

**Subject:**

**Circular Number: 2021/01**

**FURTHER GUIDANCE FOR SCHOOLS ON SUPPORTING  
REMOTE LEARNING TO PROVIDE EDUCATIONAL  
CONTINUITY**

**Date of Issue:**

4 January 2021

**Target Audience:**

- Principals and Boards of Governors (BoG) of all nursery, primary, post-primary and special grant-aided schools
- Management Committees of all voluntary providers
- Education Authority (EA)
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)
- NI Council for Integrated Education (NICIE)
- Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC)
- Proprietors of Independent Schools
- Governing Bodies Association of Voluntary Grammar Schools in NI (GBANI)
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG)
- General Teaching Council for NI (GTCNI)
- Teachers' Unions
- EOTAS Centres
- Middletown Centre for Autism
- Catholic Schools' Trustee Service (CSTS)

**Summary of Contents:**

This circular provides further advice and guidance to schools on supporting remote learning.

**Enquiries:**

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**Governor Awareness:**

Essential

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Guidance for schools

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None

This circular provides further advice and guidance to schools on supporting remote learning.

**DE Website:**

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## **Further Guidance for Schools on Supporting Remote Learning to Provide Educational Continuity**

### **Introduction**

1. Since the beginning of the 2020/21 academic year, the Department has asked schools to have contingency plans in place for the delivery of remote learning in the event of a school closure, or that a class bubble or any larger group of pupils across a year group need to self-isolate.
2. As a result of the current public health situation, all primary and secondary schools will provide remote education during week commencing 4 January 2021. From Monday 11 January 2021, post-primary pupils in Years 8 to 11 will continue to be taught remotely until the end of January<sup>1</sup>. The situation will be kept under ongoing review dependent on public health advice. The Department recognises the hard work and dedication of school staff, who are making this provision along with accommodating the children of key workers and vulnerable children and in post-primary schools also teaching those year groups continuing to attend school.
3. Schools in Northern Ireland have adapted quickly to the requirements to contingency plan and deliver remote learning. Schools have been making provision for remote learning by providing pupils with a range of hardcopy and online learning materials; finding new ways of keeping in contact with pupils and their families and supporting parents as they assist their children with their learning.
4. This circular updates the Department's circulars 2020/05 and 2020/06 from June 2020 on remote learning and curriculum planning ([Remote Learning Circular June 2020](#) and [Curriculum Planning 2020/21](#)). Schools will be familiar with much of the contents. It is designed to bring together what we are learning about emerging practice during this unprecedented time for our education system. It is not intended to be prescriptive but to support schools as they further develop and refine their practice around remote learning.
5. Further resources, guidance materials and case studies to support remote learning have also been produced by the Department's Continuity of Learning Project. The Education Authority (EA) has developed a website through C2k *MySchool*, to host resources and to

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<sup>1</sup> See [Educational Continuity Direction - 3 January 2021](#).

provide a gateway to access a range of online Teacher Professional Learning sessions and webinars. Access to the website is available via a “Supporting Learning – TPL” icon on your *MySchool* front page. The following link will also provide access: [Supporting Learning – Teacher Professional Learning](#). This website collates and makes available the resources and guidance developed through the Continuity of Learning Project, including case studies. New resources continue to be added.

6. In the initial period of remote learning CCEA created a Home Learning Hub which provided a platform for accessing existing CCEA resources. This Hub has been reviewed and has been renamed, [Supporting the Curriculum and Assessment in 2020/21](#) . The Hub provides information for parents on the NI Curriculum; Curriculum Guidance for schools with links to useful resources; additional links to existing resources; ideas and exemplars for connected learning and active citizenship to facilitate exploration of issues relating to COVID experiences. CCEA has also launched a [Wellbeing Hub](#), which includes a range of resources and links to support student health and wellbeing. CCEA will continue to review and update the hub with materials to support remote learning.
7. Practical advice and support is available to schools from their COVID-19 Link Officer and from both the Education and Training Inspectorate and EA more generally.

### **What is Remote Learning?**

8. Remote learning is where the student and teacher are not physically present in a traditional classroom environment for a specified period. Educational resources, information and support for pupils is provided through hard copy learning resources and/or online including through e-learning platforms. Remote Learning can occur synchronously with real-time teacher to pupil or peer-to-peer interaction and collaboration, or asynchronously, with self-paced learning activities that take place independently of the teacher.
9. The nature of remote learning provision will vary across schools who need the flexibility to plan and provide remote learning that is suitable for their particular circumstances. This includes considering the age and learning needs of pupils, as well as the content of particular subjects or areas of learning. Remote learning for younger pupils and those who may have additional learning needs will typically need more involvement from parents, whilst some older pupils may be able to learn more independently.

