

Education Restart - Supplementary Guidance for Special Schools in Northern Ireland – January 2021

From: Department of Education

To: All Special School Principals

Date: 21 January 2021

Revised: 25 January 2021 includes amended references to ‘Covid Link Officers’ to ‘EA Support Officers’, at paras **‘Purpose of the guidance’**; **‘Effective from 7th January 2021: All Special Schools are to remain open’**; **‘Mitigating Measures’**; **‘Staffing/ support staff shortages’**; **‘Staffing concerns in relation to ‘Keyworker’ service at their child’s school’**; **‘Managing Trade Union enquiries’**; **‘Clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) individuals’**; **‘Remote Learning’** and revised arrangement relating to Free School Meal Entitlement at para **‘Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME)’**.

Dear Principal

The Minister continues to recognise the valuable work and engagement that Special School staff provide to their communities and the dedicated support given to children, young people and their families throughout this pandemic. Special Schools play a vital role in the lives of some of our most vulnerable children and families. Many parents during the initial lockdown and extended Halloween break struggled during that time, felt isolated and unable to cope without the routine and structure that Special Schools bring to our most vulnerable children and young people. The children and young people themselves also communicated the negative impact that the lockdown and subsequent school closures had on their mental health and wellbeing, and overall development. This is testament to the lifeline and support that Special Schools provide for these children and young people and their families and which is necessary now more than ever as it is critical to their learning, development and for their personal reassurance during this challenging time.

Purpose of the guidance

The information in this guidance is intended to supplement the DE Coronavirus Guidance for Education Settings (December 2020) previously issued to all schools.

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-school-and-educational-settings-northern-ireland>

As with that guidance, this document has been informed by judgements based on the scientific and public health advice available at the time of writing and should be read and applied in conjunction with the latest public health guidance available. Given the changing scientific and public health environment, DE may be required to update this guidance in line with the latest advice and as such this should be treated as 'agile' guidance in the current context.

It provides guidance on how Special Schools in Northern Ireland can operate in an ongoing COVID environment, with the aim of ensuring broad consistency and equity across local areas, but is sufficiently flexible to allow Special Schools and staff to adopt approaches that best suit their and their pupil needs.

The Public Health Agency (PHA) COVID-19 bulletins provide the most up-to-date data to support staff discussions and risk assessments, and provide a level of context in relation to the epidemiology across schools and can be found at:

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/coronavirus-bulletin>

The EA can provide support in relation to the completion of Risk Assessments through the designated Support Officer.

Key Messages from PHA Data include:

- Schools are not a major source of transmission
- There are a number of Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions (NPIs) available eg: social distancing; PPE; cleaning regimes which are proven very effective when implemented correctly.
- Schools will always reflect the prevalence in the wider community

Effective from 7th January 2021: All Special Schools are to remain open.

The Minister announced that in light of the current public health situation, the Northern Ireland Executive has agreed that all Special Schools are to remain open and operate as per Level 2 of the Contingency Framework (issued 31 December). <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/vulnerable-children-and-young-people-contingency-planning-framework>

The Education Continuity Direction published on 7 January 2021 gives legal effect to the operational arrangements in the education system and, while that remains in place, Special Schools are required to open for in-person provision of education. The Continuity Direction may be accessed using the following link: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/education-continuity-direction-notice-no-2-7-january-2021>

Special Schools must work closely with the Education Authority (EA) prior to making operational decisions which may reduce provision to ensure all possible actions/mitigations have been explored and exhausted. Schools are advised to record decisions and reductions in provision, where needed, should be kept to the shortest period as possible and reviewed weekly.

The EA will provide details directly to Special Schools around indemnity in place in the event that there is an adverse incident in school, where Principals have taken all steps to comply with the Continuity Direction.

Special Schools should also engage with EA Special Schools Support Officers and their Covid Link Officer (CoLO) around some of the ongoing staffing challenges created by Covid-19 related health issues, and any/or other medical or mental health issues present amongst their workforce.

