

Appendix 1

Framework Plan for phased return of primary school education

1. Introduction – Phase 3

Following intensive engagement and input from primary stakeholders this framework has now been developed in order to achieve a phased return to in-school provision for children in junior classes in primary schools (Junior Infants - Second Class). This builds on the earlier phases which saw a return for children in special schools and special classes. Supporting these children remains a high priority for all partners.

The Framework is an interim arrangement as the Department of Education (DE) and the education partners' work together to ensure that special schools, junior classes in primary schools and special classes in primary schools can open fully in line with public health advice from **Monday, 1st March 2021**.

The framework sets out three broad areas intended to support planning and clarify certain issues that have arisen since schools closed in late December.

Those areas are:

- A. Public health supports, messaging and risk mitigation measures in the classroom and in schools.
- B. A model for special schools, junior classes in primary schools (junior infants, senior infants, first class and second class) and special classes in mainstream primary schools including flexible provisions for staff.
- C. The current sequencing and timeframe for March 2021.

Section A

Public health supports, messaging and risk mitigation measures in the classroom and in schools.

The following actions must be implemented to support the phased return to primary and the full reopening of special schools.

Risk Mitigation Measures

1. COVID-19 Response Plans:

The **COVID-19 Response Plan** for the safe and sustainable operation of Primary and Special Schools have been re-examined by DE to ensure that they remain fully in compliance with the Government's Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19 and the 'Work Safely Protocol' which has been developed by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Department of Health with guidance documents provided by the Health and Safety Authority (HSA).

The 'Work Safely Protocol' is a revised version of the 'Return to Work Safely Protocol' containing the same elements and features of the original guidance but is updated to reflect the latest advice issued by Government and National Health Emergency Team (NPHET) to reduce the risk of the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/dd7fb-induction-training-for-reopening-schools/>

The list of required new additions/revisions are highlighted in the summary document '*Summary of additions to COVID-19 Response Plan required by Work Safely Protocol*' in section order as they appear in the school COVID-19 response plans. This list will make those changes easily identifiable, and overall they do not introduce significant changes to the current school COVID-19 response plans.

2. On 3 February 2021 a specific guidance note (Appendix 2) issued to special schools (and schools with special classes) in advance of opening, providing information on the infection prevention and control measures of particular relevance to those settings in line with the HPSC guidance. These measures are also applicable in mainstream class settings.

Public Health position

3. Public Health has confirmed in discussion with DE and stakeholder representatives that while the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) is keeping risk mitigation measures in general under review in the context of emerging new variants that the infection prevention control (IPC) measures in place for schools since September are still considered highly effective for risk mitigation against transmission of COVID-19. The HPSC have not advised any change in the infection prevention and control measures in the context of the new variants. However, they emphasise the importance of rigorous adherence by members of the school community to existing measures.

4. It has been further affirmed by Government that this phased approach to the reopening of schools is in line with the current public health position.

5. Weekly reports provided by the HSE on the results of mass testing of close contacts in schools consistently show low detection rates in adults in schools for COVID-19. These reports will continue to be produced and published on the HPSC website generally every Wednesday in line with the phased reopening of schools.

6. Clear public health messaging will continue including the circulation and broadcasting via social media and other means of short videos focussed on the need to protect schools by staying at home if anyone has symptoms of COVID-19 or is a close contact of a confirmed case.

Information for parents

7. Short videos for parents from public health doctors will be circulated to reaffirm the importance of keeping COVID-19 out of education facilities by keeping symptomatic children at home. Parents should err on the side of caution in this respect and follow the school's sickness policy.

8. Parents of children attending during this phase from March 1 will be asked by the school to complete the declaration form which can be found [here](#).

9. Parent communications from the school should emphasise that there should be **no congregation outside schools** during this phase or at any stage, and that staff engagement should be requested through the school and will be provided by telephone or online.

School Planning and compliance

10. Details of the changes required to update school COVID-19 response plans in advance of the proposed phased reopening are highlighted in the '*Summary of additions to COVID-19 Response Plan required by Work Safely Protocol*'. These take into account updated protocols agreed with the Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF). The need for full compliance with the updated plans is emphasised.

11. Funding is in place to support implementation of all infection prevention and control (IPC) measures required by HPSC including the provision of appropriate PPE for SNAs and Teaching staff in special schools and special classes. Any school who needs additional funding for PPE can get in touch with the Department at the following email address: covid19_alert@education.gov.ie

It is recommended that medical grade masks of the standard EN14683 are provided for SNAs and Special Education teachers. Schools may access the current PPE framework where there are supplies of masks at this grade.