10. The terms 'remote learning' and 'blended learning' are often used interchangeably and mean slightly different things to different school leaders, educators, teaching unions, parents and pupils. It is suggested that blended learning is more specifically an approach whereby pupils are provided with in-school learning on a part-time basis and this is combined with remote learning. Blended learning is therefore defined as:

*An approach to education whereby schools will combine classroom based teaching and learning methods within school, with a range of remote learning in order to deliver the Northern Ireland curriculum.*

### **Digital Devices for Pupils**

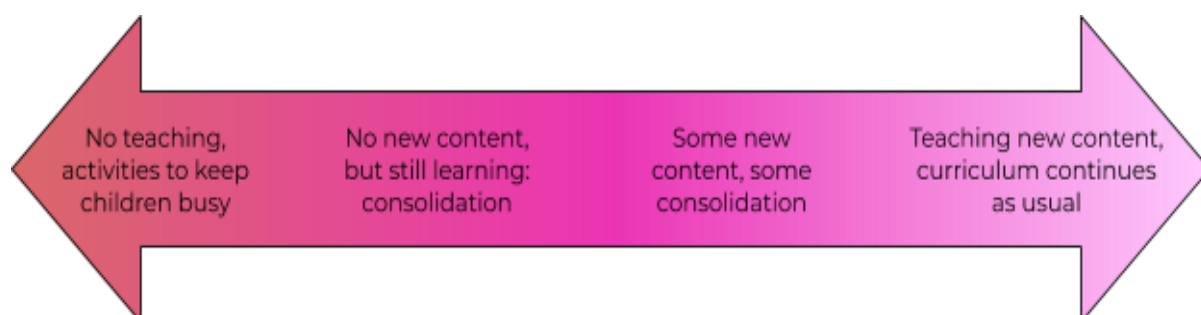
11. The Department is conscious that all pupils do not have the same levels of home support nor do all households have the same level of access to resources, particularly internet connection and devices such as tablets and laptops. Consideration should be given at all times to ensuring availability of resources for pupils without ready online access, including through distribution of hard-copy versions.
12. The Department's scheme to provide IT devices and WIFI access (vouchers or MiFi devices) to our educationally disadvantaged and vulnerable learners has provided over 11,000 devices to date and remains open. The Minister has recently agreed the procurement of up to 10,000 additional devices. Schools can apply for the scheme via the C2K exchange.

### **Planning and Implementing Remote Learning**

13. The Department is very conscious of the pressures faced at this time by teachers and classroom assistants. Consequently whilst this section sets out high-level principles that schools may wish to consider when further developing their remote learning programmes, the Department intends this guidance to provide support and assistance only.
14. One key learning point that has emerged worldwide during the current pandemic is that schools should not expect to make similar progress to taught lessons in any given period of remote learning. It will be necessary to identify key learning priorities, without necessarily sacrificing breadth across the curriculum. Schools will wish to take a pragmatic approach to delivering the curriculum, prioritising key knowledge, understanding and skills in each area of learning.

15. The Department recommend that all schools aim to engage with pupils on an ongoing basis through the wide range of e-learning platforms available rather than provide hard copy or emailed resources alone, if at all possible.
16. Technology can increase both the quality and quantity of remote learning that pupils undertake. The use of e-learning platforms can provide additional opportunities to motivate pupils, establish a daily routine and give ongoing feedback, helping to keep pupils engaged and enhancing their learning experience. Notably, OECD has stressed that the success of all pupils in regard to remote learning and particularly those from disadvantaged groups is linked to maintaining a close relationship with their teachers.
17. The Department has not prescribed e-learning tools to be used by schools, as this will vary according to the pupil profile and the individual subject and task context. The C2K system, however, provides a secure platform and a range of tools to support teaching and learning.
18. At this time, schools will wish to reflect on where they are currently with remote learning and how they want to move forward as they develop their approach. There are a variety of stages in schools' approaches to remote learning along a continuum. Most schools will not stay fixed at one point rather they will be moving along the continuum and adapting as time goes on, based on what works for their school community.

*Continuum of Remote Learning*



19. School leaders will develop an appropriate approach as to what to teach remotely for their school community based on their response to a number of key questions.
  - ✓ What level of access do our pupils currently have to devices and connectivity?
  - ✓ How much can we ask of our staff at this time?
  - ✓ How much can we ask of our parents and families?

