

Response Levels – COVID-19 and Schools

The response to the arrival of COVID-19 to the Isle of Man has continued to be swift and decisive over the course of three lockdown periods. School leaders, teachers and other members of staff have worked under huge uncertainty to provide education for vulnerable children and those of key workers. They have also supported the majority all pupils who remained at home through distance/remote learning and a range of other online provisions. Reviewing provision and other elements of DESC's response to Covid-19 in the Autumn of 2020 led to greater resilience in the system. This preparedness ensured smoother and more efficient transitions to disrupted functioning when the island was required to deal with further outbreaks in January and March 2021.

With increasing numbers of new Covid-19 variant strains, the risk to children themselves of contracting the virus increased. Although there are negative health impacts of being out of school, the third lockdown period saw all schools fully closed and all pupils at home due to the ever changing threat.

As we prepare for an ongoing and persistent threat of the Covid-19 virus, it is important that schools are well-planned and clear about the options they should adopt in the event of a suspected or confirmed cases in their community. It is important, from the outset, to state that – despite detailed planning - schools' responses often need to be dynamic and modifiable in light of specific advice offered by Public Health and the prevailing circumstances at the time.

There cannot be a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. School leaders have shown they are best placed to understand the needs of their schools and communities and to make informed judgments about how to balance delivering a broad and balanced curriculum with the measures needed to manage risk.

Preventing spread of COVID-19 into a school

There are a range of universal precautions which should be maintained to keep all those who attend or work in schools as safe as possible;

- 1) Minimise contact with individuals who are unwell by ensuring that those who have coronavirus (COVID-19) symptoms, or who have someone in their household who does, do not attend school.
- 2) Clean hands thoroughly more often than usual.
- 3) Ensure good respiratory hygiene by promoting the 'catch it, bin it, kill it' approach.
- 4) Introduce enhanced cleaning, including cleaning frequently touched surfaces often, using standard products such as detergents and bleach.
- 5) In the event of a pupil or member of staff becoming unwell whilst at school follow a clear protocol to isolate them and arrange for necessary testing.

Isle of Man Government has published advice on managing the impact of the virus including what to do if you or someone you know develops symptoms and a high-level COVID-19 Response Levels document which summarises the different levels of response that may be adopted;

<https://covid19.gov.im/general-guidance/>

Key considerations will include:

- Communicating closure arrangements with parents and families;
- Communicating closure arrangements with staff, temporary staff and contractors;
- Updating all contact details to allow effective communications;
- Nominating key points of contact for staff during a closure and agreed methods of communication;
- Updating websites, social media etc.;
- Maintaining access to school IT systems;
- Ensuring senior staff have key contact details e.g. school leadership team, school site manager, emergency DESC number.

The Minister will need to authorise any school closure and so the recommendation to do so will need to be made to the Chief Executive Officer by the headteacher and approval to close received before the wider public is informed.

Localised Closure

It is possible that, in the case of future outbreaks in geographically limited areas, a more localised response is called for and that restrictions are placed on individual year groups, schools or clusters of schools. In an Island community like ours this could, of course, lead to problems for families with children in different settings, for employers (including DESC) who may require attendance at work from those whose children are required to stay at home and for school leaders, in particular.

We have understood from our recent experience of managing the virus that it is important, wherever possible, to maintain a strategic educational provision. As stated by the Department for Education, "school is vital for children's education and for their wellbeing". Any areas which can, therefore, remain free from restriction increase the opportunities to maintain education, maintain contact with vulnerable pupils and support the economy.

Response Levels for Schools

The following summary table seeks to provide key aspects of the response for schools.

		School Estate	Staffing	Travel	Out-of-school activities	Meetings	Remote Learning	Social Distancing	Large Gatherings
Level 1 - Stay Responsible	Business As Usual				Out-of-school activities permitted	Ensure contact details for staff are up-to-date	Ensure processes in place for communication and remote learning with all pupils		Large gatherings permitted
Level 2- Stay Safe	Business As Usual with optional attendance	All school sites open	Managed internally	Relax travel restrictions	Restrict all out-of-school activities	Mixed format	Pupils who are not attending school are provided with remote learning, regular contact from school and feedback on learning		Restrict all large gatherings (max 30 people)
Level 3- Stay at Home	Reduced provision – identified year groups or rota system	All school sites open	Managed internally	Restrict to essential travel	Restrict all out-of-school activities	Mixed format	All pupils provided with remote learning, regular contact from school and feedback on learning	1 metre (secondary schools & UCM only) Primary bubbles	Restrict all large gatherings (max 10 people)
Level 4- Lockdown	All provision closed other than for identified groups	N/A	All staff work remotely	Restrict all travel	N/A	All on MS Teams	All pupils provided with remote learning, regular contact from school and feedback on learning	2 metre (for provision settings still open)	N/A

Note: Remote learning: see remote/distance provision guidance agreed in October 2020

		PPE	Cleaning	Hand-washing	Catering	Quality Assurance	Uniform	Communication (community)	Communication (schools)
Level 1 - Stay Responsible	Business As Usual	Optional	Enhanced	Good 'hand hygiene' promoted	Business As Usual		School policy decision		Normal pattern of communication
Level 2- Stay Safe	Business As Usual with optional attendance	Optional – unless working in close contact with pupils	Enhanced	Increased hand-washing	Business As Usual	No External Validations	Uniform suspended		Normal pattern of communication with additional contact with some senior leaders
Level 3 - Stay at Home	Reduced provision – identified year groups or rota system	Optional – unless working in close contact with pupils	Increased cleaning regimes	Increased hand-washing	Stagger lunch breaks	No External Validations	Uniform suspended		Weekly contact (via MS Teams) with senior leaders. Daily Updates by email
Level 4- Lockdown	All provision closed other than for identified groups	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	No External Validations	N/A		Weekly contact (via MS Teams) with senior leaders. Daily Updates by email

Risk Assessments

Having planned for a gradual re-opening, schools will already have undertaken part of the work necessary to balance some of the potential risks associated with COVID-19. Schools should use their risk assessment documents to review risks and draw up any additional plans for the future that include any newly identified risks and an appropriate system of controls.

