



An Roinn Oideachais
Department of Education

Updated Guidance on Continuity of Schooling: Supporting pupils at risk of educational disadvantage For primary schools

January 2021

Introduction

This guidance from the Department of Education (DE) advises on how schools and teachers can support continuity in the learning of pupils at risk of educational disadvantage during the school closures associated with Covid-19¹.

Pupils in a range of education settings may be at risk of educational disadvantage. Contexts that can give rise to this risk include socio-economic disadvantage, being a Traveller or a member of the Roma and migrant communities, or accommodation arrangements, including homelessness or residing in a direct provision setting. This guidance takes account of the fact that schools and other education settings have various resources and supports available to them to assist them in meeting the needs of pupils at risk of educational disadvantage. These range from care teams and in-school management teams to the services of the Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) and other agencies. Further, schools in the DEIS programme have additional resources to assist them in supporting such learners.

The guidance builds on the key messages in a range of guidance materials which were issued to schools and centres for education as they were published (Appendix 1) and are available at gov.ie. Specific guidance has been published by the Department to support schools in the context of remote teaching and learning in a Covid-19 context.

- *Guidance on Remote Learning in a COVID-19 Context: September – December 2020*; <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a0bff-reopening-our-primary-and-special-schools/#additional-guidelines-and-procedures> (Department of Education, October 2020)

This has been complemented by the Department of Education Circular Letter 0074/2020 in relation to the establishment of Digital Communication, Teaching and Learning Platforms: https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0074_2020.pdf

Where a full school closure is required on foot of public health advice, all teachers, including special education teachers (SETs), should provide, as far as is practicable, remote teaching to all pupils in their class or on their caseload.

The need for pupils at risk of educational disadvantage to have regular, ongoing schooling is particularly important. While all pupils need to be supported to maintain their

¹ The document will be updated as necessary to take account of future circumstances regarding school closures which may arise.

engagement in learning, learners at risk of educational disadvantage need even more support at this time. Since March 2020, many schools have introduced a range of strategies and measures to ensure that the needs of these pupils are catered for, including pupils who have limited access to technology or whose parents are not in a position to support their learning. Examples of those strategies are included in this guidance note. The Department thanks the schools and teachers involved for sharing their practice. The Department also acknowledges the advice provided by a broad range of stakeholders in the preparation of the guidance.

Key themes of this guidance

- Teachers and school leaders working to support pupils at risk of educational disadvantage
- Features of provision for remote teaching and learning
- The role of teachers in engaging with pupils in learning
- Keeping in touch with parents and guardians
- Staying safe in the distance learning environment
- Resources for teachers

Teachers and school leaders working to support pupils at risk of educational disadvantage

During school closures, as a result of public health restrictions, schools and teachers have to consider teaching and learning from a different perspective. Pupils' routines and support mechanisms have been impacted significantly and, in some instances, home circumstances may be challenging in terms of continuity in the pupils' learning. To the extent that is possible, schools should take account of these circumstances in planning programmes of work.

Members of the school community play a key role in ensuring that there is continuity of learning for all learners, but most especially for learners at risk of educational disadvantage:

- Boards of managements should work to ensure that the school provides for continuity of schooling for all pupils and that school leaders have taken the steps necessary to identify pupils who are at risk of not progressing their education
- Boards should also support their school leadership teams in working to engage these pupils by using the extent of the school's resources and by putting in place and monitoring appropriate strategies and interventions
- The school leadership team, comprising the principal and those in management or coordination roles should:

- Maintain oversight of the continuity of learning for all pupils by engaging regularly with teachers
- Ensure that the school's resources are targeted at those most in need through existing care and management structures
- Promote a positive solution-oriented approach that will support all pupils to achieve, to learn and to progress in their education
- Use all available information to work towards minimizing any further educational inequality among those at risk of educational disadvantage
- Use information relating to pupils' levels of engagement from no engagement, to partial and full engagement to inform the identification and planning of strategies to re-engage pupils.

Schools should use all available supports, both in-school and community-based, to engage with pupils.

Key amongst these are those supports provided by Tusla Education Support Services (TESS). These comprise supports provided under the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Scheme and the School Completion Programme (SCP) (in schools where they exist); and also the statutory service of educational welfare officers (EWOs). EWOs are in place nationwide and play a pivotal role in engaging with schools in supporting the educational welfare of pupils.