- ✓ What level of home support can be provided for learning?
- ✓ Do we want to consolidate existing knowledge and on site learning, or teach new content (the answer to this may vary according to Year Group and subject area)?
- ✓ If new content, what type?

20. Time spent thinking about and developing a clear whole-school approach to what remote learning looks like in your school is important as it will:

- ✓ provide direction and helps the school prepare for the future
- ✓ inform planning and help set priorities;
- ✓ prioritise, align and helps focus the work of individuals across the school;
- ✓ provide purpose; and
- ✓ characterise the school's approach its school community, particularly its parents.

21. The ways in which schools and school leaders develop a vision for remote learning will differ but usually it will be based on the answers to some key questions such as those set out below.

- ✓ What should remote learning look like in our school?
- ✓ What do we need to do differently to achieve this?
- ✓ Can we learn from how others are developing their approach?
- ✓ How will we communicate the vision to parents and the wider school community?
- ✓ How will we deliver drive forward the vision?

22. The EA, working with CCMS and a group of principals, has developed a *Readiness for Continuity of Learning at Home Checklist*, which is attached for information. This may be useful for schools as they continue to refine their plans around remote learning.

23. The Education Endowment Foundation has found that the effectiveness of remote teaching is determined by many of the same factors as determine the effectiveness of live classroom teaching. For example:

- ensuring pupils receive clear explanations;
- supporting growth in confidence with new material through scaffolded practice;
- application of new knowledge or skills; and
- enabling pupils to receive feedback on how to progress.

24. These characteristics of good teaching are more important than the medium of delivery, be it in the physical classroom or through remote provision (whether or not that remote

provision is live or pre-recorded). A key element of success is how to transfer into remote education what we already know about effective teaching in the live classroom.

### **Principles of Remote Learning**

25. In further developing and enhancing their remote learning experiences, schools will, therefore, be reflecting on their pedagogical goals and how technology might help to achieve these goals. In this work, schools may wish to give consideration to the key principles set out below.
- i. Schools might consider the order of teaching in some subjects or Areas of Learning, perhaps delaying some topics and content until later in the school year when pupils may be spending more time in school. Flexibility to alter the sequence will of course depend on the nature of the subject.
  - ii. Learning tasks and activities should be designed to achieve a specific goal or for a specific reason in order to engage pupils. Providing explicit learning objectives and clear success criteria for activities is important and ensures pupils are clear on the purpose and intended outcomes of the learning experience. Having pupils themselves set individual or class goals for working remotely can also increase motivation and engagement. The Education Endowment Foundation has developed a range of planning and reflection tools which schools and teachers may find useful when developing their remote learning practice (<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/covid-19-resources/support-resources-for-schools/>). The planning framework sets out a learning sequence with five approaches to learning – activate, explain, practise, reflect and review – and provides example tasks and activities within each approach.
  - iii. Optimally e-learning learning tasks should last around 10-30 minutes for primary pupils and 30-45 minutes for post-primary pupils.
  - iv. Schools should aim to utilise the multimedia aspects of e-learning through visuals, video and audio where possible. Providing links to videos, online experiments, animations and podcasts can be very helpful by providing pupils with different ways of explaining concepts, assisting those who are less confident, and to work in lieu of teacher-led explanation. Feedback from parental surveys has also emphasised how useful parents have found short videos explaining key concepts with which they are

unfamiliar. This has built their confidence in reinforcing teaching approaches used by the teachers.

- v. It is important as much as possible to adjust existing practice and resources to ensure they are still engaging for pupils working remotely. For example, providing pupils with handouts that would have been used in the classroom can be confusing without the teaching to accompany it, particularly if there are large amounts of text which was to be inserted as a result for example of science experiments or discussions which were to have been completed in class. Schools will wish to consider adapting handouts to ensure they stand alone to provide simple and clear explanations of work.
- vi. Schools and teachers recognise a focus on feedback is key. E-learning tools provide a platform through which to give regular whole class and individual feedback to pupils whilst they are learning remotely (see Assessment and Feedback Section).
- vii. Where possible schools should aim to ensure the resources provided are appropriately differentiated by pupils' ability in order to provide a positive and appropriately challenging learning experience for all pupils and avoid feelings of frustration and confusion.
- viii. When providing worksheets or packs of hard copy resources, it is helpful to send guidance on completion of the activities, model explanations and answers as much as possible in order to assist pupils and also parents in supporting their child's learning. Worksheet style resources without explanations and answers will be an issue for all pupils but in particular for pupils in more vulnerable circumstances. In addition, if schools are emailing worksheet style resources, it is essential to have hard copies available at school or to be delivered or posted, as not all parents will have access to printing facilities and ink cartridges are expensive. Almost a quarter of respondents to a recent report by Stranmillis University College on Home-Schooling in Northern Ireland during the COVID-19 crisis did not have a printer. If possible, schools should actively encourage parents to get copies of resources from school or for them to be delivered or posted.
- ix. Online learning can include:



- asynchronous approaches, which occur more independently at different points in time, based on the child or young person's request or home circumstances; and/or
- synchronous approaches that occur with a number of other children or young people at the same time, usually online.

Asynchronous approaches provide greater flexibility and are easier for parents to manage at home. Therefore, these will remain prevalent when organising remote learning.

Schools may, however, wish to consider implementing some live lessons via a C2K supported digital platform. Scheduling one lesson a day or even one or two lessons a week at a regular time can be valuable and help to develop something of a routine for pupils. It also keeps a level of personal interaction and belonging to the school community, as well as allowing pupils direct access to high quality teaching. Schools will note that when Stranmillis University College asked parents for a single recommendation to improve home-schooling during the first lockdown period, the most common theme was a call for some degree of live interaction with teachers. This recommendation was echoed in the findings of Parentkind both in Northern Ireland and across the UK.

The Department notes that there is no compelling evidence to indicate that such synchronous learning is more effective at improving pupil outcomes than asynchronous approaches through for example pre-recorded lessons. The Department is also conscious of the cautionary note raised by a number of the teaching unions in regard to livestreaming of lessons. It is of course a matter for individual schools in conjunction with their staff to determine whether livestreaming represents an appropriate learning approach for their school community and to ensure that all child protection and safeguarding procedures are appropriately followed.

Given that not all pupils may be able to access such sessions, it is likely they will focus more on deepening and enriching pupils' existing knowledge and understanding rather than covering new curricular content. Research indicates that online teaching must use about one third of the words that would otherwise be used in normal classrooms in order to hold attention.

- x. A particularly important aspect of remote and blended learning are the opportunities it offers to focus on pupil independence as learners. This will support the further development of the cross-curricular thinking skills and personal capabilities, particularly self-management and management of information (see Section on Skills for Learning).. This may include helping pupils to organise their learning and to reflect on what conditions and what types of resource are most conducive for helping them as learners. Providing self-assessment and peer-assessment opportunities is a key element of remote learning allowing pupils **to** reflect on their learning and performance and set goals.
  
- xi. Multiple reviews have highlighted the importance of peer interaction during remote learning. If possible schools should try to provide pupils with the opportunity to collaborate in discussions and group assignments and share their learning with their peers in small groups and online forums. Creating small groups or pairs who share thoughts, carry out peer marking and give feedback on each other's work can be very beneficial. This will help maintain a social connection, help pupils avoid feelings of isolation and encourage pupils to continue working with others as they learn.
  
- xii. Promoting mastery orientations is an important element of remote learning as pupils' perspective of learning activities also determines their level of engagement. When pupils pursue a task because they want to learn and understand (i.e. mastery orientations), rather than for example to obtain a good grade, please their parents, or outperform peers (i.e. performance orientations), their engagement is more likely to be full and thorough. Schools may wish to consider how they can build interactivity and fun into the lesson.
  
- xiii. Flipped learning is a pedagogical approach where pupils first explore new course content before class **by** viewing a pre-recorded lesson, video or digital module, or completing a reading or preparatory assignment. In-class time is organised around pupil engagement, inquiry, and assessment. It typically entails the use of active learning strategies, including case studies, investigating problems or structured discussion. In the current context of remote learning, the concept of flipped learning is important as all aspects of the course are online and pupils will need to explore new content independently. In this context, it is important to note that schools can currently maintain the 'flipped' portion of learning through live class sessions or

setting activities for pupils to engage in remote collaboration such as posing questions for pair or small group discussion, or setting shared assignments.

