

Dear Mrs Weir

### **Freedom of Information Act 2000**

I refer to your Freedom of Information Request received in the Department 22 June 2020 which requested:

1. A copy of the health guidance or other information that was used to decide to drop the social distance in schools from 2 metres to 1 metre.
2. Details on the decision making process and information that led to schools opening on 24 August and why that changed from 17 August.

In relation to item 1 of your request, as the New School Day guidance makes clear, and as agreed by the Executive at its meeting on 18 June 2020, the current social distancing guidance of 2m must be followed between all adults within the education sector in line with Public Health Agency guidelines, but a distance of 1m is an appropriate planning assumption for social distancing between children and young people while using a 'protective bubble' strategy.

The 1m planning assumption is based on the Minister's decision that schools should reopen to pupils on 24 August, just over a month from now and should be viewed in that context. It will be reviewed and refreshed where appropriate as the Northern Ireland Executive's Coronavirus response is rolled out. The guidance also makes clear that public health advice at the time of school opening will always prevail over the aspirational planning assumptions made within the guidance.

Further detail on the medical evidence considered is available [here](#).

In relation to item 2 of your request, the Minister asked officials and the wider education sector to consider how the Department and education system can jointly prepare for the return of children to school after the current restrictions are eased. The Department has established the Education Restart Programme, which, working alongside a wide range of stakeholders, will put in place the detailed measures and guidance which will enable a safe phased reopening of schools.

The Education Restart Programme will ensure that the reopening of schools is done in a manner and in a timescale which is safe for our pupils, our staff and wider society. The pathway to recovery has been discussed with Executive colleagues and will follow the route outlined in the education section of the [Executive Approach to Decision Making](#) document.

A number of underlying principles will inform restart planning design and delivery. Education Restart will:

- Be **Evidence Informed** – the timing of Restart will be determined by circumstances and evidence, not by dates.
- Seek to **Protect the Workforce and Learners** – the health and well-being of our workforce and our pupils will be a primary concern.
- Require **Collaboration and Consultation with Stakeholders** – Restart will clearly benefit from the support and confidence of a range of stakeholders including delivery partners, unions, teachers, sectoral bodies, parents and learners.
- Involve **Planning for a New Normal** – the impact on the school day will be significant, a transitional service model is required which ensure education is safe and effective.
- Result in **Phasing and Prioritisation** – stringent social distancing in schools will be difficult to achieve. This will require careful management including phased returns, prioritisation of learners and ongoing blended learning.

The Department is well aware it cannot deliver the Restart Programme without the support and confidence of the education workforce. [Northern Ireland Schools Re-opening Guidance](#) was published on 19 June 2020 and supplementary guidance will issue in the coming weeks. To this end, the Department will continue to work alongside stakeholders through both Practitioners Groups and the established consultative fora to ensure a safe and effective re-opening of schools for the benefit of our children and young people.

The guidelines have been co-designed with the school principals on the Practitioners Group. Their insight has been invaluable and their willingness to work at such intensity above and beyond their 'day job' should be commended. Proposals have been shared with trade union colleagues and sectoral bodies for consultation and input.

If you are unhappy with the level of service you have received in relation to your request, you may ask for an internal review within two calendar months of the date of this letter. If you wish to do so, please write to the Departmental Information Manager,

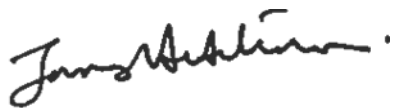
Rathgael House, 43 Balloo Road, Rathgill, Bangor BT19 7PR or send an email to: [freedom.info@education-ni.gov.uk](mailto:freedom.info@education-ni.gov.uk) if you wish to make a complaint.

If you are not content with the outcome of the internal review, you have the right to apply directly to the Information Commissioner for a review of our original decision. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at:

**Information Commissioner's Office**  
**Wycliffe House**  
**Water Lane**  
**Wilmslow**  
**Cheshire SK9 5AF**

If you have any queries about this email, please contact me. Please remember to quote the reference number above in any future communications.

Yours sincerely



**JAMES HUTCHINSON**