



UPDATE NEU SCHOOL REPS Friday 20 March 2020

Coronavirus: Impact on Schools

We are mindful of the concerns and worries that members have at this time in school across Northern Ireland.

We are working hard to advise members, and to respond to a huge number of calls in a quickly changing environment.

We hope this update is helpful – there will be further updates as the situation changes.

You will be aware of the Education Minister's letter to schools:

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/letter-minister-education-education-sector>

The letter goes part way to providing some clarity for principals and teachers. However, the decision that most schools will remain open for children with parents who are deemed key workers or vulnerable children, has caused much confusion.

The request asking schools to open to provide care for children of key workers and vulnerable children is not a statutory requirement – schools are being asked to help as part of a response to the unique situation we find ourselves in.

The school-based provision is only for Key Workers who have no other option available to them – he clearly stated this on air. His expectation is that the majority of key workers will try to make other arrangements for their children to remain at home.

This is a very different type of provision than schools usually provide; for these pupils, it will be about care, not education.

This is about keeping children safe and allowing key workers (such as NHS staff, and others) to go to work and care for the sick, or to keep food supply chains moving.

With examination imperatives lifted, the expectations around educational provision should be reasonable- teachers should do what they can under these circumstances.

NEU believe that schools that provide this care should be free to determine what the provision looks like and what they deem to be best for the pupils they are supporting.

Critically, it is schools that are responsible for offering places to those pupils who may be eligible to attend this provision. This will require considerations at school level to

identify who is eligible and, in some cases, prioritise offers to families according to capacity, need and health advice from PHE (NI).

We are hopeful that an agreed 'pro forma' will be available soon.

The Minister's clarification around the payment of education workers is good news and we have worked very hard with our sister unions to secure this.

The confirmation that there will be no public examinations in this school year will remove the uncertainty and concern being felt by many teachers' principals', parents and students. There remains work to be done to ensure students get the grades they deserve and that none are disadvantaged.

NEU will work to ensure that teachers are secured from any potential negative impact should grades be disputed. We also anticipate that an appeal or complaints procedure will emerge to cover any challenges to grading.

The communication of the decision to close schools has caused some confusion. Having taken the decision to close schools, then decide to keep school open to provide day care provision for the children of a long list of key workers has added to that confusion.

The current list of 'key workers' are:

- **Health and Social Care.** This includes doctors, nurses, midwives, paramedics, social workers, home carers and staff required to maintain our health and social care sector.
- **Education and childcare.** This includes nursery and teaching staff, social workers and those specialist education professionals who will remain active during the Covid19 response.
- **Public Safety and national security.** This includes civilians and officers in the police (including key contractors), Fire and Rescue Service, Prison Service and other national security roles.
- **Transport.** This will include those keeping air, water, road and rail transport modes operating during the Covid-19 response.
- **Utilities and Communication.** This includes staff needed for oil, gas, electricity and water (including sewage) and primary industry supplies to continue during the Covid19 response, as well as key staff in telecommunications, post and delivery, services and waste disposal.
- **Food and other necessary goods.** This includes those involved in food production, processing, distribution and sale, as well as those essential to the provision of other key goods (e.g. hygiene, medical etc).
- **Other workers essential to delivering key public services**
- **Key national and local government** including those administrative occupations essential to the effective delivery of the Covid-19 response.

The very broad definition of key worker is at odds with the Ministers stated objective of keeping numbers to a minimum, we estimate that this will may rise to 20% of pupils.

The NEU position is:

"This is a long list and could result in some schools having the majority of pupils attending. This will not achieve the goal of slowing the spread of the virus. So, it is vitally important that parents follow Government advice to keep their children at home, wherever possible.

Schools can only accommodate a limited number of children and the fewer children making the journey to school, and the fewer children in educational settings, the lower the risk that the virus can spread."

NEU do have concerns that asking teachers to provide 'day care', a task they are not trained for, is at variance to the scientific and medical advice on social distancing.

NEU members are advised to continue to observe the guidance on minimum distances and at all times follow PHA (NI) guidance.

Teachers cannot carry on supporting online and distance learning for their pupils whilst simultaneously providing day care for other essential workers' children *and* managing their own family and caring responsibilities. Principals are faced with a logistical unknown in respect to how they are to marshal their staff on Monday morning.