In some instances, pupils may not respond to the school's efforts to engage with them. In these cases, schools should identify and agree who within the school staff is best placed to make contact with the parents, with a view, in turn, to making contact with the pupil. Once contact has been established, its frequency will depend on the identified needs of the pupils concerned; in some cases, for example, it will be daily. However, contact should be supportive in nature and affirming of pupils' efforts.

In most instances, schools have successfully provided for continuity of learning for their pupils, including those at risk of educational disadvantage. However, a small number of schools have faced particular challenges in engaging with some of these pupils. In these circumstances, and where a school has exhausted all means of making contact with the pupil, the school should engage with TESS educational welfare officers who will assist in establishing contact with the pupil.

In the coming weeks, TESS staff will engage in a process of checking in with all school principals across the DEIS and non DEIS settings. Educational welfare officers (EWOs), School Completion Programme (SCP) coordinators and Home School Community Liaison

(HSCL) officers will also make direct contact with all open cases, target students and parents respectively.

TESS will work collaboratively with schools, families and other relevant services to support children at experiencing educational disadvantage. Contact will be made with all school principals by TESS and direct contact with all target pupils and parents by EWOs, SCP and HSCL coordinators.

EWOs will continue to maintain ongoing contact with all pupils on their caseloads, in both DEIS and non-DEIS schools, employing a welfare-oriented approach, working collaboratively with schools and other agencies in meeting the needs of the children and the young people concerned. EWOs, in addition to providing support to all pupils/families in open cases, will engage with all school principals in their areas on an ongoing basis and will also liaise with all Accommodation Centres (direct provision) for children and homeless hubs to ensure pupils are linked with their schools.

HSCL coordinators will work with school principals to identify those families and pupils most in need of support and assist in the provision of school meals, learning resources and materials and maintain a supportive link between the school and those families. Similarly, SCP will continue to work closely with school principals and HSCL coordinators to assist in the provision of supports to families. They will also continue to provide one to one support to pupils both attending school and out of school who are on their target lists of vulnerable pupils. SCP staff are available to engage with pupils where principals have identified that intervention is required to maintain the pupils' participation in education.

TESS staff (EWO, HSCL and or SCP) will assist with signposting families to other services where school principals consider additional supports may be deemed necessary.

Features of provision for remote teaching and learning

The Department of Education's guidance² on remote teaching and learning requires primary schools to have:

- **Regular engagement with pupils:** It is important that teachers engage with their pupils; in a primary setting this should, ideally, be on a daily basis.
- **A blend of guided and independent learning tasks/experiences:** Teacher-pupil engagement should involve both direct teaching by the teacher and the assignment of independent learning tasks for completion by the pupils.

² Department of Education (2020). Circular Letter 0074/2020 Communication, Teaching and Learning Platforms: Available from https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0074_2020.pdf

- **Appropriate and engaging learning opportunities:** Teachers should ensure that the chosen learning tasks give pupils an opportunity to demonstrate their learning in a clear and concise way.
- **Learning tasks:** The tasks chosen should be specifically aligned to the needs of the pupil, including pupils with special educational needs (SEN), and should enable the teacher to monitor progress and give constructive, developmental feedback to support the next stages in their learning.
- **Two-way feedback between home and school:** Schools should ensure that two-way feedback between teachers and parents/guardians and between teachers and their pupils is encouraged and supported. Schools should provide manageable and accessible opportunities for all pupils to regularly share samples of their work with the teacher(s) throughout each week. Teachers should ensure that work received is corrected and relevant feedback is provided.

Schools and teachers should use their professional autonomy and discretion to ensure that the highest quality teaching and learning experiences are provided. This may mean that pupils are given opportunities to learn using a blend of online and offline activities.

The provision of remote teaching will support pupils' learning and development and their overall sense of wellbeing. During the period of school closures in 2020, schools used some of the following strategies to engage with pupils at risk of educational disadvantage and their parents and guardians:

- Daily contact between the school and the pupils
- Use of existing pupil support and care structures to identify the barriers for those pupils who are most at risk of educational disadvantage
- Engagement with parents, guardians and pupils to let them know how to contact key members of the staff
- Reassuring pupils that any contact from them will be received positively and support will be offered
- Praising pupils frequently for engaging with the school and continue any rewards system that is in place
- Prioritising pupils based on a continuum of support model where supports are categorised as available **for all**, **for some** and **for a few**.