Contact Details for EA Support Officers:

denise.white@eani.org.uk	07867 556037
cathy.castles@eani.org.uk	07769 286197
mary.loughran@eani.org.uk	07917 544118

EA Educational Welfare Officers are also available to provide support.

Please liaise as necessary with relevant Health and Social Care (HSC) staff if you have any queries in the respective areas that already support and may provide sessional input to your school e.g. CCN, AHPs etc.

If you have any queries that require regional direction please contact PHA/HSCB personnel outlined below who will attempt to address your query or signpost to relevant Trust colleagues;

Medical – joanne.mcclean@hscni.net

Nursing – Eilidh.mcgregor@hscni.net

AHP – Geraldine.teague@hscni.net

Social Care – Maurice.leeson@hscni.net

Mitigating Measures

All Public Health measures **must** be adhered to. Any specific queries that need to be considered should be referred to the EA Support Officers or the PHA at: joanne.mcclean@hscni.net. Principals are also reminded of the ongoing engagement with the Education Support Cell established by PHA and the need for adherence to measures to address specific circumstances.

The following measures will be brought forward to ensure ongoing support and build confidence for staff within Special Schools:

- A paper is to be brought to the Executive on vaccinations for teachers (further details provided below).
- A webinar was held (18 January) with all Special School Principals which included representatives of Department, the EA and Public Health Consultants to discuss Covid trends in schools settings, including specific details for Special Schools.
- In School Testing (further details provided below).
- The EA is considering the use of additional schools transport to negate the mixing of bubbles and or schools on school transport.

- The Department is to strengthen messaging around the use of parental transport to school, where possible, and provide information on cleaning regimes for school transport.
- Regular engagement with Special Schools Strategic Leadership Group (further details provided below).
- Updated Safer Working guidance for educational setting is available to schools on the internet.

Staffing/ support staff shortages

The EA will put support in place for Special Schools to check availability of teaching staff via NISTR and also a new database for emergency Classroom Assistant/ Support Staff cover. These can be accessed by contacting your designated EA Support Officer.

Staffing concerns in relation to 'Keyworker' service at their child's school

Under the Temporary Continuity Direction all schools are to provide access to supervised learning to children of keyworkers and those children and young people identified as vulnerable.

If there is an issue in the delivery of this service by your staff member's school, in the first instance they should try to resolve this matter directly with the school. If matters persist then they should refer the details through the Principal to the EA Support Officer.

Managing media enquiries

In the event of media enquiries, in the first instance contact the EA Campaigns & Media Officer john.martin@eani.org.uk (079 7170 3527) who can provide assistance in handling the query.

Please also then notify the DE Press Office via email press.office@education-ni.gov.uk

Managing Trade Union enquiries

In the event of Trade Union enquiries, Principals should contact the EA Support Officer in the first instance.

EA Guidance for schools

Additional guidance was also published for schools by the EA (8 January 2021) covering the period 10 January – February mid-term break



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Schools 8th January 2

School survey

The School Survey will be circulated on a weekly basis, in order to ensure that both EA and DE are aware of emerging issues and to support contingency planning, it is critical that this is completed as requested.

Attendance at school – Children & Young People

All Special Schools are to remain open for vulnerable children and young people. All children who attend Special Schools are regarded as vulnerable within the definition of vulnerable children and young people as set out in the cross-departmental Vulnerable Children and Young People's Plan 2020. Whilst Special Schools are open, some parents may choose not to send their child(ren) to school, indeed attendance levels to date have reduced. <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-cross-departmental-covid-19-vulnerable-children-and-young-peoples-plan>

SIMS code: For Key Worker pupils / vulnerable children attending school – record as normal in the am and pm using Code / and \ (Present Code)

Where parents choose not to send their child to school

SIMS code: For pupils in Special Schools where agreement has been reached between school and parent, code [**“Covid-19 Self-isolating & Learning from Home”** (Approved Activity) may be used.

