**Education Restart - Frequently Asked Questions for Parents and Carers - 13 August 2020**

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**Introduction**

The issues we are now facing in education have never been encountered before, and indeed all areas of society face difficult challenges.  The reopening of schools and all education settings must be led by medical and scientific evidence to ensure that it is done in a way that is safe for our pupils, our staff and wider society.  The health and well-being of the children and young people in our care and all our staff is our primary concern.

There will be pupils and parents who may feel a level of anxiety around the return to school.  A successful return to school requires the continued support of schools, parents, pupils and wider society to be vigilant and act responsibly within the overarching public health guidelines.

These Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) are intended to provide parents and carers with the latest information on the return to school and youth work settings.  Where these FAQs refer to schools, this also includes pre-school unless stated otherwise. The plans for the return to education settings are subject to change as we respond to the latest public health advice therefore, these FAQs will be updated when new information is available.

It is important to remember that all schools are different.  Schools have been given guidance that sets out practical things they can do, based on what has been shown to work, but every school will do what works best for them.  Schools must do what best meets the needs of their pupils, staff and the physical circumstances of each individual school.

**If a parent has a specific concern or question about a particular issue relating to their setting they should, in the first instance, make contact directly with the school Principal, Leader, Management Committee or the Board of Governors.**

**Returning to School**

**When will children and young people return to school?**

The start of term will be 24 August 2020 for Primary 7, Year 12 and Year 14 pupils and for vulnerable children across all year groups.  All other pupils will return to school from the week commencing 31 August 2020.

Your child’s school will tell you when your child should return to school.

**Why are only certain groups returning to school on 24 August 2020?**

Primary 7 is an important year as children prepare to leave primary school and enter post-primary education. This is a major change in their educational journey.  Year 12 and Year 14 are key examination years. Other jurisdictions (e.g. England, Scotland and Wales) are all bringing similar cohorts back earlier in August for similar reasons.

**Will my child be in school every day when they return to school?**

The return to school will be on a full time basis of five days a week for every pupil, including those who attend Special Schools.

**Will my pre-school child have a settling in period?**

Each pre-school setting makes their own arrangements for induction/ settling in, taking into account the Department of Education guidance on Induction and Transition, available[here.](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/guidance-induction-and-transition-pre-school-education-and-year-1-primary-school)

Generally, it is expected that the majority of children should be settled in to the pre-school setting within the first few weeks of term, following a short period of induction.

**What home learning will be available if my child cannot attend school?**

A small minority of children may be designated clinically vulnerable and parents should follow medical advice from their hospital consultant if their child is in this category.

Where a child is medically advised not to attend school from the commencement of the 2020/21 term, parents should consult with their school Principal and, as required, the Education Authority regarding education provision for these pupils.

**What information is available to help me support my child’s learning at this time?**

A range of resources are available for parents to support their children’s learning and can be found [here](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/support-parents-and-pupils).

**What about children of key workers?**

Children of key workers will return to school at the same time as all other children in their year group.

**Will every school operate in the same way from the start of term?**

The return to school will be on a full time basis of five days a week for every pupil, including those who attend Special Schools however, every school is different and every classroom is different. Therefore, there will be some differences in how schools approach the return to school.  Schools have been provided with guidance outlining the things they should put in place for the return to school.

A separate return to school plan may be put in place for children with SEN to enable them to re-engage with the school day and environment as smoothly as possible. A joint Health and Education process, will continue to be supported by the established regional oversight group. The Department of Education, Public Health Agency, Health and Social Care Board and the Education Authority are represented on this group and work in close liaison with the relevant Department of Health.

Parents should contact their child’s school if they have any concerns.

**What will happen if I don’t send my child to school?**

**Parents should not send their children to school if they display any COVID 19 symptoms.  You should let your child’s school know if this happens.**

Whilst we fully understand concerns regarding Covid-19, in his statement of 6 August the Minister said that having taken account of the scientific and medical evidence, it is now appropriate for all pupils to return to school during the week commencing 31 August.  In light of this position, attendance will therefore be compulsory.

If a school is concerned about a pupil’s pattern of attendance and/or if it falls below 85% and there is a cause for concern, a referral should be made to the Education Welfare Service (EWS), based on consultation with the designated Education Welfare Officer during the school year.

**What extra support will be provided for vulnerable children and children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) to return to school?**

Children and young people who need extra help may be considered as a particular group and return to school at a different date arranged with their parents/carer.