Additionally, schools in the DEIS programme should seek to:

- Draw on the existing relationships that the HSCL Coordinators and School Completion Programme (SCP) personnel have established with pupils and families
- Continue SCP interventions, including mentoring for pupils, where possible and practicable or adjust interventions that pupils availed of prior to school closures

- Engage with TESS personnel to continue to proactively engage with all pupils at risk and their families during these challenging times.

Here are some practical measures that schools should put in place to assist pupils at risk of educational disadvantage:

- *Provide for remote teaching and learning on a daily basis*
- *Ensure that pupils with Special Education Needs engage with their SET regularly*
- *Post information packs to pupils who are experiencing difficulties connecting remotely*
- *Put out a call at local level to community services for extra digital devices that may no longer be in use to be redistributed*
- *Loan school digital devices to pupils*
- *With parental/guardians' permission, use Apps which facilitate pupils to access remote teaching or videoed lessons on mobile phones and other digital devices*
- *Engage with pupils to establish what is working well for them*
- *Send a communication to the parents and guardians of pupils, inviting them to encourage their child to check in with the school*
- *Link with local community and youth groups to support some pupils in the community*
- *Where possible and practicable, provide pupils with tables and chairs to do schoolwork where needed.*

The role of teachers in engaging with pupils in learning

Most of the strategies outlined in this guidance are intended to be used by primary schools. Many may also be suitable for use in other settings where primary school-aged children are to be found, including Emergency Reception and Orientation Centres (EROCs) and, in some cases, schools attached to Special Care Units (SCUs) or Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Teachers at the different levels will take account of their pupils' ages and abilities in devising programmes of learning. Teachers play a pivotal role in keeping their pupils connected to school. For example, teachers of younger pupils should encourage them to the extent that it is possible to participate in structured and unstructured play activities in the home environment. Teachers of older pupils should encourage them similarly but should also focus on the development of their literacy and numeracy skills as outlined later in this guidance.

Here are some strategies that teachers can use to support their pupils' learning:

- Adapt approaches to ensure that for those pupils who do not have digital access, their ability to participate in learning is not compromised
- Daily contact with those most at risk of educational disadvantage as this connection enhances the pupils' sense of wellbeing and is a key enabler of continuity of learning
- Devise tasks so that all pupils can achieve some success
- Scaffold work and provide manageable components so as to maximise completion rates and not overwhelm pupils

- Tap into the knowledge of individual pupil's interests to devise pupil-centred learning tasks accordingly
- Provide pupils with a choice of activities and invite them to present their work in a flexible manner
- Adopt a flexible approach when designing activities, so that learning can take place using the pupils' own physical surroundings
- Invite the pupils to submit work on a completely open task which the pupil identifies for him/herself

In addition to the strategies listed above, here are some practical ways that teachers have used to engage with pupils:

- *Post work and materials to pupils who are not able to engage digitally*
- *Upload videos/audio of lessons and learning materials on the school website so that pupils can access these materials at a time that is best suited to them*
- *Devise simple recipes with everyday ingredients and post these on the school website with a video demonstration*
- *Use the school website to post a STEM challenge that pupils can undertake with everyday materials*
- *Post a video demonstration of physical exercise routines that pupils could do at home.*
- *Set up systems so that groups of learners can work together, either by phone or internet.*

Focusing on pupils' literacy and numeracy skills

In ensuring continuity of learning for pupils at risk of educational disadvantage, it is important that schools continue to provide opportunities for those pupils to develop their literacy and numeracy skills. In that regard, schools can continue to avail of the services of support personnel in the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) as well as the support of psychologists from the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS). Contact details for these, and other organisations, are to be found in the appendices.