This should be reviewed every 2 weeks. It is assumed under any “learning at home” scenario that pupils will be learning from home. Where additional support is needed, the EA should be contacted to provide assistance in this regard.

Clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) individuals

A small number of children will be advised by their clinical team not to attend school, e.g. children who are receiving cancer treatment or who recently had an organ transplant. These children will receive advice from their Paediatricians/Medical Consultant who will consider each case individually and some Paediatricians/Medical Consultant may issue relevant CEV letters to parents. If a family receives such a letter, it would be useful for schools if the family could share a copy to be retained for their records. Principals are asked to advise their EA Support Officer in the unlikely event of a child attending school, where they believe the child should be 'shielding'.

The vast majority of these children would routinely be advised not to attend school even outside pandemic period due to the risk of infections other than COVID-19.

SIMS code: For Pupils learning at home – **Code 1 (Approved Activity)** should be used.

It is important that schools update SIMS in a timely, accurate and complete manner. Any queries please contact attendance@education-ni.gov.uk

Emergency response for CEV / Medically Challenged Children & Young People

The PHA have provided assurance that NI Ambulance Service and Critical Care remains a priority and that children and any young person who requires a 'blue light' response, will be attended to as per the usual procedures.

Remote Learning

The Education Continuity Direction published 7 January 2021 gives legal effect to the operational arrangements in the education system. The Continuity Direction may be accessed using the following link:

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/education-continuity-direction-notice-no-2-7-january-2021>

It is acknowledged that it is difficult to support those in school and at home at the same time. Special Schools should not leave children unsupported where possible if pupils are not attending school either on medical advice, or due to parental choice and should liaise closely with parents and carers.

Special Schools are asked to liaise with their EA Support Officer who can assist with general queries in relation to the provision of remote learning. In some specific cases it may be useful to involve the Special Schools Support Officer, who can coordinate a multi-disciplinary team response to ensure those pupils with more complex needs are adequately supported at home.

The EA will consider the use of COVID-19 funding to facilitate remote learning. Further guidance on remote learning can be found at:

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/circular-20205-guidance-schools-supporting-remote-learning>

EA Pupil Support Services

EA Pupil Support Services remain fully operational at this time, providing a blended approach of remote and in-person support, for the most urgent cases of assessment or support, if required. The contacts details for the Services can be found

<https://www.eani.org.uk/services/pupil-support-services>

Contact with individuals who are unwell

If anyone, staff or pupil, are displaying any COVID-19 symptoms they must not attend school.

The DE Coronavirus Guidance for Education Settings (December 2020) contains information on what to do if a member of staff or pupil is displaying COVID-19 symptoms or has contact with individuals who are unwell. <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-school-and-educational-settings-northern-ireland>

Vaccination for education staff

The Minister is to bring a paper to the Executive seeking prioritisation of vaccinations for **all** education staff who are in face to face engagement with children and young people, suggesting that first priority is to given to staff within Special Schools given the physical contact required there, followed by any other educational staff - such as Middletown Centre for Autism - engaging with children (such as key workers' children and vulnerable children).

In School Testing

The Department will continue to engage with the EA and PHA, around updates on the timescales for the proposed roll-out of onsite testing for pupils and staff in Special Schools. This matter will remain an agenda item with the Special Schools Strategic Leadership Group (SSSLG) to ensure that sufficient resources and supports are in place.

PPE

The Department issued updated PHA guidance (4 January 2021) to educational settings on safe working during the coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/guidance-support-safe-working-educational-setting-northern-ireland-4-january-2021>

The EA will continue to work with schools in terms of procuring suitable and robust PPE for staff and any issues around the supply order should be raised with the EA for resolution.

Information is available on the EA website on the correct procedures for donning and doffing of PPE.