Schools may also ask for what changes you think should be taking place to keep your child safe and ready to return to learning.

Planning is underway to deliver the necessary support services to schools and special schools such as pupil support services, language and communication, nursing and occupational therapy for school restart. Parents should liaise directly with the school in relation to the practical delivery of their child’s Statement of Special Educational Needs.

Schools will let parents and carers know of any news so you will know what is happening.

**What protective measures will be in place in schools?**

To make sure that schools remain safe for our children, young people and staff, a number of measures will be put in place.  These include;

* **Keeping Covid-19 out of schools.**  Anyone displaying any Covid-19 symptoms **must not** attend school.
* **Enhanced hygiene and cleaning measures** will be in place.  All cleaning will be carried out in accordance with PHA Guidance. Regular cleaning of door handles, desk tops etc. will take place throughout the day.
* Children will **wash their hands** as soon as they arrive at school and regularly throughout the school day.
* Public health guidance with respect to **social distancing of 2 metres (2m) will remain in place between adults** and as far as possible between adults and pupils.
* Whilst the stringent application of social distancing requirements between pupils will be relaxed,as far as is practicable, **social distancing should be maximised for both children and adults who are not from the same household.**
* **Protective bubbles will be used as a key mitigating action where possible.** The protective bubble arrangements will be used to segment pupils into a consistent group or groups that arrive together, learn together, play together and eat together, reducing contact throughout the school with other children.
* **Classroom space will be maximised** as far as possible with unnecessary items removed and schools will make use of all space including outdoor space.
* **Children will not sit facing each other where possible** and **seating plans can be used to aid contact tracing** in the event of a positive Covid-19 case.
* PHA guidance under the **Test and Trace and Protect programme** will be applied for all staff or pupils in contact with someone who tests positive for Covid-19.
* **Lunch and break times may be staggered** with more sittings, take away services and / or delivery to classrooms.
* **Staggered arrival and pick up times** may be introduced to limit interactions and avoid gatherings at the school gates.
* Given the risk mitigations in place in schools to limit and contain the spread of COVID-19, **face coverings are not generally recommended for routine use in schools**. Staff and pupils may wish to use them during the routine school day and this is acceptable.
* With the exception of those who are exempt, it is **mandatory for all pupils aged 13 and over to wear a face covering on public transport**. It is also strongly recommended that **all pupils regardless of age, should wear a face covering on all buses, trains or taxis** for the journey to school where it is appropriate for them to do so and they are able to handle them as directed.

**Will Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) be needed in schools?**

PPE will only be required in a very small number of cases, such as working with pupils who require intimate care needs and administering medication.

PPE should not be worn by children.

**Will my child need to wear a face covering when they return to school?**

Given the risk mitigations in place in schools to limit and contain the spread of COVID-19, face coverings are not generally recommended for routine use in schools. Staff and pupils may wish to use them during the routine school day and this is acceptable.

Face coverings must be used on public transport for everyone aged over 13 but are not mandatory on dedicated school transport (buses and taxis).

**Will my child need to wear their school uniform when they return to school?**

The wearing of a school uniform is for the school to decide. Schools are encouraged to consider the views of parents, pupils and the school community and to show flexibility around the issue of school uniforms in these extraordinary times.

**Will social distancing be applied in schools?**

Strict social distancing requirements between all pupils will be relaxed from a specific distance to the best spacing that can be achieved but will remain in place between adults and, as far as it is practicable between adults and pupils.

Schools should continue to implement as much social distancing as is practical and where physical capacity and curriculum delivery permit. On the return to school, the overriding provision will be a full class return with all appropriate and practical protections put in place.

**Will there be more cleaning of schools?**

An enhanced summer clean will have been undertaken before the new school term.

School cleaning will be carried out in accordance with Public Health Agency guidance and routine cleaning will take place daily. This may be an extension of the cleaning regime, with desk surfaces, chairs, doors, light switches, banisters, sinks and toilets being cleaned more regularly.  There should be routine cleaning and disinfection of frequently touched objects and surfaces (e.g. telephones, keyboards, door handles, desks and tables).

**What will happen if my child starts to display symptoms of Covid-19 while in school?**

If your child becomes unwell while in school with a new, continuous cough or a high temperature / fever or anosmia (a loss or a change in your normal sense of smell, which can also affect your sense of taste) in an educational setting they must be sent home and will be advised to follow the guidance for households with possible coronavirus infection.

