

**Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills John Swinney MSP's speech on managing the impacts of coronavirus on Scottish education, given to the Scottish Parliament on Thursday 19 March 2020.**

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**Coronavirus (COVID19) – impact on education: Deputy First Minister speech, 19 March 2020**

Responding to the coronavirus pandemic is a matter of the greatest national importance, and the scale of the challenge in front of us is truly without precedent.

Every aspect of our national life has been affected by this crisis, and sustaining our education system has been at the forefront of my mind.

My priorities are to ensure the health and wellbeing of our children, young people and staff, and to maintain teaching and learning wherever this is possible, guided by the advice of the Chief Medical Officer and public health experts.

I would like to place on record my sincere appreciation for the extraordinary work that all of the teaching and non-teaching staff in our schools and Early Learning and Childcare settings have been doing to maintain educational continuity in these unprecedented days.

The approach of the Scottish Government to this crisis has been to deliver clear and open communications with members of the public. When circumstances change, we need to set out the basis of that change. And that is the point we reached yesterday in relation to our schools.

Firstly, scientific advice now highlights that closing schools will help to suppress the spread of Coronavirus. Secondly, as people follow the advice issued on Monday, it is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain education provision.

As a consequence of these two factors, the First Minister set out yesterday that schools and nursery closures for pupils are now inevitable.

I want to be clear at the outset that what we are advising is this: at the end of tomorrow, schools and nurseries should, ordinarily, close for children and young people.

Teaching, learning and support will continue – albeit in different ways for different groups of children.

For the majority, this will be through distance learning and online learning, with different forms of on-going contact with teachers rather than in-school, face-to-face. Teachers and other staff who are well, will continue to be working. Senior phase

pupils with coursework for national qualifications to complete will be informed by their schools how to complete this.

For vulnerable children and those who have parents or carers employed as key workers, Local Authorities are developing approaches to support them at this time.

My statement today will provide more detail about what these mean in practice, and how our teaching and education workforce can re-focus their work to support pupils in a range of different ways in the weeks and months ahead.

We want our local authorities to be able to exercise the necessary flexibility in the use of school buildings and other settings, to enable the education workforce to operate in new and different ways to support learners. There are three ways in which this should be the case and we have discussed and agreed this approach with local government:

Firstly, we need to continue to support **vulnerable children**: we will not cut adrift vulnerable young people, who often rely on school life for hot meals or for a safe, nurturing and supportive environment.

Secondly, we want to deliver as much **educational continuity as possible**: we want local authorities and teachers to do all they can to ensure educational continuity for our children and young people, with a particular focus on S4-S6 pupils who need to complete coursework for national qualifications. Teachers can provide educational continuity for children in the broad general education in a variety of ways; for example through setting weekly learning tasks and emailing these to families where possible, or using Glow and other online learning platforms. I am confident that the teaching profession will respond in a variety of imaginative, creative and simulating ways to support continuity in learning for pupils.

And thirdly **key workers**: we are clear that we must support local authorities to put in place arrangements that ensure the children of key workers, who do not have another parent or carer at home who can look after them during the day, have continuing access to all-age learning and childcare that allows their parents or carers to participate in the national response to Covid-19. For example, our doctors and nurses must continue to be available to support the fight against this virus.

I will go on to set out what this is likely to mean in practice, but I would like to be clear about one thing – this may mean that local authorities opt to keep some settings open with reduced staffing, but operating in a very different way; or they might create local hubs and use community facilities in different ways. It may also mean that they work with private and third sector providers of childcare, including childminders, to deliver childcare, to key workers. Indeed I would strongly encourage

that they prioritise the use of these facilities to ensure continued support for that critical sector.

Amongst all of these models, we will balance the extent of physical provision in buildings with the risk of undermining the health interventions. In doing so, we will of course be led by the advice of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies.

Speaking specifically to parents and carers whose children do not fall into these categories, we know this is a difficult time, and there will be support for you too. We know that a lot of parents will be thinking about how they balance working from home with looking after children. You are not expected to be a teacher or to recreate the school day. But we want you to feel supported to help your child, and your school will be giving you some resources and suggestions as your first port of call

I would also highlight the excellent advice already provided to children and young people by Young Scot. We will be working with a range of partners to find the best way to keep children and young people updated and supported with the latest information.

I will of course take questions at the end of my statement, but I will make clear now now that we do not pretend to have all the answers at this stage.

### **Support for Vulnerable children and young people**

We are working with local authorities and partners to ensure that vulnerable children and young people can continue to benefit from the learning, care and support that schools and nurseries provide for them.

Local authorities will need to take into account issues of child protection, welfare, poverty, children with complex additional support needs, and the need to provide access to food for young people who need it. I am not going to set a definitive definition of what a vulnerable child is; our schools and local authorities know our children and families well and are best placed to identify which children need care, protection and support the most during the period that lies ahead.