Special Schools are asked to continue to work closely with the EA, PHA and Health and Social Care Trusts with regards to the particular arrangements required for the small number of pupils who require Aerosol Generating Procedures (AGP).

As part of the child's care including to meet the requirements outlined in the child's statement of special education need, it may be necessary for HSC staff to visit

schools. They will be wearing appropriate PPE in line with HSC Trust policy and will work within the DE and school's COVID management arrangements.

School transport

The EA will continue to provide home to school transport provision for children and young people attending Special Schools as normal. Schools and parents should continue to liaise with the EA directly. The DE Coronavirus Guidance for Education Settings (December 2020) provides detailed information on the use of the home to school transport and strongly encourages all parents, children and young people to consider alternatives, although it is acknowledged that active travel may not be possible for some Special School pupils.

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-school-and-educational-settings-northern-ireland>

The DE Coronavirus Guidance for Education Settings (December 2020) also details a range of mitigating measures put in place to support all pupils in order that they can safely access home to school transport. Mitigating measures on EA vehicles include installation of hand sanitisers, issue and use of physical protection equipment (PPE) by staff; provision of PPE for situations where there is an increased risk of transfer of bodily fluid and close contact is required; issue of operational guidance and training for staff and a programme of installation of driver screens and regular cleaning of vehicle and common touch points. The buses will also be well ventilated.

It is also highly likely that the same pupils will use the same bus service each day, often using the same seat. This will help to minimise the number of pupils that each pupil will be in contact with.

In individual cases where it is considered necessary, the EA will carry out a risk assessment in respect of a pupil's home to school transport and take forward action as necessary. The EA will also provide more detailed operational guidance to staff, parents/carers, pupils, and operators that is consistent with the guidance from other government departments and bodies such as the Department for Infrastructure and the PHA.

Face coverings on home to school transport

Since October, legislation has required all those of post primary school age to wear a face covering on public transport, subject to exemptions. Individual risk assessments may be required for Special School pupils for whom the use of face coverings would not be feasible.

The current policy in relation to Special School Transport is that it will remain operational. There is no current evidence that transmission of Covid-19 is a greater risk within the school bus environment. Mitigating measures used on EA vehicles are listed above.

The Department, the EA and Translink will continue to promote the use of face coverings on school transport across a range of channels. It is appreciated that this may be difficult for many children attending Special Schools but schools are asked to reinforce the message to pupils, wherever possible.

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/face-coverings-be-mandatory-all-school-transport-post-primary-children>

Face coverings in schools for hearing impaired Children and Young People

The EA's Sensory Service has provided information and advice on the impact of wearing face coverings in schools for hearing impaired children and young people [Annex A].

Social distancing

It is appreciated that this may be difficult for staff due to the regular physical contact required with pupils attending Special Schools and the assistance required at times from other adults. Special Schools should consider how best to implement these measures taking into consideration the needs of the pupils and the support provided to them.

Principals are asked to reinforce the message that social distancing should remain in place between adults and as far as possible between adults and pupils as is practical where physical capacity, curriculum delivery and pupil care permit. Staff can wear face

coverings where they cannot safely distance, however they are not recommended for routine use in classrooms generally.

In the event of a staff member testing positive for Covid-19, a face covering would not exempt other staff from being a close contact if social distancing was breached and may result in the whole 'protective bubble' being required to self-isolate for 10 days. The PHA Education Cell and the EA should be contacted for a risk assessment in this event.

For children and young people in Special Schools with the most complex additional support needs, schools should involve lead professionals and parents to decide how best to continue supporting them.

Protective bubbles

In circumstances in which the guidance on social distancing cannot reasonably be applied, an additional risk mitigation approach should be adopted. This involves organising children and young people into groups ('protective bubbles') with consistent membership, which are appropriate to the size of the setting.

When adopting this approach, every effort should be made to decrease interactions between groups and, if workable, ensure social distancing is considered within such groups and adhered to between such groups at all times.

