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Clare Adamson MSP
Convenor of the Education and Skills Committee

Dear Clare

School Christmas and new year holidays 2020

As the Committee are aware, we have been exploring options around extending the school Christmas holiday period in light of COVID-19. We have discussed the issue at the Education Recovery Group, where there were mixed views on whether or not the Scottish Government should intervene to make changes to the current dates for the holiday period, which vary across local authorities.

I have reached the decision not to make any changes to the planned Christmas and new year holiday dates and I am writing today to set out the reasons for this.

The Public Health advice that I received is to keep schools open as planned as the controlled school environment is more preferable to social mixing outside of school if schools are closed early. In addition, vulnerable children may be at greater risk if they are out of school for an extended period. The view of the Chief Social Work Advisor is that being in school is a very significant protective factor for the most vulnerable children and the longer children are out of school the more chance there is of hidden harm.

Public Health advice is, on balance, that there would be less transmission of COVID-19 through children and young people being in school than mixing out of school. Adding this to the issues around vulnerable children and the need for childcare for key worker children, public health advice is to not change term dates at either end. I am also mindful that an extension to the school holidays could cause significant difficulties for working parents.

In addition, I asked the COVID-19 Advisory sub-group on education and children's issues for advice. The group discussed this at their meeting on Tuesday 1st December and concluded that there should be no change to the Christmas holiday dates. The group reiterated that there is no evidence that schools and ELC settings are driving transmission, and there is no clear rationale for disrupting them and children's education. I attach the advice which I received as annex A.

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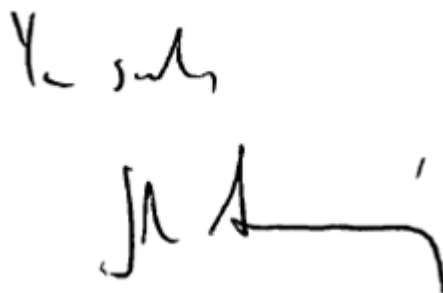
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One issue where there is broad consensus is around the need for school staff to have their planned holidays without interruption due to the need to engage in contact tracing. We also want to avoid families being disturbed on or around Christmas day due to any outbreaks which may involve a school prior to the start of the holiday period. In considering local arrangements, it will be vitally important that every effort is made to ensure that senior leadership teams and school staff get a proper break, and that the likelihood of staff being required to support contact tracing activities over the holiday period is minimised. Please note that contact tracing activities may go back as far as 7 days due to schools being complex environments. We understand that some local authorities have already made arrangements to address this risk, and we are now asking that similar arrangements are put in place as early as possible across all councils. While it is for local authorities, in consultation with their staff, to develop solutions that best suit local needs, options that have been implemented in some local authorities already include: (i) named individuals who have volunteered to be on-call for a local area in exchange for appropriate overtime payments, with access to information to support contact tracing if required; or (ii) putting in place central local authority teams who are on duty or on call over the relevant period and can access the relevant information. The National Contact Tracing Centre have also indicated that they stand ready to support work to contact affected individuals in the event of a case being identified in a school during this period. Public Health Scotland will agree with each Local Health Protection Team on the preferred approach.

Finally, I am sure that all members of the Committee will join me in expressing our gratitude and sincere thanks to school leaders, teachers, all school staff and local authority education officials for their outstanding commitment to the education and wellbeing of Scotland's children and young people this session. The exceptional professionalism and dedication of staff has enabled children and young people to learn safely in school since the return in August. We are also very grateful for the ways in which school staff have supported continuity of learning for children and young people who have been absent from school for COVID-19 related reasons.

Yours sincerely



JOHN SWINNEY

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COVID-19 Sub-group on Education and Children's Issues Summary of advice for school holidays over the festive season

