

## **Appendix 1**

### **Framework Plan for phased return of post-primary school education**

#### **1. Introduction – Phase 1**

Following intensive engagement and input from post-primary partners this framework was developed and agreed with all partners, including unions and management in order to achieve a phased return to in-school provision for groups of students at post-primary level.

The Framework is an interim arrangement as the Department of Education (DE) and the education partners work together to ensure post-primary schools can safely reopen for priority groups in line with public health advice at the earliest opportunity.

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. An interim model for special classes in post-primary schools including flexible provisions for management, staff and children (phase 1).
- C. The sequencing and timeframe for re-opening.

It should be noted that if the public health environment allows, then full re-opening of post-primary schools may occur in advance of the implementation of any other phases.

#### **Section A**

#### **2. 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 post-primary schooling

##### **Risk Mitigation Measures**

#### **1. COVID-19 Response Plans:**

The **COVID-19 Response Plan** for the safe and sustainable operation of Post-primary schools have been re-examined by Department of Education 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 the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) 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 (Appendix 3) '*Summary of additions to COVID-19 Response Plans 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. Overall they do not introduce significant changes to the current school COVID-19 response plans.

2. A specific guidance note (Appendix 2) will issue to post-primary schools with special classes in advance of opening which will provide information on the infection prevention and control measures of particular relevance to those settings in line with the HPSC guidance.
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 control and prevention measures in place for schools since September are still considered highly effective for risk mitigation against transmission of COVID-19. The HPSC has not advised any change in the infection prevention and control measures in the context of the new variants but Public Health has emphasised that strict adherence to these measures is required at all times and this framework is predicated on such strict adherence.
4. In that respect schools are reminded of the framework for physical distancing that was agreed in advance of September reopening. Classroom layouts for SEN classrooms and other post primary classrooms can be accessed here:  
<https://assets.gov.ie/81948/36874b14-f604-4966-b8c8-bc2954b73bbd.pdf>  
<https://assets.gov.ie/81947/e89b3523-78ee-45cb-ae14-c13d143b889b.pdf>

### Public Health position

5. The Deputy Chief Medical Officer at the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health, on 22<sup>nd</sup> January, clarified that a percentage of up to 5% of the national total school population returning to on-site provision is an acceptable amount of movement in the population and will not have any adverse impact on community transmission rates.
6. It has been further reaffirmed by Government that limited reopening for children with special educational needs is expected to take place in a phased way during February.
7. Weekly reports provided by the HSE on the results of mass testing of close contacts in schools consistently show low detection rates in adults (i.e. persons, including students, aged 18 or more) for COVID-19. In the last report before the Christmas break for week 51, overall 2,852 tests were carried out on close contacts in school communities. Of these 4% (100) were on adults (18+) in special education settings and less than 5 of those tests detected COVID-19, a positivity rate of 3%. These weekly reports will continue to be produced and published in line with the phased reopening of schools.
8. Clear public health messaging will continue including the circulation and broadcasting via social media and other means of short videos focused on the need to protect schools by insisting that anyone who has symptoms of COVID-19 or is a close contact of a confirmed case must stay at home.

### Information for parents

9. Short videos for parents presented by 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.
10. Parents of children returning to school will be asked to complete the declaration form at the attached link:  
*This form is to be used when children are returning to the setting after any absence.*  
<https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/educationguidance/Return%20to%20Educational%20Facility%20declaration%20form.pdf>
11. Communications to parents/guardians will emphasise that there should be no congregation outside schools during this interim phase. Requests to engage with staff should be made through the school and will be provided by telephone or online.

### School Planning and compliance

12. Schools will be provided with details of the changes required to update their COVID-19 response plans in advance of the phased reopening. These take into account updated protocols agreed with Labour Employer Economic Forum. The need for full compliance with the updated plans has been emphasised.
13. 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 Special Education Teaching staff as set out in the updated HPSC guidance published in January 2021. Any school that needs additional funding for PPE can get in touch with the Department.
14. It is agreed that the Lead Worker Representative(s) should be available if required to deal with any concerns arising regarding compliance with the guidance for the phased reopening.
15. 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 post-primary education.