Here are some measures that schools have put in place to develop literacy skills:

- *Arrange for pupils to write a short story using a small set of random words*
- *Invite pupils to submit a book or film review and award a prize*
- *Offer loans of books from the school library*
- *Send supportive texts to parents and guardians at appropriate intervals to remind them to read with their child or encourage their child to read and send congratulatory texts when tasks were completed*
- *Encourage parents, guardians and pupils to join Libraries Ireland (see Appendix 2 for details)*
- *Connect pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL) of the same language group to work together on tasks and connect pupils with EAL of different languages to teach each other one new word a day in their home language*
- *Ask pupils with EAL to watch the news in their own language and provide a summary in English.*

Here are some practical measures that schools have put in place to develop numeracy skills:

- *In subjects where numeracy plays a key role, teachers:*
 - *include questions that involve some element of problem solving in tasks or assignments*
 - *include questions that allow different approaches to addressing any problems posed and presenting their solutions*
 - *assign work that requires that pupils draw conclusions and explain their reasoning*
- *Post Numeracy “Problems of the Week” on the school’s website for the various class groups and award prizes*
- *Send frequent texts to parents and guardians to remind them to encourage their child to engage with the numeracy resources on Scoilnet.*

Keeping in touch with parents and guardians

Schools should continue to engage effectively and continuously with parents and guardians as a means of supporting them to support their children. Schools are advised to ensure that:

- Effective systems are in place to identify parents and guardians most in need of support
- Communication from the school is frequent, daily where necessary, clear and written in accessible language
- Parents and guardians are provided with contact numbers or emails to assist them in contacting the school

- Efforts are made to link in with local community support agencies including Youth Services to assist with the translation of communication with parents and guardians of children with EAL needs
- Feedback is sought from parents and guardians regarding what is working well and suggestions for improvement
- Information of a general nature is updated on the school website.

Here are some practical strategies that schools have implemented to ensure effective communications between the school and the parents and guardians of learners at risk of educational disadvantage:

- *Use the normal systems of communication via school website, text, email, Aladdin Connect*
- *Print a dedicated parent and guardian newsletter to provide advice and an update on how the school is providing continuity of learning*
- *Place an article in a local community newspaper outlining how the school is supporting pupils and providing contact details encouraging parents and guardians to get in touch*
- *Be interviewed on local radio to reiterate support and to encourage parents and guardians to contact the school*
- *Develop a dedicated social media communication platform for parents and guardians*
- *Provide the link to the Covid-19 advice in different languages on the school website*
- *Reach out to parents and guardians to support parents and guardians with EAL in their understanding of any school communication.*

The role of the HSCL teacher in DEIS schools in linking with parents and guardians of pupils at risk of educational disadvantage is critical. The HSCL should ascertain how parents and guardians and their children are adjusting to remote/blended learning and advise parents and guardians on how best to support their child. The importance of regular phone calls and contact by the HSCL cannot be overstated.

Schools should continue to use their existing programmes to support pupils' upcoming transitions to post-primary schools. Where schools have the services of the SCP, this should be availed of to support identified pupils who may require additional support. It is very important that communication is sent to parents and guardians and pupils to assure them that, as much support and information as possible around the next stage of education will be made available to them. This will help reduce anxiety among pupils and parents and guardians. Schools should liaise with EWOs in cases where pupils have not been offered a place in a post-primary school for September 2021.

Staying safe in the distance learning environment

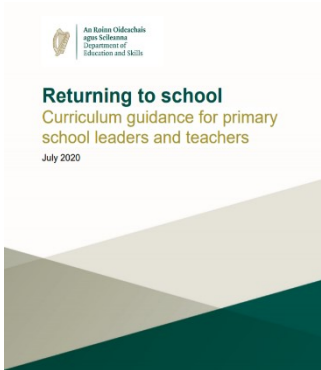
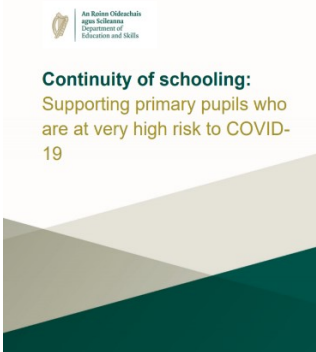
Staying safe in the distance learning environment is critically important for schools, teachers, parents and guardians, and pupils. For guidance on this issue, please refer to the Department's ***Circular 0074/2020: Communication/Teaching & Learning***

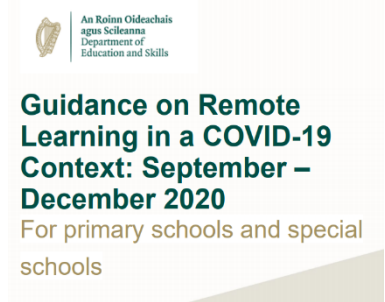
Platform which provides advice on the safe and ethical use of the internet during distance learning and on keeping personal data safe when working from home. Schools should particularly ensure that their Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) informs and guides remote or distance learning activity and engagement in all its forms.

