FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER

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Dear Parent/Carer

I recognise the past number of months have been challenging for every part of society, not least for you as parents and carers, many of whom have been balancing working from home and supporting your child's learning. I would like to put on record my thanks to you for supporting your child throughout the period of time they have not been in school.

My aim has always been for all pupils to return full-time to school as soon as possible, when it is safe to do so. One of my main concerns is the long-term well-being and educational impact on children and young people as a result of the prolonged absence from school. I am also conscious that many young people are worried about completing their programmes of study and the impact this may have on their futures.

I previously said that if circumstances allowed I would like to see all children back in school as soon as possible. Based on the advice of the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Advisor, the prevailing scientific advice provided by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), and the recent decision by the Executive to approve relaxed social distancing in schools, I have decided that schools will reopen for key groups of pupils from 24 August 2020. This will include those pupils who are going into Primary 7, Year 12, Year 14 and pupils who are vulnerable. All other pupils will then return from the week commencing 31 August 2020. This return will be on a full-time basis of 5 days a week for every child.

Why is it now safe to do this?

I have consistently stated that the re-opening of schools will be led by evidence, this remains the case. The scientific evidence is consistent that with proper risk mitigations, schools are safe to open.

Indeed, a recent paper published in mid-July by SAGE details the risks associated with reopening settings in England in September. Some of the key messages from that paper include;

- There is relatively low immediate risk to children's health from SARS-CoV-2[1], with some evidence indicating that children/adolescents have lower susceptibility to SARS-CoV-2 infection and clinical disease than adults.

- There is some evidence that children play a lesser role in transmission than adults.

- In countries where schools have been open for some time, data suggests that school opening has made little difference to community transmission.

Whilst Covid-19 is still here in Northern Ireland, you will be aware of the gradual relaxation of restrictions in many other areas of society. Governments in England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland have all signalled their intention to re-open schools with normal patterns of attendance for all pupils in the coming weeks, in time for the new school term.

However, this does not mean a return to business as usual. We are still operating in a pandemic and **everyone** will have a role to play in ensuring that hygiene and public health measures are followed to allow a safe return to school.

Do not send your child to school if your child or anyone you live with has any of the following symptoms:

- **a high temperature** – this means you feel hot to touch on your chest or back (you do not need to measure your temperature);

- **a new, continuous cough** – this means coughing a lot for more than an hour, or 3 or more coughing episodes in 24 hours (if you usually have a cough, it may be worse than usual);

- **a loss of or change in sense of smell or taste**.

If your child or anyone in your household has any of the symptoms above you should get a test for Covid-19. Details on how to do this can be found here.

Covid-19 is still in our communities and we need parents, pupils and wider society to stay vigilant to "**Keep It Out"** of our schools.

What is being done to make schools safe?

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.

[1] Covid-19

- **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.

Home to School Transport

I know that the provision of transport is key in enabling children and young people to return to school. I realise that many of you will want to personally transport your children to school. While I would ask that you encourage your child to use other means of travelling to school for example, walking or cycling where it is safe and reasonable to do so, I recognise that for many children the home to school transport network may be the only available option.

Pupils on all buses should always seek to maintain a social distance from others wherever possible, however the guidance for public transport on **social distancing will not apply on dedicated school transport** in the new school year. The department considers this to be reasonable as:

- pupils will usually face forward on a vehicle except in a small number of cases such as some pupils with Special Educational Needs;

- pupils on dedicated school transport do not mix with the general public on those journeys;

- dedicated home to school transport often carries the same group of children and young people on a regular basis, and those children may also be together in school; and

- the predictability, which public transport does not afford, will allow for planning so that protective measures can be put in place.

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 should wear a face covering on any form of home to school transport where it is appropriate for them to do so. Pupils should bring a plastic bag for storing their face covering if they have used one on home to school transport. You are asked to ensure that your child(ren) clean their hands before boarding any home to school transport vehicle.

Where capacity on a vehicle allows for additional space to be put between pupils, that should be done, however it is recognised that this will not always be possible. Where it is not possible, other measures to protect pupils will be implemented.

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 August. Further details will be available on the Education Authority website.

Pupils using **public transport** services that are also used by members of the public will continue to adhere to social distancing guidelines for the general public.

School Meals

The Summer Food Payment scheme will end on 31 August 2020 and it is my intention that school meals will be available in schools from the 1 September 2020. It

is expected that where possible a hot meal will be available for those entitled to free school meals and any other pupils who wish to avail of them.

A packed lunch will be required for those pupils returning to school from the week commencing 24 August 2020.

Summary

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. My Department has produced a leaflet which is enclosed emphasising the key public health message and I would ask for your help in supporting your children with the changes we all have to carry out. Further information on Education Restart can be found here.

Finally, I would like to thank you for the support you have provided to your children over the last number of months. I have no doubt that with your continued support we will ensure a safe return to school for all our children and young people to continue their education.

PETER WEIR MLA
MINISTER OF EDUCATION