12. It is agreed that where the Lead Worker Representative or the deputy/assistant Lead Worker Representative are not returning to school in this phase they should make themselves available if required to deal with any concerns arising re compliance with the guidance for the phased reopening.

13. Schools are being issued with an information note setting out time-bound temporary flexibilities in staffing arrangements in advance of the phased re-opening of primary schools and the full reopening of special schools.

Vaccinations

14. The Department of Education has engaged with the Department of Health on the vaccination schedule who have confirmed that those essential to Education are estimated at this time to be in the first one third of the population captured by the Vaccine Allocation Strategy. The Department has further engaged with the Department of Health requesting that consideration is given to school community as the vaccination programme is rolled out in order to accommodate front line school staff (i.e. those working with SEN students) within the vaccination programme at the earliest possible opportunity.

School Public Health Risk Assessments, testing and tracing

15. The Department has confirmed with Public Health that:

- the enhanced/ augmented Public Health schools teams will be available to fully support schools that are opening in this interim phase,
- full contact tracing and bulk fast-track testing within the school setting will resume immediately for schools as they reopen,
- the numbers to contact public health teams or alert the HSE if a principal is notified of a positive case connected with the school are available to principals to respond. This helpline is not for other Covid-19 queries.

HSE has also confirmed that close contact testing has resumed in the community. Close contacts will now be tested at day 0 (or as soon as possible after identification) and again at day 10. If the second test results in no detection of the virus, then staff or students can return to school.

16. Detailed data in relation to transmission of COVID-19 within school settings will continue to be published and made available to DE and stakeholders during this phase. Reports also contain the numbers and % of confirmed cases by age group and week in the overall population.

17. In all instances where COVID-19 is positively confirmed in a school age child in community testing (referred by G.P) or as part of close contact testing in the community, Public Health are immediately notified and a Public Health Risk Assessment is initiated with the school by local HSE public health Schools Teams. Where COVID-19 is detected in an adult in the community, either through symptomatic or close contact testing and when initial contact tracing confirms that they work in a school setting, Public Health are immediately notified and the Public Health Risk Assessment is initiated with the school by HSE School Teams in a similar way. A principal may also notify the HSE Schools Teams directly if s/he is notified by a teacher or other staff member, however this is not necessary as the process described above will take place in any event.

18. The current position of the HSE is that serial antigen or PCR testing is not recommended as a public health measure to keep schools safe. The HSE has examined the use of rapid antigen testing in different settings and the logistical requirements to implement such testing. The World Health Organisation does not currently recommend the use of antigen testing in schools. The HSE will continue to use the more accurate PCR tests for testing all index cases and close contacts within the school community and will prioritise the mass swift queue PCR testing which has proven highly effective to date. This position will be kept under review. Currently serial testing is recommended only in settings where is evidence of significant COVID-19 transmission taking place and in healthcare settings where all results are backed up by the more accurate PCR tests.

PPE

19. Revised HPSC guidelines for SNAs published on 7 January 2021 recommended surgical grade masks for all SNAs 'Guidance for Schools Regarding Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) Supporting Children and Young People with Additional Care Needs in the Context of COVID-19'. **The Department is confirming this level of PPE should be provided for all teachers in special schools and special classes also.** As set out above, medical grade masks in EN16483 category should be provided to this staff cohort.

20. Certain staff working with children who require Aerosol Generating Procedures will be provided with PPE in line with HSE advice as set out [here](#) at this link:

21. The Department confirms that funding for all required PPE is being provided for the coming school term. Any school who needs additional funding for PPE can get in touch with the Department. In addition any issues relating to supply should be raised immediately with DE at the following covid19_alert@education.gov.ie

22. Masks and visors should be donned and doffed and disposed of as demonstrated in videos available [here](#)

Temporary time-bound staffing arrangements

23. DE has set out the temporary flexibilities that may be utilised by schools to provide for the provision of remote learning to pupils at home by staff working remotely from their home. This in no way constitutes a precedent for high risk or other staff being facilitated for remote working in subsequent phases.

24. All flexible arrangements must be approved by Board of Management (BOM).

Childcare

25. Childcare facilities remain open to provide childcare for children of essential workers. The Department of Children has provided FAQs and information on subsidies that may be available for education sector staff is available on www.ncs.gov.ie. Greater flexibility in the use of existing parental leave days has also been put in place during this phase.