The protective bubble arrangements will be used to segment pupils into a consistent group or groups as far as is practicable. The approach will vary depending on circumstances, however, in Special Schools, it is envisaged that in most cases a class will act as a single consistent bubble with minimal prolonged interaction with other classes.

In the event of staff shortages and to ensure that classes remain open, it may be necessary, to introduce a sub teacher/ classroom assistant to support the protective bubble.

The use of consistent groups or bubbles is not an “all-or-nothing” approach and will bring public health benefits even if logistics mean that this measure can be implemented only partially (for example, with groups maintained for the majority of the day but some limited mixing into wider groups for transport as an example).

Provision of one to one care and support is integral to the delivery of quality education and support to some of our most vulnerable pupils. Whilst adult to adult social distancing should be maintained at all times, where staff consistently remain with a pupil or a class they should likewise be viewed as part of the protective bubble and social distancing between those adults and children may be relaxed but other public health measures adhered to e.g. hand washing, good respiratory hygiene etc..

If an individual (staff or pupil) within a protective bubble tests positive for COVID-19, the PHA Education Cell and the EA should be contacted for a risk assessment to be undertaken. This risk assessment may result in the whole protective bubble being required to self-isolate for 10 days.

Cleaning

The DE Coronavirus Guidance for Education Settings (December 2020) provides detailed information on cleaning and hygiene. Continued communications between schools and parents may help to emphasise these issues and to build up a level of understanding and routine application by parents with regard to cleaning of equipment routinely used by their children and brought into school, e.g. wheelchairs. Special Schools should not hesitate to contact EA for additional support in relation to cleaning if required.

Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME)

School meals, for paying pupils and pupils entitled to free school meals, will continue to be provided as normal for those children in attendance at Special Schools.

Direct payments in lieu of free school meals will issue to the families of all children entitled to free school meals in Special Schools, but who are not attending for the period of 25 January to 12 February. Families do not need to apply for the

payment. Payments will be made as soon as possible during week commencing 1 February 2021.

Additional support for families

The Department for Communities (DfC) has allocated additional funding to Councils to support community and volunteer organisations providing food and other essential items. Anyone in need, should contact the COVID 19 Community Helpline on Freephone 0808 802 0020, text ACTION to 81025, or email covid19@adviceni.net who will put the individual into contact with suitable local support services.

Engagement with Special Schools Strategic Leadership Group (SSSLG)

The Department has put in place regular meetings with the SSSLG to ensure that staff concerns relating to the Contingency Framework for Vulnerable Children and Young People and COVID-19 can be dealt with in a timely manner. Should you or any staff wish to raise any concerns please contact the Chair of the SSSLG, Barbara Spence. The Department, the EA and the PHA will work with the SSSLG to develop additional measures, where possible, to further mitigate the risk of the transmission of COVID-19 within Special Schools.

New RISE NI Parent website launched

The Regional Integrated Support for Education team in Northern Ireland (RISE NI) works in partnership with mainstream schools to support children's learning across all areas of the curriculum. This includes the social and academic skills required to give the children the best chance to succeed in the future. The trans-disciplinary team which includes occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, physiotherapists, behaviour specialists, clinical psychologists and therapy assistants, work with children and education staff in mainstream nursery and primary schools.

On 11th January 2021 a regional website specifically for parents and carers of children in mainstream nursery and primary school (up to P4) was launched with the aim to provide support and information digitally which may be a useful reference point for parents as well as educational staff. The RISE NI information leaflets, suggested

activities/resources and parent training videos aim to promote development of speech and language, fine and gross motor skills, and social and emotional development.

RISE NI teams from across all 5 of Northern Ireland's Health and Social Care Trusts contributed to the website which was designed and built 'in-house' by a Belfast Trust occupational therapist and speech and language therapist.

More information can be found at <https://view.pagetiger.com/RISENI/parents>

A RISE NI Education Staff website is also due to be launched in the near future.

