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Date: 15 June 2020

Dear Parent/Carer,

Firstly we would like to thank you and all our children and young people for being so patient, understanding and accommodating during this unparalleled health emergency.

We do not underestimate the challenges faced by young people, who have been unable to see their friends and who have had their routines disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic. Equally, we understand that, for parents and carers, the challenges of supporting children with learning at home while managing other changes brought about by coronavirus may have been very difficult.

We would also like to pay tribute to all our teachers and other education staff who are working hard to provide digital learning and many of whom have also been involved in keeping our community hubs open so that the children of key workers and vulnerable groups can be looked after.

Understandably you may be feeling anxious about how your child will access education following the summer break and we wanted to outline our plans. We aim to ensure that all our children and young people are fully supported and we have been working hard to make plans across early years, primary, secondary and additional support needs schools.

As you are aware, all schools and nursery classes in Scotland have been closed since 24 March as part of the national lockdown arrangements and we have been ensuring continuity of education provision through home and online learning. We know that schools and centres have been making great efforts to stay in contact with parents, carers and pupils over the last two months and we appreciate that this has been challenging.

The Scottish Government recently announced that children and young people will return to school and early learning and childcare settings on 11 August as long as it is safe to do so.

Teachers and other education staff will return to schools and early learning and childcare settings in June to prepare and plan for the forthcoming academic year. Access for those pupils who are transitioning to Primary 1 and Secondary 1 will be arranged, albeit in small groups and with their families, from 15 June. Head teachers and heads of centres at individual schools/centres will be in contact with parents and carers of transitioning children to confirm arrangements.

We are working hard on recovery plans to deliver a blended learning model from August 11 incorporating a mix of in-classroom teaching with home and online learning. This mixed model of learning is needed because the need to have physical distancing measures in schools and early learning and childcare settings means we are not able to accommodate the normal number of children every day. We have already been putting measures in place to assist pupils who require access to digital devices and schools will be in direct contact with those affected.

Health and safety sits at the heart of our plans, with risk assessments and infection prevention and control measures in place. We are working on a range of options which may include smaller groups of pupils being in school for shorter periods and over fewer days, possibly with staggered start, end and break times.

Schools, classrooms and playrooms will also look somewhat different to before, with fewer pupils, group learning, outdoor and alternative classrooms, enhanced hand hygiene and cleaning routines and step by step guidance to help maintain physical distancing.

We know this will be challenging for some young people. Physical distancing is difficult for everyone, but especially children and we will have signage and practical help in place to make sure your child is supported.

Our facilities management team is busy preparing our schools and centres for this. The use of personal protective equipment (PPE) for teachers, early learning and childcare and support staff may be required for some early learning and support settings where close contact with children is required. There is no requirement for children and young people to wear PPE as a general rule.

We know that you will have a lot of questions around how schools and centres will operate, as well as issues including school transport, practical considerations for ASN pupils and future SQA exams. You will understand that this is a complex and fast-moving situation and we are working as hard as possible to finalise the details. We assure you that we will update all parents and pupils as soon as we can.

Childcare support will also be important to you as some parents and carers start to return to work and we are exploring complementary options for families of key workers and support for vulnerable young people.

You and your child's health and wellbeing is of the utmost importance. We hope you have been able to access some of the support resources available if you need it. You can find out more about them in the 'advice for parents' section at www.northlanarkshire.gov.uk/coronavirus.

We also have a support helpline for parents and pupils which can be accessed by phoning 01236 812 380 during the hours of 10am until 3pm, Monday to Friday.

We will be in touch soon with more details about the return to school. We look forward to welcoming your children back to a safe learning environment in August and thank you again for your patience and perseverance throughout this period.

Regards,

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Convener
Education and Families

Derek Brown
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Date: 8 June 2020

Dear Parent/Carer

I am pleased to have the opportunity to write to you to outline the progress we have made in planning for the return of children to school from August 11 onwards. It is anticipated that we will clarify arrangements in more detail in June, but what follows is an outline of our planning and a description of the steps we are taking to consult with various groups of stakeholders.

Planning Assumptions

In August, we have to plan, first and foremost, on the basis of safety. We need to ensure that your child and the staff in schools are as safe as possible and that the opportunity for viral transmission is reduced as far as possible.

In addition, due to government stipulations on physical distancing (2 metres squared, being used as a basic stipulation for schools, and anticipated guidance on smaller groupings in early years settings) it is likely that the capacity of settings to welcome children and young people will be between 40%-50% of current volumes.

We also have a reduction in staff capacity due to the continued need (under Scottish Government guidance) for staff who are part of the shielding programme to continue to work from home, as has been the case during the emergency lockdown period. It is difficult to quantify this absolutely at present, but the service is planning on the availability of 80-85% staff being able to attend work as a basic assumption.

Therefore, as Scottish Government advice makes clear, there will need to be models deployed in local authorities and in private settings which incorporate what the First Minister has called, ‘partial delivery’ and ‘blended learning.’

Opening Schools

It is likely that all young people, with the exception of the children of key workers and designated vulnerable groups will receive between 40%-50% of pre-lockdown education and childcare provision in the recovery period.

While this is enormously challenging for staff in schools and settings, as well as for the young people and those who care for them, it is an absolute requirement if Scotland is to recover its services fully in a way that prioritises health and safety and minimises viral transmission.

In schools, most pupils will experience a partial in-school timetable, equivalent to a minimum two days most weeks, supplemented by an enhanced online digital learning offering and the potential for wider community based support. In primary, the priority will be to take a family-centred approach, overseen by head teachers. In secondary, due to the need to align the senior phase with the offering of key partners, such as New College Lanarkshire, there will be a focus on key year groups attending on particular days.

Importantly, further consultation on how this will operate in practice will take place in June, and the precise detail will be clarified before the end of the school session, in plenty of time for August.

Early Years

In Early Years, the Scottish Government decision to pause the roll out of the 1140 Hours Expansion programme, due to the need to reduce staff:child ratios, means that it will be likely that most parents will receive 600 hours, which they are entitled to by statute.

This is based entirely on the prioritisation of critical child care for the children of key workers and vulnerable children as set out by the Scottish Government. Where local authorities make a critical childcare offer to key worker families and vulnerable families, this should be free at the point of access during the emergency response period.

To ensure settings are as safe as possible for children and staff, there is an expectation that all settings will put in place arrangements to accommodate physical distancing. This will also potentially reduce capacity within individual settings.

How this all works in the recovery period will depend on further advice and guidance from Scottish Government, due to be published on 15 June on arrangements for early years' settings, including private funded providers. Following this, further dialogue will take place with partner providers regarding how they can adapt their settings to comply with guidance and draw down funding from the framework and further communication will take place with parents and carers.

Consultation and Communications

We hope to enlist the support of the members our representative parent groups for the approach we are advocating, which is grounded in clear national guidance and the professional advice of our own central officer teams.

Any plans being brought forward are being done with reference to existing council policy and we will continue to communicate with you as things develop.

We understand you will have questions, many of which we are unable to answer at this point. We are working as hard as possible to manage all of the details and we will keep you updated by letter and at www.northlanarkshire.gov.uk/schoolplans.

Yours sincerely



Derek Brown
Executive Director, Education and Families