In planning to support young people, the needs of young people will be taken into account. Those with complex additional support needs who are learning and living in residential special schools will continue to receive the care and support they require. Plans will specifically take into account any long-term health conditions in order to protect the health and wellbeing of this group. I know that local authorities are creatively considering different ways of supporting young people with different needs during this period, for example using outreach models and joining up available staff to provide care, support and continuity. We have made great strides in recent

years through increasing multi-agency working, and now is the time for professionals and services to work together in new, dynamic ways which meet local needs.

All Chief Social Work Officers have now been asked that special consideration is given to identifying and supporting vulnerable children at increased risk - for example, lone-parents who have become too unwell to look after their children.

We have already stated our commitment to work with local authorities to continue the provision of free school meals, which both reduce costs to families and ensures provision of healthy and nutritious food. Multiple options are being planned for by local authorities, including the successful model already deployed in Shetland where direct payments and vouchers have been provided to families whose children are entitled to free school meals. Other local authorities are considering opening community campuses to provide meals or to enable young people or families to collect food.

A £350m package of support for our communities was announced yesterday, which includes establishing a £70m food fund to support households who may be worried about accessing food. These additional funds will also support the continued provision of free school meals, ensuring continued support for families who need it, within their communities.

Elsewhere, we will relax the guidance on the use of Pupil Equity Funding to provide further flexibility for headteachers and local authorities to support our most vulnerable children and their needs during this time. This flexibility will also apply to schools and local authorities in receipt of Challenge Authority and Schools' Programme funding.

I believe that this approach, together with our local authority children's services and community partners, will enable the continuation of vital support for Scotland's vulnerable children and young people.

### **Educational continuity and exams**

Presiding Officer, I now wish to turn to the 2020 exam diet.

In all of our history, Scotland has never cancelled the exams. Since 1888, they have been held every May or June without fail.

In the midst of two world wars, the exams went ahead.

It is a measure of the gravity of the challenge we now face, that I must today announce the exams will not go ahead this year.

I am aware of how significant a step this is. Indeed, it is an unprecedented one in unprecedented times. Scotland's exam diet has never been cancelled before.

Whilst the protection of life is our overriding priority here, we must do our utmost to ensure that the interests and life chances of our young people, due to sit exams from the end of April, are protected. Their achievements must be rightly and fairly recognised. I want the 2020 cohort to hold their heads high and gain the qualifications and awards that they deserve, after many years of hard work. I know they will be very worried by the situation they face and I want them to be assured we are doing all that we can to deliver the best outcome for them.

Scotland's Chief Examining Officer has advised me that, with the support of the wider education system, a credible certification model can be put in place that can command confidence in the absence of the exam diet – to ensure that young people in our schools and colleges who, through no fault of their own, are unable to sit exams, are not in any way disadvantaged.

I anticipate that this model will use coursework, teacher assessments of estimated grades and prior attainment as the basis of certification.

In order for such an approach to be effective, the Scottish Qualifications Authority will require relevant units to be completed and coursework and teacher estimates of grades, to be submitted by the agreed deadlines, or indeed sooner where that is possible. We are facing significant disruption at this time, but I appeal to our teachers and practitioners to do all they can - safely - to meet these deadlines and so allow qualifications to be awarded to their young people. So this ask is clear: schools should submit course work and teacher estimates as soon as they can – and by the dates provided. I should stress that these elements form part of the suite of materials provided to the SQA every year when a full exam diet has been in operation.

In addition to the hard work and ongoing commitment of teachers, I also want to thank the Chief Examining Officer, Fiona Robertson, and all staff at the SQA for their significant efforts already and those which will be delivered in achieving this task.

I am aware of the scale of the task that they are facing, but I believe that this is in the best interests of our young people – they deserve to have their achievements recognised and to be able to make their next step in learning, life or work and we cannot achieve this without the vital contribution of the SQA

### **Key workers**

The Scottish people are key to our efforts in tackling this virus. Throughout the pandemic, we will need to ensure that key workers, for example NHS staff, have

provisions in place that allow them to continue to play their vital role in the national response. The workforce of our health service, our care services and our emergency services have led the way in addressing this challenge, and enabling them to continue to work will help to save and protect lives across the country.

At a national level, we are viewing key workers as those who work in posts which ensure that essential services can be delivered, or those who cover tasks within the local community which support the vulnerable and aid community resilience.

To best serve local priorities, the exact definition of a key worker may vary across the diverse range of localities across Scotland. Urban and rural communities will rely on different key people doing their jobs in order to keep them safe, healthy and with access to the food and medicines they need, for example.

I am humbled by some of the early and highly creative thinking of our local authority partners. It was encouraging to see that, in a response to their own circumstances, Shetland have been able to implement a “hub” arrangement to provide care and support for the children of key workers. Another authority plans to create a number of hubs to provide care, learning and a range of stimulating activities for children who may be vulnerable or those whose parents are key workers.

They are drawing together a range of staff – teachers, active schools coordinators, CLD staff and others to provide a high quality experience for the children who need us most during these unprecedented times.

We will now continue to work with local partners and colleagues across the rest of the UK on provision for key workers as the situation develops.