Resources

A list of useful resources is provided in the appendices to support the work of schools in continuing to engage with pupils at risk of educational disadvantage. These resources relate to teaching and learning and to promoting positive health and wellbeing, and transitions. The list is not exhaustive, so schools are encouraged to draw on as many additional sources of information as possible to address the needs of their pupils and particular context. Seeking solutions to the current challenges provides a significant opportunity for schools to access information from the websites of their patron bodies, the managerial bodies, all relevant professional and teaching bodies, and to learn from each other. It should be noted that the Department of Education does not endorse any particular external tools or resources.

Appendix 1: Guidance documents provided by the Department of Education to support schools 2020/21

Primary available at https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a0bff-reopening-our-primary-and-special-schools/		
 <p>Returning to school Curriculum guidance for primary school leaders and teachers July 2020</p>	<p>Returning to School: Curriculum Guidance for primary school leaders and teachers</p> <p>July 2020</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This guidance was designed to support school leaders and teachers in preparing for learning to recommence on the re-opening of primary schools in September 2020. • It provides guidance on preparing for returning to school, curriculum considerations for supporting learning, teaching and assessment, further advice and support for schools, and information on pausing curricular reforms.
 <p>Continuity of schooling: Supporting primary pupils who are at very high risk to COVID-19</p>	<p>Continuity in Schooling: Supporting primary pupils at very high risk to COVID-19</p> <p>August 2020</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This guidance is provided to support schools in making adapted education provision for pupils who cannot return to school because they are medically certified as being at very high risk to COVID-19. • This adapted education provision will help to ensure that these pupils can maintain a meaningful connection with their class and school in order to successfully continue their learning from home. It provides options for schools in facilitating this provision, the roles and responsibilities of the stakeholders involved, an outline of the fundamental principles of this adapted provision and details of further supports available to schools.

 <p>Guidance on Remote Learning in a COVID-19 Context: September – December 2020 For primary schools and special schools</p>	<p>Guidance on Remote Learning in a COVID-19 Context: September- December 2020</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This Department guidance sets out how schools should plan for and support pupils' learning in a number of possible scenarios which could occur during the 2020/21 school year. As the extent to which partial or full school closures are required cannot be predicted, it is possible that individual or groups of pupils and teachers may find that they are advised to self-isolate on a number of occasions throughout the school year. • It provides a number of scenarios and worked examples for the continuity of schooling during periods of partial or full school closure.
<p>An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna Department of Education and Skills</p> <p>27 August 2020</p>	<p>Public Health Guidance - Letter to Schools</p> <p>27 August 2020</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This letter, issued to school principals, outlines the information contained in <i>Schools Pathway</i> document for Covid-19, setting out the Public Health approach to managing isolated confirmed cases of Covid-19 within the school community, and also the principles that will underpin the management of outbreaks or potential outbreaks and the aligned testing strategy within an educational facility.

Appendix 2: School Resources

Information issued by the DE on home tuition through distance learning for the duration of the pandemic can be accessed [here](#).

National Council for Special Education resources

- The [NCSE website](#) outlines a wide range of resources suitable for children with special educational needs. The site has a new dedicated resource section to support home learning during this time that includes [Online Resources for Teachers](#), [Online Resources for Parents](#) and [Useful apps](#) for home use. There are also links to many useful educational websites to direct parents, guardians and teachers towards further online supports.
- NCSE's network of advisors also remain available via NCSE's online application form to provide support and advice by telephone and email to schools and teachers of pupils with SEN. The form is available [here](#).

Professional Development Service for Teachers resources

- The PDST provides a range of resources relating to provision for pupils at risk of educational disadvantage including literacy resources targeted at DEIS and EAL, and mathematics programmes targeted at DEIS. These can be accessed at the following links:
 - [PDST- Literacy at home](#)
 - [PDST- Maths Recovery](#)
 - [PDST- Ready Set Go Maths](#)
- The PDST's online libraries section provides teachers with a range of online libraries to source and share both English and Irish texts across a variety of levels at [PDST- Distance learning- Digital libraries](#).
- The PDST also provides resources for primary EAL support and suggested websites to support EAL at [PDST – EAL \(Primary\)](#).