Classroom ventilation

26. Updated guidance on ventilation in schools has been provided by DE. Schools are reminded that this should be applied in all phases and when schools reopen in full. Guidance is available [here](#).

Other supports to schools by DE

Inspectorate

27. The COVID-19 helpline has a dedicated option to contact the Department's Inspectorate. This line is open 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday during this phased return to school. This team has access to Inspectors from the special education area who will be available to engage with schools on any aspect of the education provision where their advice and support is sought. The Inspectorate are available to assist schools in working through the education guidance materials and will provide advice on how best to use them in the return to in-school teaching and learning.

NEPS

28. Now that schools are moving to a broader reopening phase, NEPS will commence a return to an in-school casework service, in line with the blended model of service delivery that was in place prior to the current school closures. NEPS return to an in-school casework service will take place in the context of adherence to public health advice, and with school and parental agreement. This has commenced from February 22nd. Psychologists will be asked to pay particular attention to casework that may be needed in order to ensure special education placements for children and young people for next year.

The NEPS Wellbeing resources to support the wellbeing of school communities as schools reopen are available on gov.ie [here](#).

NCSE

29. The dedicated phone line which the NCSE currently operates for schools is continuing and calls from special schools or schools with special classes will be prioritised for engagement with an NCSE advisor on any aspect of support during this period. SENOs will also be available to support parents where children are experiencing any challenges in returning to school.

Section B

A model for special schools, junior classes in primary schools (junior infants, senior infants, first class and second class) and special classes in mainstream primary schools including flexible provisions for staff.

This phase of re-opening from March 1 will provide for a full return to on-site provision for children with special educational needs in special schools, special classes and junior classes in mainstream primary schools

This section sets out the agreed model which is underpinned by the following:

- On-site provision for children in special schools, special classes and junior classes in mainstream primary schools;
- Managed flexibility for staffing arrangements

Special schools

1. When special schools fully reopen from March 1, all staff, including all teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) who work in special schools should return to work, other than in circumstances provided for in updated staffing circular, or where staff are on approved leave.
2. In circumstances where staff members cannot attend due to illness, substitution arrangements will apply. Subs may be needed for exempted staff too including from supply panels.
3. Schools have been given some flexibility to facilitate remote working for certain staff members as set out in the updated information note on temporary staffing arrangements. Staff members working from home must support children remotely.
4. Those on flexible arrangements or on approved leave can be substituted.

Special classes and Junior classes in primary schools.

1. All junior classes and all special classes, including early intervention special classes for children with autism or hearing impairment, in primary schools will attend school from Monday 1st March 2021. In the meantime school staff and BOMs will familiarise themselves with the guidance and liaise with parents.
2. From the 1st March those staff members teaching and supporting junior mainstream and special classes will return to school. **In instances where teachers are teaching mixed classes that include some pupils from senior classes, those children should also return to school.** With the exception of those on flexible arrangements and on approved leave as provided for in the Information note on temporary staffing arrangements, all SETs and any other teachers who do not teach mainstream classes should also return to schools from 1st March. This also applies to all SNAs. Some SETs and SNAs may also be required to continue to support pupils in senior classes remotely.
3. Staff on approved leave and where necessary on flexible arrangements can be substituted. Where schools with special classes have a short term need for SNAs and the school has SNAs elsewhere in the mainstream setting, they should assign one of their other SNAs temporarily to the special class in the first instance.
4. Similarly, schools may temporarily redeploy another member of the teaching staff to the special class to maintain the operation of the special class if the special class teacher is on leave.

5. The substitution arrangement will then apply to the reassigned SNA/mainstream class teacher.

Other relevant arrangements:

1. School transport services will be fully operational with the continued additional hygiene and other measures that were introduced on school transport services at the start of the school year. Bus Eireann local offices continue to engage with local HSE schools teams to ensure that any concerns on school transport are addressed.
2. Enhanced cleaning regimes should resume in schools during this phase.
3. School inspectors working with enhanced HSE school teams will be available to assist and advise principal teachers during this interim phase.

Enhanced teams will be in place to ensure full support for schools as they open.

4. If an issue arises a school may only temporarily cease on site provision with the permission of Department of Education and on the advice of Public Health.

Section C

The sequencing and timeframe for March 2021.

Special schools will fully reopen from Monday March 1st 2021

Junior Classes (junior infants, senior infants, first class and second class) and Special Classes in primary schools will attend school from Monday March 1st 2021

Planning will continue about the further reopening of the remainder of primary school class groups during March with reference to public health. A target of mid-March for the return to school of these class groups will be worked towards.