All these issues are informing the union's ongoing engagement with the Department of Education and the Employers.

NEU have been advising members for a number of days now that those in the at-risk group or those with someone in their immediate family circle who is in the at-risk group along with those displaying symptoms and pregnant members should not be attending school.

This advice remains the same and is not superseded by the Minister's letter.

Our advice remains the same in regard to risk assessments concerning the circumstances in which a principal or Board of Governors may be compelled to close a school.

It's important to reiterate that school leaders will still need to make individual decisions about whether it is safe to open their school.

It remains the case that if a school does not have enough staff to care for pupils safely (even based on the new 'reduced provision' approach') then, subject to a risk assessment, and consultation, a full or partial closure may be necessary.

To be clear: All schools should conduct risk assessments in line with guidance:

<https://www.eani.org.uk/school-management/health-safety>

Schools will need to keep all of these matters under daily review.

NEU will continue to engage positively with the Department of Education and the employing authorities in the interests of members and that of broader society.

It is important our members are protected in so far as is possible and we continue to do what we can to ensure this. What we will not do is walk away from this engagement and leave our members exposed.

Clarification today:

Since the publication of the Minister's letter, further clarification has emerged.

The Minister said that it is expected that all schools should only open on Monday to start planning to cater only for those children of key workers (up to Year10). This will obviously have a greater impact at Primary School level. The Minister feels that this would 'spread out' the number of pupils and allow for them to be 'socially isolated' as far as possible.

He indicated that this would be for a minority of students and that only key workers would be catered for.

Teachers are included in the 'key workers' category and if alternative arrangements cannot be made for the child at home then the child can attend either their own school, or the school of the teacher.

Also, key workers should 'behave responsibly' and only expect their children to go to school if they cannot find any alternative arrangements. For example, if they have a family member at home that can look after the child then the child should not go to school. Those key workers who can make arrangements to keep the child at home should do so.

Only in situations where keeping the child at home means that the key worker cannot then attend work should result in the child going to school.

The Minister also said that the expectation is that no more than 10/15% of the school population would fall into this category.

The Minister's view is that the key issue is that we need some level of cover for the children of key workers who can't be looked after at home. This is a 'work in progress' and further clarification will be issued later today.

The Minister also said that in attempting to cater for key worker's needs the following should apply:

- If the child is vulnerable stay away from school
- If other arrangements can be made at home – stay away from school
- If any member of the family has been told to 'socially isolate' – stay away from school
- If the child is not the child of a recognised key worker – stay away from school.

What is in place in schools for Monday 23 March will need to be adapted and we will need to ensure that clear guidance is provided to schools.

NEU's view is that the highest priority will be for families where both parents are keyworkers or where a sole parent is a key worker, and there should be a degree of flexibility around this to help schools manage individual circumstances.

For now, teachers should report to school as normal on Monday - unless otherwise directed - with the exception of teachers with underlying health issues who should seek advice from an appropriate medical practitioner and follow their advice.

Our understanding remains that this includes those who are suffering from:

- chronic (long-term) respiratory diseases, heart disease, kidney disease; liver disease
- chronic neurological conditions
- diabetes
- a weakened immune system
- eligibility for a flu vaccine

Pregnant women have been advised as of the evening of March 16th by the Prime Minister not to attend school and to self-isolate. NEU members who are themselves pregnant should follow this advice.

For teachers with children, it is not advisable for grandparents to act as child-care providers during this crisis. If you cannot secure suitable child-care arrangements, NEU advises that you stay at home.

Teachers who are prevented from attending their normal place of work due to COVID-19 will receive their normal salary per the current Guidance:

<https://www.eani.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-03/GUIDANCE%20ON%20ABSENCE%20RELATING%20TO%20CORONAVIRUS%20-%20DELAY%20PHASE%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

NEU will continue to communicate to members any further clarifications as the situation evolves over the coming days and weeks.

Further updates will be made available on our NEU website and Facebook page:

<https://neu.org.uk/neu-northern-ireland>

<https://neu.org.uk/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NEUNorthernIreland/?ref=bookmarks>

I hope this is helpful.

Best wishes and stay safe.

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