Staffing

Even with ongoing variation in the prevalence of COVID-19, we expect that all staff will attend school. Those staff who have been required to shield during the course of the pandemic may seek further guidance or advice from HR.

Cross-government policies (e.g. off-Island travel, caring, vulnerable persons etc) which apply to DESC staff should be followed and, where needed, guidance sought from the HR team.

<https://hr.gov.im/policies-procedures-codes-guidance-and-forms/>

In Levels 2 and 3, staff should be kept in as small a 'family group' as is reasonable and, where possible, restricted to reduced areas of schools. Meetings and staff rooms should be modified to try and provide for social distancing and the wearing of face coverings by members of staff when moving around the school should be made optional.

At Level 3 and if pupil numbers allow it, teams of staff should be created. One team can undertake 'front-facing' work while another works from home (or even at a distance in the school, if that is more appropriate). Rotas of teams should be configured such that normal leave allocations are also accommodated.

In order for schools to provide and maintain high quality remote/distance learning during periods of full or partial school closure, and at the same time provide a face-to-face service for vulnerable children and those of essential workers, teachers should not be expected to (and could not) provide or engage in both functions simultaneously.

Remote Learning

Where a class, group or small number of pupils needs to self-isolate, or there is a local or national lockdown requiring pupils to remain at home, schools will be expected to have the capacity to offer immediate remote education. In making such arrangements, it will be important that the principles of effective curriculum planning – the need for continuity, progression, breadth and balance – are ensured.

Schools will develop such remote learning so that it is integrated into school curriculum planning. Remote learning will be an essential component in the delivery of the school curriculum for some pupils, alongside classroom teaching. All schools will plan to ensure any pupils educated at home for some of the time are given the support they need to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and understanding and so make good progress.

The agreed guidance is that for pupils who are not attending schools all or part of the time, they are provided with high-quality, meaningful home learning experiences by the school, that they receive regular contact from the school and that they are provided with feedback on their learning.

A suite of guidance documents were devised by DESC and School/Union leaders in October 2020. These relate to remote/distance learning requirements, safeguarding, and pastoral care that will be provided by schools should their modes of functioning need to change as a result of changes to the Covid-19 response levels. These documents were reviewed, updated and circulated regularly during the 2nd and 3rd lockdown periods.

Such provision may be digital and may also involve the loan to pupils of 'hard' resources such as reading books or other printed resources. DESC has produced a list of high-quality remote learning resources which are available to schools and parents for free.

<https://isleofman.itslearning.com/ContentArea/ContentArea.aspx?LocationID=3690&LocationType=1>

In Levels 2 and 3, large gatherings such as assemblies should be avoided.

Social Distancing

Given the relative age of many users and the consistency of groups using the space in schools, specific guidelines were previously produced to support school leaders in implementing distancing measures within their own organisations during Levels 2 and 3. While these offer general guidelines, they will need to be interpreted in the context of each individual school environment.

We know that Physical Distancing is not always possible, particularly when working with younger children, but if adults can do this when circumstances allow that will help. Consistent groups reduce the risk of transmission by limiting the number of pupils and staff in contact with each other to only those within the group. Maintaining distinct family groups that do not mix makes it quicker and easier to identify those who may subsequently need to self-isolate, and keep that number as small as possible.

Many schools will consider it prudent to move to a 'non-essential visitor approach'. This is a decision for schools, based on their circumstances.

Attendance

Whilst in the appropriate response level (stay responsible) It is vital for all pupils to remain at school to minimise as far as possible the longer-term impact of the pandemic on their education, wellbeing and wider development. School attendance will therefore be mandatory again from (insert date)

This means from that point, the usual rules on school attendance will apply, including:

- parents' duty to secure that their child attends regularly at school where the child is a registered pupil at school and they are of compulsory school age;
- schools' responsibilities to record attendance and follow up absence;
- the availability to issue sanctions, including fixed penalty notices.

Behaviour

Schools should consider updating their behaviour policies with any new rules/policies, and consider how to communicate rules/policies clearly and consistently to staff, pupils and parents/carers, setting clear, reasonable and proportionate expectations of pupil behaviour. The disciplinary powers that schools currently have, including referral to a Facilitated Move panel, remain in place though this sanction should only be used as a final step of managing challenging behaviour and in response to the most serious violations of a school's behaviour policy or code of conduct.

Appendix

<https://covid19.gov.im/general-guidance/>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sars-cov-2-infection-and-transmission-in-educational-settings>

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/causesofdeath/bulletins/coronaviruscovid19relateddeathsbyoccupationenglandandwales/deathsregistereduptoandinclusing20april2020>

<https://hr.gov.im/policies-procedures-codes-guidance-and-forms/>

<https://isleofman.itslearning.com/ContentArea/ContentArea.aspx?LocationID=3690&LocationType=1>

See also following DESC documents:

- Manxified UK Government advice on Schools
- Covid-19 response action cards for Schools