB

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP
Secretary of State
Department for Education
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Dear Gavin,

School and College Reopening from January 2021

Throughout the Coronavirus pandemic, the education of children and young people has been of paramount importance to the country as well as to members of the NASUWT. Throughout the last 9 months, the country has witnessed first-hand the tremendous efforts of teachers, headteachers and support staff in schools and colleges who have worked tirelessly to provide the best possible education and care for children whose education has continued to suffer disruption due to the impact of the Coronavirus. Where children have been required to self-isolate due to the Coronavirus, teachers have continued to provide remote education, despite reporting significant concerns about the absence of appropriate resources to support such provision.

I wrote to you on 12 November 2020 reaffirming the strong commitment of the NASUWT to securing safe schools during the Coronavirus pandemic. We maintain that the best place for children and young people is to be in school or college, to be guaranteed access to education and to be looked after in terms of their wellbeing. However, it is abundantly clear that the pandemic is seriously impacting on the ability of schools to continue to operate normally, with the continuing uncertainty over whether schools and colleges can remain open safely, the risks to pupils, staff and their families when they come into contact with someone who has received a positive Covid-19 test, and the capacity of schools to have a sufficient number of teachers available to support pupils' learning.

The NASUWT is clear that schools can only remain open to all pupils where it is safe for them to do so. It is, therefore, extremely regrettable that the country finds itself in the grip of a further escalation of Coronavirus transmission with a new variant that has been identified and which the Prime Minister confirmed on 19 December 2020 is 70% more transmissible. We also note with the utmost concern commentary from various medical experts and the scientific community that the new variant may present an increased risk amongst children and young people.

Given the heightened risks, the Government has taken action to review and revise its national emergency planning with the introduction of further public health restrictions which are to be further reviewed on 30 December. However, we note that no new measures have been introduced with regard to schools and colleges. We believe that it would be wholly inadvisable to wait weeks or months to see the impact of the new variant in schools and colleges before taking further action to limit the spread of the virus.

With the impending reopening of schools and colleges in January, it is vital that your previous covid-security plans for schools and colleges are also revised and updated and that school and college employers are provided with the time necessary at the start of the new term to review their operations, consult on new risk mitigation measures, and to be able to do so without putting health or lives at risk.

It is increasingly clear that the covid-safety advice you have issued previously to the sector may no longer be sufficient, not least given that it does not take into account the new risks posed to schools and colleges. It is also clear that school and college employers have not had the opportunity to review and consult on their health and safety risk assessments in light of the new information that emerged immediately prior to Christmas. Nevertheless, it is evident to the NASUWT and to our members that further mitigations will be needed urgently to ensure a safe and effective start to the new term.

As levels of Coronavirus transmission have increased rapidly in the wider community, teachers, headteachers and support staff have worked valiantly to keep schools open safely. However, with a further wave of virus transmission now regrettably in prospect, teachers' safety concerns cannot be overlooked. Teachers and headteachers have sought to implement your existing safety advice, despite the evidence that covid transmission is impacting directly on schools and colleges, and the emerging evidence of a new Coronavirus variant. Without the appropriate tools and safeguards in place, teachers, headteachers and support staff risk fighting a losing battle to keep schools and colleges covid-safe.

We trust that you will agree that teachers cannot teach and children cannot learn where their health or safety is at risk. That risk is increasing and will continue to do so unless appropriate action is taken immediately to ensure that schools and colleges do not contribute to the spread of the virus. Without an urgent and effective programme of national action and measures to demonstrate that the Government is taking all necessary steps to ensure the safety of education provision during the pandemic, there is a real risk that fewer staff will be available to continue teaching and that more pupils will be required to spend more time out of school or college whilst they self-isolate.

The NASUWT believes that government has a duty during this crisis to do whatever it takes to ensure that schools and colleges are, above all, safe places for teaching and learning. With one week before the start of the new term, I must ask you to confirm the additional actions you intend to take in order to ensure the safety of schools and colleges and those who work in all educational settings.

To that end, we would urge you to take the following actions immediately:

1. Act swiftly and urgently on the emerging scientific evidence and advice on the transmission of the Coronavirus, including the new variant, recognising that it is important to take preventative action to limit the further transmission of the Coronavirus in schools and colleges.
2. Publish new guidance for the sector as a matter of urgency, taking into account fully the heightened risks associated with the new strain of the virus and setting out the further mitigations that will be necessary to deal with the increased risk of Coronavirus transmission in schools, colleges and other education settings.
3. Confirm that schools and colleges will be permitted to restrict onsite provision to pupils who are deemed to be vulnerable, together with children of frontline/key workers, and that such restrictions will apply in the case of those schools and colleges serving communities in the highest tier areas. Delaying the return of pupils to schools and colleges at the start of the spring term will also enable all school and college employers to undertake and consult as required on new risk assessments and ensure that they can be compliant with any new measures or requirements contained in any forthcoming national guidance.
4. Require schools and colleges to implement additional control measures to prevent the spread of the virus, including:
 - routine and effective arrangements for mass testing of pupils attending schools and colleges;
 - stringent application of 2 metre social distancing between staff and pupils;
 - mandatory wearing of face masks or visors within school and college buildings;
 - provision of PPE (e.g. gloves, aprons) to be worn by education staff.
5. Ensure that staff who are clinically extremely vulnerable, together with staff in other high risk groups, are required to stay at home and work from home pending further review of the situation.

In addition, we also urge you to further consider:

- a) the financial support available to schools to deliver covid-safe teaching and learning environments, including the provision of additional funding to support schools from the start of the spring term. There is mounting evidence that the funding levels for the sector are inadequate and this is putting at risk safe working practices in many schools and colleges. It should be recognised that schools and colleges have had to spend significantly more in order to operate in a 'covid-safe' environment, with more than half of schools forecasting an operating deficit as a result of extra expenditure on covid-safety measures including PPE and cleaning supplies, staffing, signage, digital equipment and handwashing facilities;
- b) extended provision of remote education support, including IT support for pupils and staff, to ensure continuity of education. The provision of IT support for pupils and staff to enable effective remote education provision remains an issue of concern for our members;

- c) priority access to the Coronavirus vaccine for staff working in schools and colleges.

The additional measures set out above are intended to minimise disruption to the education of children and young people at this critical and uncertain time, whilst also ensuring that schools and colleges can continue to operate safely in the interests of all children and young people.

Given the urgency of situation, I trust that you will consider the matters raised in this letter to be of the utmost priority. The NASUWT stands ready to work with you in the interests of children, young people and the workforce in schools and colleges.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Patrick Roach
General Secretary