



Media Release

For immediate release

Date: 16th December 2021

ESC won't make hasty decisions around the return of students to education in January

The Committee for Education, Sport & Culture will closely monitor developments during the Christmas period, particularly around the Omicron variant, before making any decisions linked to the return of students to education settings in January.

However, it is important for all involved in the delivery of education to understand that the focus will be on minimising any disruption as the community must collectively continue living responsibly with Covid-19, which now includes the new variant. The Committee, in response to the latest letter from the NASUWT, said we must find a way to manage the implications of an expected increase in cases as a result of Omicron in such a way that allows education to continue.

It will not make hasty decisions at this stage without evidence that will be gathered during the Christmas period.

However, Deputy Andrea Dudley-Owen, President of the Committee for Education, Sport & Culture, has provided initial responses to the four proposals included in the NASUWT's letter.

Providing onsite testing facilities and resources for pupils throughout the period between January and the February half-term 2022:

The Committee is surprised by this suggestion as it would almost certainly require the NASUWT's members along with other teaching staff to monitor any on-site lateral flow testing of students, including disposal of test results, and the Committee considers this would increase the level of exposure risk for staff. It is unclear from the NASUWT's letter whether they have asked their members about this recommendation. We are currently asking all students to take a lateral flow test before attending an education setting on the first three days of term and will also maintain the extensive surveillance testing programme for contacts of positive cases. Testing before students arrive at school is preferable to testing on-site as it further limits the risk of positive cases attending school.

Staggering the return of pupils to all schools and colleges at the start of January 2022:

Any decision to stagger the return of students to education settings requires us to balance any potential Public Health-related benefits of doing so against further disruption to the delivery of education. Should our dialogue with Public Health colleagues indicate benefits that outweigh the disruption to student's education, which would only compound earlier pandemic-related disruptions, we will of course carefully consider that advice. This is a rapidly evolving situation and we do not intend to take a hasty decision at this stage without evidence that will be gathered during the Christmas period.

Publishing further guidance advising schools and colleges to update risk assessments in light of Omicron, in consultation with staff and trade unions, ready for wider reopening in January:

Our Director of Education ensures the operational guidance for settings is regularly updated and will of course ensure this includes the latest advice around the new variant. Officers have regular discussions with colleagues in Public Health to ensure the latest evidence is included in education decision-making.

Publishing further guidance advising schools and colleges to cancel or postpone non-essential activities or events, to move to online staff and parental meetings, and to mandate staff working from home where appropriate, during this period:

We are confused that the NASUWT is again making this recommendation, as it did in its last letter three weeks ago, when we made clear at that time that it has already been in the gift of each headteacher or principal to cancel, postpone or move online non-essential activities or events. This guidance has been in place since September.