1 December 2020

Background

1. The sub-group on education and children's issues was asked to provide advice on possible changes to the school holiday arrangements, for the purpose of reducing social contact and driving down transmission of the virus before and after the 5 day relaxation of restrictions over the festive period.
2. The sub-group considered 3 possible options at its meeting today:
 - i. Maintain the current arrangements, whereby term dates are determined by local authorities and arrangements made in line with local circumstances
 - ii. Close school buildings from 18 December (meaning the final day of school activity would be 17 December) and reopen on 11 January throughout Scotland, while maintaining current term dates to provide remote learning on weekdays outwith the planned school holidays
 - iii. Close schools and change term dates so that holidays for all schools run from 18 December to 11 January, with no learning or teaching taking place during that period.
3. Prior to this discussion, the group had received a presentation on the current state of the pandemic and compliance; and clear concerns were expressed by sub-group members about the impact of the easing of restrictions over the festive period. The group also heard a short context-setting presentation relating to the decision about school holidays, setting out the legal considerations; views from education stakeholders, senior clinical advisors and the public health community; and practical issues relating to childcare provision and contact tracing.
4. In formulating its advice, the group was asked to apply its expertise and knowledge of the evidence, and to consider (i) the state of the epidemic – including prevalence and degree of community transmission, (ii) coherence with Scotland's wider strategy and consistency of communications, (iii) partner views and practicalities, and (iv) the balance of harms.

Advice

5. Members of the sub-group recognised the range of factors to be considered, and that the decision was finely balanced. However, **the consensus view was in support of maintaining the current arrangements (option 1), subject to some specific considerations.** The following factors were fundamental in reaching this view.
6. There is no evidence that schools and ELC settings are driving transmission, and there is no clear rationale for disrupting them and children's education. Members talked about it making no sense to 'hit' schools, and that it was wrong for vulnerable children to have to 'pay' for the Christmas easing.

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7. There were concerns about the message, which would be inconsistent with Scottish Government's emphasis on school safety and on keeping schools open. Clarity and consistency of message were seen to be important factors. Closing schools for a 3 week period to reduce transmission would undermine the consistent message that schools are safe, and would serve to amplify the concerns that had already been expressed by teachers about the safety of working in schools.
8. Equity was regarded as a key consideration, with significant concerns being expressed about the health, wellbeing and safety of vulnerable children and those living in poverty. Christmas and New Year are often particularly difficult times for these children and young people, and an extended period out of school would increase those difficulties and potentially result in more household mixing for children whose parents are unable to provide care for them. School closures would have a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable children, those who are living in poverty, and those who are at risk from domestic violence or child sexual exploitation. For these groups, the 5 day relaxation of restrictions over Christmas would bring little benefit, and yet they would be the most adversely affected by a longer period without the regular contact, support, and safeguarding provided by schools.
9. It was recognised that we can't tell at this stage whether social mixing would be increased or decreased during a period of closure of school buildings with on-line learning, but group members talked about the considerable efforts made by schools and ELC settings to prevent and mitigate COVID-related harms, and were not aware of any evidence that closing schools for a longer period over Christmas would reduce social mixing. Schools provide a routine and a considerable degree of protection. School closures would not stop social mixing and might increase it. Modelling is not yet available to provide an understanding of likely impacts.
10. There was potential for learning loss (whether from school closure or on-line learning), particularly for disadvantaged students for whom existing inequalities have already been exacerbated by the school closures before the summer. This would be more of an issue in January than it would be in the few days before the holiday period.
11. There were also concerns about parity with other key workers, should additional holidays be agreed for school staff, but not those in health and social care roles, for example. Linked to this, the practical difficulties in providing critical childcare should school holidays be extended or online learning required, would have knock-on consequences for key workers across sectors – either resulting in greater absences from work, or necessitating household mixing to cover childcare.
12. All of these considerations led the group to advise that the current arrangements, whereby school term dates are decided locally and based on in-school learning, should be maintained. However, this was conditional on school staff being enabled to have a proper break over the festive period, and their wellbeing being given due attention. The prospect of having to undertake contact-tracing over Christmas is regarded as being the straw that might break the back of many teachers and headteachers. An alternative approach should be agreed urgently, working with local public health teams and the national contract tracing centre.

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13. Lastly, group members expressed significant concern about January, recognising the range of pressures that will come together, including: an anticipated post-Christmas increase in infections and hospitalisations; the return of schools and universities, likely to lead to a short term increase in cases and the potential for significant numbers to have to isolate; the delivery and administration of vaccine; and the normal winter pressures. For these reasons, allowing for local flexibility to reduce coincident challenges (for example through flexibility/delay of school return dates, and delay of university students returning) would be helpful.

Summary

14. In summary, the sub-group recognised that it was a difficult and finely balanced decision. The members felt that, on balance, option 1 remained the best approach, with the requirement that authorities ensure that staff are able to have a good quality break over the festive season. Approaches to achieving this might include providing support for contact tracing in the run up to Christmas.

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