Distance learning resources

- The Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST) website page on [distance learning](#) provides support to teachers to engage with learners remotely. Supports include an online teaching course, information about platforms, distance learning supports for Health and Wellbeing and distance learning supports for Literacy.
- The [Scoilnet](#) website identifies resources for distance learning and home access. It provides links to the Department's support services that are relevant to the school closures.

- The [Webwise](#) website offers a range of resources to help teachers integrate internet safety into teaching and learning. It also provides advice for parents, guardians and children.
- NEPS has provided resources on literacy, transition planning etc. in the Guidelines, Tips and Handouts for Parents and Teacher section of its [Resources and Publications](#) webpage.

Publishers' resources

- [Folens](#) is offering free access to all of its eBooks and resources.
- [CJ Fallon](#) is offering free access to all of its online textbooks.
- The [Educational Company of Ireland](#) is offering free access to all of its eBooks and digital resources.

Online reading resources

- All pupils in the Republic of Ireland have open and free home access to a collection of all eBooks from World Book Online at [Scoilnet- World Book](#) .
- Britannica is offering free access to its Science and Humanities LaunchPacks to all [Scoilnet](#) users during the school closure period.
- [Children's Books Ireland](#) provides access to reading materials, guides and lists.
- [Libraries Ireland](#), the national library system, is providing free online access to eBooks, audiobooks, online magazines and newspapers.
- [Amazon](#) is giving free access to books and audio stories available.

Television resources

- The RTE Homeschool Hub, a teaching initiative for primary school children covering elements of the primary school curriculum, can be accessed at [RTE Learn](#).
- Cúla 4 ar Scoil, a school program through Irish for primary school children covering elements of the primary curriculum can be accessed at [TG4 Cúla 4](#). TG4 Cúla 4 provides a range of daily programmes and competitions.
- [World news](#) in many languages from the BBC is a useful resource for EAL pupils.

General online resources

- [National Geographic Kids](#) has a wide range of videos, games and quizzes which relate to History, Geography and Science.
- [Dorling Kindersley](#) has videos, fun facts and quizzes on a range of topics, especially on the area of SESE.
- [Starfall](#) available in both website and app, has games and stories to support the learning of phonics and reading. It is particularly useful for Junior Infants to 1st Class.

- [Teach Your Monster to Read](#), available in both website and app, supports children in learning to read.
- [GoNoodle](#) provides videos of dances, exercises and physical activities. It is used in schools to keep children active.
- [Matific](#) are offering free access for 60 days to its digital Mathematics resources for primary schools.
- This Irish visual arts website [I Am An Artist](#) has short videos, slideshows, lessons and projects for primary school pupils.

Appendix 3: Promoting positive health and wellbeing

- The [National Educational Psychological Service \(NEPS\)](#) provides valuable advice and resources to schools and families for keeping children and young people well during Covid-19.
- [Tusla Education Support Service \(TESS\)](#) provides important information for schools, parents and guardians and young people.
- The HSE webpage [YourMentalHealth website](#) provides information and signposting on all mental health supports and services that are available nationally and locally provided by the HSE and its funded partners.
- The HSE webpage [Mental Health Supports and Services during COVID-19](#) gives details of the service providers that offer online and phone mental health supports and services during the current crisis. It lists a range of services and resources to help young people cope and manage themselves in the current crisis. Contacts for Jigsaw; BeLong To; Reach Out; Spunout; Barnardos, Childline etc. are listed. The webpage also give details of mobile apps that may be used to manage anxiety.
- Local authorities (councils) have established a Community Response Forum to coordinate Covid-19 related community supports. As part of this, each local authority has now established a helpline listed at [www.gov.ie - Contact Details for Local Authorities](#) that vulnerable people can phone if they are looking for basic services such as delivery of food or meals, or transport for essential trips.
- Teachers' attention is directed to the Department's Employee Assistance and Wellbeing Programme. Details are available at the following link: [Employee Assistance and Wellbeing programme](#)