### Vaccinations

16. 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 within the vaccination programme at the earliest possible opportunity.

### School Public Health Risk Assessments, testing and tracing

17. 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 that any school reopens,
  - the numbers to contact teams or alert HSE are still in use and will be available to schools in this interim phase.

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.

18. 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 interim phase. Reports also contain the numbers and percentage (%) of confirmed cases by age group and week in the overall population.
19. In all instances where COVID-19 is positively confirmed in a school age child in community testing (referred to by G.P) or as part of close contact testing in the community, Public Health is immediately notified and a Public Health Risk Assessment is initiated with the school by local HSE public health Schools Teams. Where there is COVID-19 detected in an adult in the community, either through symptomatic or close contact testing and when initial contact confirms that they work in a school setting, Public Health is immediately notified and the Public Health Risk Assessment is initiated with the school by Schools 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 but this is not necessary as the process described above will take place in any event.
20. The current position of the HSE is that serial antigen or serial 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. In this respect, schools must not engage with any other testing regime other than the very comprehensive and highly accurate testing carried out by Public Health.

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 there 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. It is understood that testing is kept under review in the Department of Health and HSE. The Department will update any advice and guidance to schools if alternative or supplementary regimes are recommended by the health authorities.

## PPE

21. 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 that this level of PPE should be provided for all Special Education teachers also.
22. Certain staff working with children who require Aerosol Generating Procedures will be provided with PPE in line with HSE advice as set out at this link:  
<https://www.hpsc.ie/az/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/infectionpreventionandcontrolguidance/aerosolgeneratingprocedures/>
23. The Department confirms that funding for all required PPE is being provided for the coming term. Any school that 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](mailto:covid19_alert@education.gov.ie)
24. Masks and visors should be put on, taken off and disposed of as demonstrated in videos available at <https://www.hpsc.ie/az/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/infectionpreventionandcontrolguidance/ppe/>
25. It should be noted that HPSC has advised that masks are more effective in reducing transmission of COVID-19 than visors. A visor may be worn in addition to (but not instead of) a mask to prevent rubbing of eyes etc.

## Temporary time-bound staffing arrangements

26. In recognition of the reduced attendance of students for in-school provision at any one time during this first phase of reopening (special classes), DE has set out in the attached note the temporary flexibilities that must be utilised by schools to provide for the provision of remote learning to students 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.
27. All flexible arrangements which comply with the attached note should be approved by the Board of Management on a temporary basis.

## Childcare

28. 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. The FAQs are available on [www.ncs.gov.ie](http://www.ncs.gov.ie). Greater flexibility in the use of existing parental leave days has also been put in place during this limited interim phase (for details see section A 26). A household of an essential worker can also form a bubble with another household for the purposes of childcare.

## Classroom ventilation

29. Updated guidance on ventilation in schools has been provided by DE. Schools are reminded that this should be applied in all interim phases and when schools reopen in full. Guidance is available here: <https://assets.gov.ie/85177/d9643a37-5254-483e-a72ed2a08ae36d46.pdf>. This guidance, including the use of indoor air quality monitor in classrooms, is being kept under review as any new guidance is issued by the HPSC. As part of managing comfort levels in classrooms, schools should check that their boilers operation temperatures are set at the recommended manufacturers' guidance levels to maximise the available heat to the school.

In addition, heating should operate for extended periods during colder weather to counteract, as best as possible, the impact of windows being open (partially when classrooms in use and fully when not in use) in order to maintain an appropriate balance between ventilation and comfort levels.

## Other supports to schools by DE *Inspectorate*

30. The COVID-19 helpline has a dedicated option to contact the Department's Inspectorate. This line is open 9am to 5pm Monday to Friday and when schools return on a phased basis, the Inspectorate will prioritise any engagement with those schools that have commenced in-school teaching and learning. 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 guidance documents, which the Department Inspectorate played a key role in developing set out the materials which teachers can use to support students during this period. The Inspectorate is available to assist schools in working through these materials and will provide advice on how best to use them in the return to in-person teaching and learning.