- xiv. Feedback from schools has emphasised the importance of being open and honest with pupils that it is a learning period for all and that their school will want to gather feedback from them on what is going well, what could be better and what they would recommend to inform the planning and delivery of their lessons and their whole school approach to remote learning.
- xv. Remote learning provides opportunities for collaborative and clustering arrangements between and within schools to explore co-planning and co-teaching, for example to provide thematic experiences which offer learning across the curriculum. In some post primary schools for example, subject departments have divided the planning and resourcing work between them, with a different teacher perhaps taking the lead for different year groups. This can maximise teachers' time and avoid duplication of effort.
- xvi. Schools may wish to consider how best to maintain curriculum breadth and other enrichment activities remotely. Some schools found during the first period of closures that running weekly competitions or challenges for the whole school or particular year groups, for example fitness, writing, art exhibitions or mathematical investigations and involving pupil leadership teams can provide opportunities for breadth and enrichment. Schools may wish to think about any clubs or optional activities that could be provided or meet remotely for example coding or language clubs or skills development in sports. Schools might also think about new clubs and activities that are well suited to being delivered or meeting remotely for example online games clubs, book or film clubs. This can help maintain a balance of academic and extra-curricular learning.
- xvii. School will wish to consider how they can maintain a strong sense of community when learning is remote. The starting point may be to think about the ways you create a sense of community in school and work out what the best online equivalent might be.

### **The importance of Skills for Learning**

26. The central importance of the development of the whole curriculum thinking skills and personal capabilities at the heart of the Northern Ireland curriculum has been underlined

by recent events. Coping with the high level of uncertainty and change presented by COVID-19 requires adaptability and psychological resilience. These skills are paramount in supporting pupils to cope with the rapidly changing environment of the current pandemic.

27. Further, remote learning does provide particular opportunities to focus on pupil independence as learners and on enhancing all of these skills. Skills like self-management, thinking, problem solving, decision making and management of information can be particularly nurtured through remote learning.

Whole Curriculum Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities

- ✓ Managing Information,
- ✓ Thinking, Problem Solving, Decision Making
- ✓ Being Creative
- ✓ Working with Others and
- ✓ Self-Management

28. Schools will wish, therefore, to explicitly consider and reflect on how they are developing these skills in each Area of Learning as they develop their plans for remote learning. CCEA has developed a number of resources to support schools in embedding thinking skills and capabilities into learning, teaching and assessment ([CCEA Resources - thinking skills and personal capabilities](#)).

29. School leaders and staff know that meta-learning – learning how to learn and developing self-knowledge about strategies and behaviours for learning – is a key element of the curriculum. Encouraging pupils to reflect on how they learn and equipping them with a 'growth mindset' are particularly important skills at this time when in-class learning time has been reduced (see [Metacognition and Self-regulated Learning | Education Endowment Foundation | EEF](#))

30. Consequently, schools may wish to make the skills for learning explicit to pupils to support them to build or rebuild their confidence and resilience as learners. The remote learning period could be looked at as an opportunity for pupils to find out more about

their preferred styles and their motivation to learn in different curriculum areas and in different ways.

### **Engagement, Feedback and Assessment**

31. Schools will be considering what monitoring and assessment of pupil progress is feasible during this period of remote learning. As teaching unions have highlighted schools' normal assessment policies have been developed in circumstances when pupils are on site regularly. It is highly unlikely these will be able to be applied without amendment to learning that takes place remotely. Rather the main focus of assessment activity during the current period of remote learning for Years 8-11 should be on levels of engagement and well-being and formative assessment for learning.
32. The first and most basic level of pupil engagement is work completion. The initial challenge is motivating some pupils to complete activities. Research shows that engagement will be higher when goals and expectations are very clear and is followed up. It is helpful to communicate to pupils the resources available to them on the topic or activity and staff availability for support. It can also help to gain insight into the barriers to work completion so that pupils can be supported appropriately. It can be helpful to showcase exemplars of pupils' work to increase pupil motivation and confidence.
33. Schools may wish to put in place school-wide approaches to monitor work completion across the curriculum. This can be helpful to provide an overall picture of a pupil's engagement. If schools detect a lack of engagement, it is vital to make contact as soon as possible with the parent or guardian by email or telephone. This best practice took place in many of our schools during periods of remote learning during both March to June 2020 and the first term of 2020/1. Schools will develop/have their own procedures for determining which staff are best placed to contact parents.
34. It is important to keep conversations positive, personal and focussed on learning. Supportive phonecalls will likely include discussions about consistent learning routines and wellbeing. The capacity for families to focus on school-related learning varies hugely and schools know their families better than anyone.
35. For older pupils, schools may also consider it appropriate to contact the pupil directly through online learning platforms being used by the school such as Google Classroom or by email via the C2K network. Staff who become aware of any child protection concerns

should continue to follow their school's established safeguarding procedures and as updated to take account of arrangements for remote learning.