**Will my child be left unaccompanied if he/she is awaiting pick up?**

A child awaiting collection will be moved, if possible, to a ventilated room. Appropriate adult supervision will be provided as required.

**When can I drop off/pick up my child at school?**

In order to avoid mass gatherings of people at the school gate, schools may have to restructure drop off and pick up times.  Schools will take all things into consideration such as a number of siblings in one family, using multiple entrances if these are available and/or staggering drop off/pick up times.  Parents should not enter the school buildings during these times unless required.

Schools will be able to provide advice as regards the particular circumstances for your child.

**School Transport**

More information on the home to school transport service is available on the [Education Authority website(external link opens in a new window / tab)](https://www.eani.org.uk/).

The Department of Education's guidance draws a clear distinction between the guidance for those using dedicated school transport and those using public bus/train services.

**Dedicated school transport** includes:

* EA yellow buses
* Translink school buses that are only used by pupils and not used by the general public
* privately operated school bus services that are only used by pupils
* taxis

**Public transport services** are scheduled bus and train services that are used by both pupils and the general public.

**Will a full home to school transport service be operating?**

Parents, children and young people are strongly encouraged to consider alternatives to using the home to school transport service for their journey to and from school. They should try to use active travel methods such as walking or cycling. They should only seek to use the home to school transport service where no alternative is available.

Home to school transport will run from 1 September except for those pupils in years 7, 12 and 14 who will have access to a limited home to school transport service from 24 – 28 August based on normal school opening times. Further details will be available on the EA website.

**Will social distancing apply on home to school transport?**

Pupils on dedicated school transport should seek to socially distance if it is possible to do so, however the guidance for social distancing on public transport will not apply on dedicated school transport in the new school year.

Pupils using public bus/train services should continue to follow the social distancing guidelines that apply to all passengers.

**Is it safe to use school transport?**

The Department of Education has been liaising with the Public Health Agency and the Chief Medical Officer to ensure that the restart of home to school transport is in line with their guidance. The guidance on transport outlines a range of mitigating measures to prevent the spread and reduce the risk of contracting or transmitting COVID-19.

Use of the home to school transport service, either or dedicated school transport or on Translink’s public bus services, should only be used when there is no alternative available and all pupils are encouraged to use other methods of transport where possible such as walking and cycling.

**Why is there different guidance for dedicated school transport?**

The Department draws a distinction between dedicated school transport and public transport services because members of the public do not use dedicated school transport. This means that there is a lower level of risk on dedicated school transport.

A number of mitigating measures are also being put in place such as recommending the use of face coverings, promoting good hygiene measures, encouraging parents to use an alternative way of getting to school such as walking or cycling, minimising contact and mixing on vehicles and advising that any children showing symptoms of COVID-19 should not travel to school.

**Does my child have to wear a facing covering on home to school transport?**

It is mandatory for all pupils aged 13 and over to wear a face covering on public transport and it **is strongly recommended that all pupils regardless of age should wear a face covering on any form of home to school transport** where it is appropriate for them to do so.

Face coverings should not be worn by those who may not be able to handle them as directed (for example, young children, or those with special educational needs or disabilities) as it may inadvertently increase the risk of transmission.  They should also not be used by some children and young people with special educational needs who may become distressed.

**Will my child be expected to use a public bus?**

The EA and Translink are also working to run additional, dedicated school transport vehicles where there would be no members of the public on board. This would be done in areas where there is anticipated high demand for public bus services. This will allow pupils who may have previously used some of the higher demand public bus services to use a dedicated bus instead. For more information visit the [Translink website(external link opens in a new window / tab)](https://www.translink.co.uk/schoolservices).

On Translink public services that are not anticipated to be high demand, pupils will still be able to use these services and should continue to follow the social distancing guidelines that apply on public bus services.

**When will we have details of my child’s home to school transport?**

The Education Authority is currently working on route planning for the home to school network and further updates will be provided on the [Education Authority website(external link opens in a new window / tab)](https://www.eani.org.uk/). Unfortunately this is taking place later than usual this summer due to Covid-19.

For many pupils travelling to school, unless their circumstances have changed (i.e. moved school or house) their arrangements may not have changed from the previous year; but if you use a Translink service you should check their [website(external link opens in a new window / tab)](http://www.translink.co.uk/schoolservices) for any changes to their schedule before travelling.

If your child has a special educational need and is travelling for the first time, or to a new school, the Education Authority Transport Team or the Operator delivering the service will confirm arrangements as soon as possible.

