

STATEMENT: COVID19 – UPDATE ON EDUCATION RECOVERY

INTRODUCTION

When I spoke in this chamber on the 19th March, I said that the decision to close schools was one of the very toughest we had needed to take during this crisis. My engagement with teachers, children and parents since has only served to reinforce that view.

For that reason, while it has been critical to suppress the virus, we have been clear that these closures cannot go on for a minute longer than necessary.

We want Scotland's children back in school full time as soon as possible and as soon as it is safe to do so.

That ambition is shared within the Education Recovery Group – our partnership with local government, unions representing teachers and other school staff and parent representatives.

Presiding Officer, today, I want to set out the government's ambitions for when that full time return to school might be.

When I published the Strategic Framework from the Education Recovery Group report on 21 May, we had a clear expectation that the outlook on Coronavirus was bleak.

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At that point, there were around 20,000 people in Scotland who could transmit the infection. On 21 May, 1318 people were in hospital with confirmed or suspected COVID-19, including 51 in intensive care. Tragically, over the course of that week 230 people passed away from the virus.

And, not only was that position bleak, but, at that time, the majority view of our Scientific Advisers was that physical distancing would be necessary if schools were to open. Blended Learning was developed therefore to restore some form of face-to-face education against that outlook.

Working through the Education Recovery Group, we built a plan - a plan based on making the very best of the very difficult circumstances that we expected to face.

It was a contingency plan that was and is necessary. And, for the last month councils and teachers have been working hard to enact that contingency.

Presiding Officer, even while we took this work forward, we continued to make the point that we did not want to see blended learning implemented for a moment longer than necessary.

Now, thankfully, the picture looks more positive.

Since May, because of the efforts of our fellow citizens to stay at home, we have seen Scotland make significant progress.

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There are now only around 2000 infectious people in Scotland – a reduction of around 90% since May. There has been a sustained downward trend in COVID-19 deaths. Intensive care cases now stand at a fraction of what they were.

If we stay on this trajectory - which cannot be taken for granted - by August the position will be even better.

That is good news.

That means we are now able to update our planning assumptions.

If we stay on track, if we all continue to do what is right, and if we can further suppress this terrible virus, the Government believes that we should prepare for children to be able to return to school full time in August.

I must stress, this is the aim that the Government is now working towards. However, because it has to be achieved safely, it inevitably remains conditional and dependent upon ongoing scientific and health advice.

Presiding Officer, this will be part of a wider approach. If we continue to make progress at the rate we envisage, by August, it is possible - though of course by no means certain - that we may have successfully achieved or be well on the way to Phase 4 of the Scottish Government Routemap.

I have to be honest with Parliament and admit that when we prepared our plans back in May, I frankly could not have imagined that we would be where we are now.

Presiding Officer

It is this more positive outlook that allows the Scottish Government to make this change of planning assumption for schools.

But it is a change born out of the hard work and sacrifice of people in every part of the country, sticking to the guidance, staying at home and suppressing this virus. In particular, we should highlight the many people who as parents have supported their children while continuing to hold down jobs and caring commitments.

It is a change born of the actions of our citizens.

They delivered it.

Now it falls to the Scottish Government, our local government colleagues, teachers and school staff to build on it.

I want to commend the work of local authorities and school and early learning and childcare staff across Scotland for the way in which they have responded to this emergency. They have worked tirelessly to protect the interests of our children and young people – through our childcare hubs, ensuring ongoing provision of free school meals, delivering remote learning, and planning for the next term.

I know they will continue to rise to the challenge as we get ready for the next school year.

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Presiding Officer, that is the good news. But I must emphasise the importance of Scotland staying on track if we are to make it a reality.

And we must be clear that blended learning is a contingency that we may still need to enact.

While the outlook is more positive now, there are no certainties with this virus. If there is an increase in infection rates, if there are outbreaks that require action to control, then this contingency plan could still be required. Equally, we still need to protect those in our society who may not be able to attend school for health reasons. All the work that has gone in to preparing blended learning models for every locality across the country has been essential preparation. It is vital that we have these models ready if we need them because we may need to turn to them.