36. Our pupils are facing many challenges when learning remotely, such as distractions when studying online and less regular interaction with teachers and other pupils. Online learning also requires pupils to be self-motivated and have strong time management skills. Consequently, the importance of regular feedback to pupils cannot be overestimated.
37. As schools and teachers know, numerous studies indicate that feedback is most effective when it is given immediately, rather than a few days, weeks, or months down the line. Giving regular feedback when working remotely can:
- keep pupils motivated and enthusiastic about their learning;
  - give pupils a sense that work is being looked at, so they keep sharing it;
  - keep channels of communication open so pupils and their families feel part of the school community; and
  - enhance pupil learning allowing schools to provide the best possible education in the circumstances.
38. In the remote learning environment, with the absence or reduction of the usual face to face interaction between teachers and pupils, the importance of being as specific as possible when providing feedback cannot be overestimated. Supplying learners with specific information on what exactly they did well, and what may help develop the work further is vital. If the work is good teachers should aim to explain why it is good and if it needs improvement to explain exactly what the pupil needs do to improve, with examples or prompts wherever possible.
39. Schools may also wish to consider using a range of different strategies to feedback to pupils, including audio feedback and to monitor which format pupils respond to most positively. Teachers might also provide opportunities for pupils to self-evaluate their work using the feedback
40. Formative assessment plays a key role in remote learning. It is important that teachers find ways to see what pupils are learning and check for understanding. Many teachers are building formative assessment into their teaching approach through a mixture of quizzes, polls, self-assessments, or asking pupils to film or record themselves explaining a concept or idea. These will help teachers understand

how pupils are achieving during remote learning. Hinge-point questions (perhaps in the form of an online survey) that check whether the class is ready to move on are a helpful tool to check current understanding when working online.

41. Retrieval practice is a strategy in which bringing information to mind enhances and boosts learning. Deliberately recalling information forces us to pull our knowledge “out” and examine what we know. Creating low stakes quizzes to engage learners may promote retrieval practice and also gives pupils something active to do with the knowledge they have acquired. Allowing multiple attempts also supports and promotes the practice of over-learning which is central to the concept of mastery learning.
42. It can be time-consuming to create quizzes and it may be that groups of teachers within Departments can pool resources to support each other. A possible approach is to follow up quizzes with remedial tutorials for small groups if required
43. Many schools have found creative ways to provide their pupils with feedback while they are learning remotely Schools can create whole-class or whole-school feedback loops. For example, a weekly newsletter which pulls together examples of excellent work and awards points and rewards for excellent engagement or outcomes. This could be emailed to all parents and pupils, or posted to those without digital access. The table below provides further ideas for providing feedback when remote learning.

### **Some Ideas for Providing Feedback When Remote Learning**

#### **1. Feedback emails**

This can be done in a number of different ways but is an opportunity to provide pupils with individualised and specific support and feedback. For younger children, parents might email photos of completed work to a designated year group or class email address

#### **2. Comments on photos of pupils' work or on inter-active activities**

Parents or the pupil upload photos of their child's home learning for example on Twitter or the SeeSaw App, and teachers respond as soon as they can. This feedback can be learning-focused or more general praise and celebration of achievement.

#### **3. Showcasing pupils' work in a daily video message**

This can be done in a number of different ways. Teachers can post written whole-class motivational feedback on the previous day or week's work. They can also show examples of good home learning, for example giving children "shout-outs" to praise their work. This also helps to maintain a sense of class community, reminding the children of their classmates' names and faces. It is important for schools to have a clear policy for the use of social media platforms.

#### **4. Online quizzes to give auto-feedback on incorrect answers**

There are a number of free quizzing platforms, such as Google forms, Quizlet and Kahoot that also provide data on pupil responses. This type of low stakes testing provides pupils with opportunities to actively process the information being presented, supports retrieval practice, and can help pupils absorb and remember key information. Auto-feedback can be used to focus on common misconceptions. You set up the quiz to give feedback when a pupil selects an incorrect answer, either to explain the right answer or to prompt the pupil to work out the right answer.

#### **5. Virtual certificates of achievement for pupils who have shown progress each week**

These can provide a motivational tool for pupils and incentivise others to do the same. Younger children can be awarded a virtual star of the week certificate. Schools might wish to incentivise participation in for example an optional additional writing activity.