**I would rather take my child to school during COVID-19 rather than travel on school transport, can I do this?**

Yes, you do not need to take up the offer of home to school transport. You will not however be entitled to financial assistance for this.  Guidance is that pupils should try to find an alternative method of getting to school such as walking or cycling and should only use home to school transport if there is no alternative.

**Can my child use home to school transport if they are displaying symptoms of COVID-19?**

**Pupils must not attend school if they display any symptoms of the virus and/or have a positive test for COVID-19** and therefore no pupil should be using home to school transport in these circumstances. This also applies if any members of the pupil’s household have symptoms and/or have a positive test for COVID-19 or your household has been advised to isolate.

**Will taxis be used for home to school transport?**

In cases where the Education Authority decides that it is appropriate for a child to get to and from school by a taxi for example due to a pupil’s special education needs, taxis and escorts will be available. Further details in relation to taxi provision will be available on the EA website.

**Wrap-around Childcare**

**My child attends an off-site breakfast/after-schools setting; can the childcare provider do drop off/ pick up?**

Yes.  Your childcare provider should engage with the school to ensure that they are aware of the arrangements for drop off and pick up.  Childcare providers have been provided with separate advice on the measures they should take to keep children, staff and the public safe.

**School Meals**

**Are packed lunches permitted?**

Yes, it is a matter of choice whether pupils have a packed lunch.

**What meals will be provided when will children return to school?**

The start of term will be 24 August 2020 for Primary 7, Year 12 and Year 14 pupils and for vulnerable children across all year groups. However school meals will not be available and parents should ensure their child takes a packed lunch to school.

All other pupils will return to school from the week commencing 31 August 2020 and school meals will be available from **1 September**. It is expected that where possible a hot meal, suitable as the main meal of the day, will be available for free school meals pupils and other pupils who wish to avail of them.

**Where will the school meals be served?**

It is expected that, where possible, meals will be served and consumed in the dining hall. Schools may need to consider staggered break and lunch times, etc. Schools and school caterers will work closely to agree local solutions to ensure the safe delivery of school meals. Schools should encourage pupils to wash their hands before entering the dining hall or eating their meal.

**Will the Nutritional Standards still apply to the school meal?**

Yes - all food provided in schools will be in keeping with the Nutritional Standards for School Lunches and Other Food and Drinks in School.

**Will pupils with special dietary requirements be catered for?**

Schools and school caterers will ensure that pupils with special dietary requirements or allergies are catered for as per the Education Authority’s Guidance for the provision of special diets in schools.

**What happens if my child leaves the school at lunchtime?**

If children and young people go offsite for lunch, they should follow the rules in place for wider society, for example wearing a face covering when entering a shop. Risk assessments will be carried out by the school to consider procedures for when children and young people leave and return to school premises, including hand hygiene.

**Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)**

**Is there a backlog of statutory assessments for SEN?**

Throughout the pandemic, the SEN Statutory Operations service in the Education Authority has remained a critical service and has operated under ‘best endeavours’ to continue to progress and facilitate children moving through the assessment process - particularly focussing on those children waiting longest.

Although some assessment work had to be suspended due to its face-to-face nature, the Education Authority are making best endeavours to progress existing referrals and accept new ones, for example deferred Educational Psychology assessments are to be carried out at the start of the new term.

**Will the classroom assistant be the same?**

Each school will face its own challenges to reopen safely.  Some classroom assistants may not able to return to work immediately and schools will be able to provide information as regards the particular circumstances for your child.

**When will access to external support and therapies be available?**

Online support will continue to be available for some services and therapies such as speech and language.  Face-to-face support and therapies will be delivered in line with Public Health Agency and government guidance when it is safe to do so and resources are available.  Parents should liaise directly with the school in relation to the practical delivery of their child’s Statement of Special Educational Needs.

**What if there is a second wave of the pandemic – will vulnerable children and those with SEN be able to go to school?**

Decisions will be taken based on Public Health Agency advice if the circumstance should arise.

**If my child displays increased levels of anxiety, or refuses to go back to school, will they get any help?**

All children and young people, and particularly those with SEN may need additional support to enable them settle back into school as seamlessly as possible with minimum amount of trauma.  Parents will need to share these concerns with their schools and any others such as changes to mobility, behaviour etc.    Schools will build and support social and emotional recovery using a range of educational tools and skills.

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