We must continue to ensure the safety of pupils, teachers and staff by engaging in such contingency planning, and that is why Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education will continue with their scrutiny of the plans when the latest versions are submitted by local authorities on Wednesday.

Similarly, we can only move away from blended learning if we stay on track and can command the confidence of parents, teachers and children on safety.

But there are important benefits of doing so.

A return to full time schooling would enhance the life chances of our children and young people and start to reverse any damaging impacts of recent months.

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We know from the Lockdown Lowdown, for example, that young people are concerned about school closures, and about their mental wellbeing.

If we are in a position to ease public health measures in early learning and childcare, particularly small group working, more children and families will be able to benefit from an expanded offer in the year ahead. In parallel, we continue to work in partnership with local authorities to agree a new timetable for delivery of the 1140 hours entitlement to all eligible children.

We are already seeing other countries begin to relax their physical distancing restrictions in schools, for younger children in particular, and others are starting to plan for a more “normal” return after the summer break.

The First Minister confirmed on the 15th June that we will now review the scientific assumptions underpinning education recovery as part of our statutory three-weekly review process. This will include, for example, reviewing our approach to physical distancing in schools and equivalent measures in early learning and childcare.

As part of that review process, I have established a new sub-group of the Covid19 Advisory Group to specialise on education and children’s issues. We will get the first review of that material later this week. I would not want to pre-empt such advice, but in order for us to realise our aim to resume full-time schooling, I would expect that various conditions would need to be in place.

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First: infection rates must be at a level that is sufficiently low to provide assurance that we can continue to control the virus.

Second: we must ensure that we make use of our full public health infrastructure locally and nationally to get early warning of issues and rapid local action including test and protect.

Third: there must be the right protective measures and risk assessments in place in schools to keep everyone with higher risk factors – including teachers and staff – safe.

In addition to these, the Covid-19 Advisory Group and the new sub-group have been asked for further advice on any tests or indicators which would show we were on track.

In all of this I will work closely with the Education Recovery Group. Given the change in our central planning assumption to work towards full-time return to schools in August, we will continue to work together over the summer. Local authorities will then communicate arrangements for the return to school with families in due course.

Presiding Officer

We will need all possible education resources at our disposal over the next year - to compensate for the loss of learning pupils have faced, as well as to help us should we need to switch to a blended model at any stage.

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Even with a return to full time education, it is imperative that we increase levels of digital inclusion, which is why we have already committed to a huge digital boost through the investment of £30 million to provide laptops for disadvantaged children and young people. This will include £25 million of funding to enable a roll out of digital devices to school pupils to enable them to study online.

Initial estimates from local authorities are that this funding will be required to provide digital devices to around 70,000 pupils, with up to 40,000 connectivity solutions also needed, although these figures are the subject of ongoing work.

I can now also announce that we will be providing a further £100 million over the next two years to help support the return to school and help children recover any lost ground. This new funding will see us invest to tackle the impact of coronavirus in our schools and ensure that children get the support they need.

We will start with teacher recruitment. Many of this year's probationer teachers have already secured teaching posts with local authorities. We will now work with local authorities with the objective of ensuring that every probationer teacher who has reached the standard for full registration is able to secure a teaching post for the next school year.

And, of course, we will still look to encourage retired teachers and those who are not currently teaching back into the profession wherever this proves necessary.

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I have asked Education Scotland to expand their partnership offer with the ESgoil digital learning platform to develop a strong national e-learning provision. This represents an opportunity to enable all pupils to access high quality lessons – by qualified teachers trained in offering high quality online learning – across as broad a range of subjects and qualification levels as possible.

Finally, while we want to support the wellbeing of all our children and young people, we know lockdown has been particularly difficult for pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Reducing the poverty related attainment gap is a defining mission for this government. We will therefore be working alongside partners to increase support to those families and communities who need it most. We will also seek the involvement of the Youth Work Sector in assisting us in this challenge.

Presiding Officer

Coronavirus has had a massive impact on our education system. It will take a collective endeavour to overcome that, but we have a duty to our children and young people to come together to do just that.

They have played their part in protecting this country from the worst of the pandemic, and now we must repay them that faith by serving their needs at this critical time too.

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