EA Sensory Service



Face Coverings in Schools

This document is intended to provide information and advice on the impact of wearing face coverings in schools for hearing impaired children and young people.

Whilst we are concerned about the communication challenges that face coverings present for our children and young people who are hearing impaired; we also respect that people may choose or be advised to wear them for their own protection, or for the protection of others.

This advice is intended to go some way towards mitigating against the challenges experienced by hearing impaired children and young people in schools when face coverings are worn by staff and peers.

Face coverings are a challenge for children and young people with hearing loss.

They:

- Obstruct access to lip-reading and gesture
- Distort speech
- Speech can be unintelligible
- Creates feeling of isolation

Hearing impaired children and young people (CYP) are telling us that they are experiencing high levels of stress as a result of teachers wearing face coverings in school. Some hearing impaired CYP are also telling us that they would prefer not to attend school if face coverings are worn due to the challenges in communication and feelings of isolation.

Clear face coverings and face visors/shields

Hearing impaired children are not a homogenous group. Their hearing loss may range from mild to profound. Some may communicate orally whilst other may use sign language. Many use hearing technology to support access to learning. Clear face coverings should be explored as an alternative to fabric face coverings. However, whilst these may work well for some children, it should be emphasised that this will **not** be effective for all.

- All face coverings and visors degrade the speech quality of the speaker by muffling high frequency speech sounds.

- Cloth face coverings muffle speech and provide no visual support to communication.
- It can be difficult to lip read if the clear face covering has fogged up or if there is light reflection.
- There is no particular strategy that addresses the challenges around face coverings in a way that works for all hearing impaired children.

Where face coverings are being worn or are required, clear face coverings are clearly preferable to fabric or opaque masks. However, clear face coverings do not mitigate the need to take other reasonable adjustments to ensure hearing impaired children are not disadvantaged.

Possible reasonable adjustments and mitigating steps that can be taken might include:

- An increased focus on the listening environment, minimising all unnecessary background noise. Steps should be taken so that hearing impaired children are taught in classrooms with the best possible listening conditions.
- Seat pupils who are hearing impaired at the front of the room, ideally as close to you as socially distancing permits.
- Face pupils who are hearing impaired when speaking to them.
- Reduce the background noise as much as possible.
- Make sure you have the attention of the pupils who are hearing impaired before beginning to speak.
- Talk slowly, but do not shout, over-emphasise or exaggerate your words.
- Ensure only one person speaks at a time.
- Provide vocabulary lists/key points of lesson content **in advance**. This will allow the hearing impaired pupil to be familiar with the language used in the lesson and aids listening and understanding.
- Allow time for processing information.
- Check comprehension with open questions.
- Repeat/rephrase remarks if not understood.

- Ensure any hearing devices are being worn and are working.
- Ensure the effective use of radio aids if a child uses this technology. Radio aids transmit the teacher's voice directly to the child's hearing aid or cochlear implant. Research suggests that the use of a lapel microphone can be effective in improving verbal communication when the speaker is wearing a face covering.
- Steps should be taken to ensure radio aids are cleaned when passed between the child and teacher. Cleaning should be done with care to avoid potential damage to the device. Please click [here](#) for advice on cleaning devices.
- If feasible, consider live captioning, so that what you say is displayed on the board/screen. Teachers of the Deaf can provide advice on this.

Given the fact there is no perfect solution, education settings should carry out individual assessments to consider the impact on a hearing impaired child of any decision to wear face coverings in the classroom. This should include an assessment of the difficulties that a face covering introduces for a child's understanding of speech and/or ability to communicate.

Qualified Teachers of the Deaf have a key role to play in advising on reasonable adjustments and mitigating steps. They should be involved in any plans when assessing the need for mitigating steps for individual hearing impaired CYP.

The views of hearing impaired children and their families should be sought throughout in any individual assessments.