### **Early Learning and Childcare provision**

On early learning and childcare provision, as I stated in my opening remarks it is likely that we will see many local authority nurseries close, but we do not expect or want to see all nurseries close. Our priorities are to ensure that key workers who need childcare can continue to access it and that we sustain private and third sector providers during this period of considerable uncertainty and challenge.

We are advising private and third sector childcare providers that they can remain open so long as they refocus their operating models to support solely the children of critical workers and those families most in need of support.

Childcare providers can also make a huge contribution to enabling key workers to remain in work. Local authorities are making plans for the provision of emergency childcare services to school aged children in their areas. In developing these plans, I

have asked authorities to make maximum use of local childcare providers in the private and third sectors so that they can keep their doors open.

Scottish Ministers are committed to supporting our private and third sector childcare providers to remain viable. We are reviewing the package of general business support measures announced by the UK Government this week and working closely with our partners in the sector to identify what other support we can provide.

As a first step, the First Minister guaranteed earlier today that Scottish Government will continue funding streams which allow contractual payments to private and third sector providers, including childminders, for statutory early learning and childcare hours to continue. This is worth around £220 million to the sector in the year ahead. We are working closely with local authorities to ensure they can adopt this position and provide assurance to providers that funding will continue as we all work together to respond to the pandemic.

The Care Inspectorate is also publishing new operational registration guidance for all services, including the daycare of children's and childminding sector today, which will confirm a range of regulatory flexibilities to support the sector to function in these unprecedented times, while ensuring that the safety of children remains paramount.

Our response to the Covid-19 pandemic will clearly have an impact on the delivery of our early learning and childcare expansion commitment from August. We will provide a more detailed update to Parliament in due course. The Scottish Budget delivered additional revenue funding of £201 million in 2020-21 to support local authorities in delivering the 1140 hours expansion. I will confirm to local authorities today that they can deploy that funding as flexibly as they need to support families and childcare providers during this period.

### **Further education/higher education**

Finally, colleges and universities operate in different circumstances combining learning and research. We recognise that universities and colleges are introducing measures intended to minimise the potential disruption for students and staff and to ensure their wellbeing.

For students, many universities and colleges are withdrawing face-to-face teaching and are making arrangements where possible for online teaching. The handling of this transition on the ground – in extremely challenging circumstances - is obviously key to reduce stress on students and staff. We look to our colleges and universities to make appropriate decisions in relation to their operations, while prioritising the health of staff, students and the wider public.

On student funding, the Student Awards Agency Scotland have robust business continuity measures in place to ensure their business services remain functioning. We will endeavour to continue to fund students on time. Given the nature of these unprecedented times we will keep students updated throughout.

We are working very closely with the Scottish Funding Council and institutions on business continuity actions that will support institutions, students and staff. The Minister for Further Education, Higher Education and Science had further calls with college and university principals this week, and also with campus trade unions and NUS Scotland.

We will now continue our engagement with local authorities, and expect to work on further details into next week. We would like to see the re-focused provision for the three key groups of children and young that I have mentioned (those who are vulnerable, have parents/carers who are key workers, or who have course work to complete for qualifications) – in operation over the course of next week.

Most, if not all, schools will have pupils from within these groups, and all headteachers and staff who are well will need to be a part of the offer. Strong partnership working and clear communication between local authorities and their communities about the arrangements being put in place will be vital in the days ahead.

I understand that people will naturally want clarity on how long this will last for and when the education system will return to full provision. The truth is that, at this stage, we cannot know. People should not assume schools and nurseries will reopen after Easter – as the First Minister said yesterday, they may not be able to do so before the summer break. We will keep this under constant review. I am also aware that over holiday periods – such as Easter – many schools, local authorities and out of school care providers offer services for children and their families. I would again encourage colleagues leading these services to see how they can continue for the three key groups that I have highlighted today – vulnerable children, children of key workers, and in the case of young people completing national qualifications.

Now will be a time where we must pull together, and harness the strength of our local communities and the various professional groups who support children and families across Scotland. Continuation of education, and continuation of the health and wellbeing for our children and young people should be at the centre of all that we do.

So, in summary, to the teachers or other education professionals listening to this, I encourage you to channel your professional knowledge and skills in different ways over the weeks and months that lie ahead. This may include teaching and learning in different ways, for example, through the use of technology. It may be that your

school will operate a skeleton staff to continue to support vulnerable children or children whose parents are key workers, or your local authority may offer these services through local 'hubs', examples of which I have sited today. We need our teachers and our education workforce more than ever over the weeks and months ahead, and I am confident that they will rise to the challenge with determination, creativity and above all – with the interests of the children and young people who need them most – at heart.

Following this statement I will set out the expectations that I have discussed during this statement in a letter to all local authority chief executives and directors of education and children's services

I want to offer thanks again to the local authorities for the proactive efforts they have already made to take decisive action in the best interests of children and young people, teachers and staff. Those foundations will be invaluable as we strive to deliver the education our children need in the most difficult of times.