

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER



Rathgael House
43 Balloo Road
Rathgill
BANGOR
BT19 7PR

Tel: 028 9127 9306

Email: private.office@education-ni.gov.uk

24 March 2020

Dear Colleagues

I firstly want to record my gratitude to many of you for the manner in which you have responded to the very serious threat society is facing from Covid 19. I am greatly encouraged that so many teaching and non-teaching staff have taken the lead in assisting in the educational supervision for children of key and critical workers across Northern Ireland. Yesterday, on its first day of the scheme operating, 519 schools and educational settings were open and available for children and I know more schools and settings have indicated they are also ready to open.

In communication which issued from my Permanent Secretary on 20th March, and in my statement that afternoon, I advised that guidance would continue to be updated and augmented as the scheme became operational. This is to ensure that school and pre-school leaders can respond to questions and queries that arise on the ground and are able to adjust to fast-moving events as they unfold. I have therefore enclosed further updated guidance taking account of the queries we've received from a variety of sources and I will continue to provide further iterations as the days and weeks unfold.

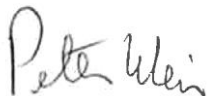
Detailed data was collected yesterday about the number of children and staff attending our educational facilities, I am grateful to you for taking the time to forward this information to the department as it allows officials to plan and make adjustments to the scheme as required.

As we go forward I would like to reinforce the following aspects of the scheme that may be applicable in certain settings:

- Where schools and pre-schools wish to work together to create a localised cluster arrangement, i.e. where certain settings in a close geographical area wish to agree collectively to have a 'hub' type setting to service all children within the area, this is permissible where it is sensible to do so and the daily data capture will continue to collect information around local arrangements. Officers from the Education Authority's School Development Service will support schools and pre-schools locally who wish to engage in a collaborative arrangement. This is covered within the amended guidance attached, including who to contact in the EA and the essential information required;

- We need to ensure that critical workers are able to continue to do their important roles, therefore I will seek to ensure that the education sector can continue to provide assistance for as long as possible. However I would reemphasise the message I have previously stated; that parents / carers should only send children to an educational setting if there are **no other viable arrangements**, schools and pre-schools should be open to vulnerable children or those who have **at least one parent/carer** who is a key/critical in relation to dealing with the Covid-19 response, and all schools and pre-schools must ensure stringent social distancing rules are in place at all times.

For the avoidance of doubt I would strongly encourage all settings to play their part in providing this service for our key/critical workers. Thank you for your continued support and I and my officials are available to continue to assist with the details of the scheme as we move forward.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Peter Weir".

PETER WEIR MLA
Minister of Education