## NEPS

31. The NEPS resource “**Supporting the Wellbeing of Students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) Returning to School**” has been revised to support the school community as schools reopen following the current period of school closure. This very comprehensive resource is targeted at supporting the planning and preparation for the transition back into school and to support re-engagement when the students return to the classroom. Separately queries and requests for advice with regard to the return to school can be facilitated either through contacting the assigned NEPS psychologist directly, or the local NEPS office. Contact details for NEPS local offices are available through the contact link [here](#).

## NCSE

32. 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**

### **3. An interim model for special classes in post-primary schools including flexible provisions for management, staff and students (phase 1).**

The first phase of re-opening will provide for on-site provision for children in special classes in postprimary schools (phase 1).

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

- On-site provision for students in special classes;
- Managed flexibility for staffing arrangements (see section A26) and;
- Temporary flexibility and choice for parents during the period of partial opening only.

#### Phase 1 - Special classes – Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2021

1. When post-primary schools with special classes reopen, all staff, including all teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) who work in special classes should return to work, other than in circumstances provided for in the attached information note on temporary staffing arrangements, 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 staff on temporary arrangements.

3. Where a student in a special class would normally leave that class to attend a mainstream class for a particular subject, schools should facilitate those students to access remote provision or online classes in line with their peers. Access should be facilitated through work stations in another room with appropriate supervision by paid supervisors.
4. Where a teacher of a special class would normally as part of her/his timetable leave that class to deliver remote or online learning to students who are still learning at home, the school should facilitate that teacher in delivering that learning from the school premises or from home, where the timetable allows for travel.
5. SNAs on approved leave and where necessary on flexible arrangements can be substituted by paid substitutes. However, schools should in the first instance assign one of their SNAs who would normally work with those other than in the special class to attend the workplace.
6. School transport services will fully operate with the continued additional hygiene and other measures that were introduced on school transport services at the start of the school year. A 50% capacity limit on post-primary and SEN services with post-primary students has been implemented on the majority of routes. Bus Eireann local offices are engaging with local Public Health Schools Support teams to ensure that any concerns on school transport are addressed.
7. Parents/guardians have been asked to notify schools 3 days in advance where they would prefer not to avail of the SEN transport service during this interim phase. Public health guidelines are being implemented on the SEN transport scheme. However, where parents would prefer not to use the service during this interim period, DE will make temporary grants available for transport. Parents can resume using their tickets when schools reopen in full.
8. Schools have been given some flexibility to facilitate remote working for staff members. Schools should make every effort to encourage students to avail of on-site provision during this phase. Where a parent/guardian does not want their child to attend the school during this interim phase, if there are staff members who would normally be working with special classes but who are temporarily working from home, he/she may continue to support remote provision for that student. The student will not be marked absent, however, the parent must inform the school in good time of their intentions.
9. Those members of staff on flexible arrangements or on approved leave can be substituted using paid substitutes. During this phase, the supervision and substitution

(S&S) scheme is not practical to utilise as most teachers will continue to work from home.

10. If a special class teacher is on leave, a school may temporarily reassign another member of the teaching staff (on a voluntary basis) to the special class to maintain the operation of the special class where that teacher is not required to deliver online learning to mainstream classes at that time.
11. As post-primary schools are partially reopening for the provision of in-school learning for priority groups, those schools have the capacity to utilise the whole of the school premises, as required. To ensure that this can be effected safely, enhanced cleaning regimes should resume when schools reopen during this phase.
12. If an issue arises, a school may only temporarily cease on-site provision on the advice of Public Health and following engagement with the Department of Education.
13. School inspectors working with Public Health 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. The sequencing and timeframe for re-opening provision.**

Phase 1 - Special classes – Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2021

Discussions will continue on the return of other priority groups at the earliest opportunity.