



The Educational  
Institute of Scotland

Mr John Swinney  
Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for  
Education and Skills  
The Scottish Parliament  
Edinburgh  
EH99 1SP

LF/KN/DFM 261020  
26 October 2020

## **By email**

Dear John

### **Strategic Framework**

I write, ahead of Parliament's consideration of the Strategic Framework, to express the view of the Educational Institute of Scotland, Scotland's largest teaching union, with regard to the proposal.

The EIS notes the articulation of a tiered approach to managing the risk of Covid infection. Hopefully, clear identification of the type of data which matches each of the scenarios will help develop public awareness, and potentially encourage greater compliance with mitigations, compared to the current situation where, frankly, people feel outside of the decision making process.

There is, however, a lack of critical detail in the proposals, and this is particularly evident in relation to schools.

The EIS shares the ambition for schools to remain open wherever possible, as long as this can be done safely for both pupils and staff. Our members, the teachers in class delivering lessons daily, understand better than most the critical importance of classroom relationships to the well-being of pupils. Immediately in advance of school reopening when the virus was significantly suppressed, 66% of teachers supported the reopening of schools despite nearly 80% expressing concerns as to their personal safety. These concerns have deepened considerably as the level of community infection has risen sharply.

The safety, and health and well-being of teachers, therefore, requires specific consideration - an aspect significantly underplayed in the Framework. It very much appears to our members that the Government has made a political priority of keeping schools open and in that calculation, teachers can be regarded as expendable.

In particular, the default position at Level 4 that schools are fully open when clearly we need to be looking at blended or remote learning as contingencies, seems to the EIS to be predicated on political messaging rather than controlling the spread of infection.

We have seen school closures, and partial closures, deployed in Wales and Northern Ireland as part of a coherent national strategy for infection control (albeit as short-term measures) but this seems to be ruled out by the Scottish Government despite significant investment of time and resource in contingency measures to enable blended and remote learning approaches. The EIS believes that the deployment of blended or remote learning contingencies should be cited, as a minimum, as required interventions at Level 4 of the Framework.

Within that context there is a subset of concerns for the EIS around paused- shielding teachers, many of whom are currently being forced to attend workplaces by employers who have set themselves against clinically based advice that working from home should be the option used.

Like other teachers, including pregnant staff and those such as BME teachers with identified vulnerabilities, the working environment for these colleagues is one where they are in a confined space with individuals from up to 33 other households and only limited physical distancing in place; something which would not be allowed anywhere else. Aside from the obvious risk to physical health, the mental health impact of this cannot be underestimated.

This applies at all levels of schooling including the senior phase where the infection rate for pupils aged 16 and 17 matches or exceeds that of the general population. The default for students of this age at college or university is blended learning – why are schools different? That the proposed arrangements deviate so far from what is in place within FE and HE calls into question the veracity of Scottish Government's statement within the Framework document that it is equally prioritising 'ensuring the safety of children and young people and the staff who have worked hard to keep settings open' with maintaining full-time face to face delivery of education.

To be clear, EIS members supported schools reopening despite their own very real concerns around safety, and we absolutely agree that keeping schools open should be a priority, but they must be Covid-secure environments. Schools cannot be kept open at any cost. They cannot be kept open at the expense of the safety of teachers and of other school staff.

Additional investment in expanding the school estate and employing the thousands of teachers currently on zero-hours supply lists would help develop greater capacity and resilience in our system. The previous £50 million funding for extra teachers was welcome but it is employing approximately the same level of staffing currently missing from schools through Covid-related absence. It broadly represented the Barnett consequential of UK spending on schools and is equivalent, for a whole year, to the sum currently being deployed to close down hospitality for 3 weeks!

If Education is a priority, additional investment in staff and additional teaching and learning space are essential.

We trust these comments will help inform the Scottish Parliament's consideration of the Strategic Framework, and indeed the subsequent detail required to apply the strategy.

The EIS is happy to expand on any of the points raised in this communication.

Best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Larry Flanagan". The letters are cursive and slightly slanted to the right.

Larry Flanagan  
General Secretary