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Your ref: LF/KN/DFM 061020
Our ref: DFM/EIS/Covid-19 071020

8 October 2020

Dear Larry

COVID-19 – FIRST MINISTER’S STATEMENT TO PARLIAMENT – OCTOBER BREAK

Thank you for your letter dated 6th October 2020, in which you set out EIS’ view on the alignment of any “circuit breaker” measures with October Break and potential impacts on the education workforce.

I would again like to place on record my sincere appreciation of the extraordinary efforts that EIS members, along with all school and ELC staff, are making to keep our schools safe, welcoming places to be under the most challenging of circumstances.

I do not underestimate the pressures that many school staff are experiencing as a result. Our action in providing £80m for additional school staff, along with work to develop an enhanced package of health and wellbeing support for staff, are key parts of our efforts to support schools against that difficult background.

COVID-19 suppression measures and October break

You will by now be aware of the [First Minister’s Statement to Parliament](#) earlier today, during which she announced further, temporary restrictions to control the spread of coronavirus in Scotland. Restrictions are intended to last for 16 days. Restrictions on licensed premises will come into force from 18:00 on Friday 9 October, with all other restrictions applying from 00:01 Saturday 10 October.

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I hope you will accept that these measures have not been introduced lightly. They are carefully targeted on the basis of the best evidence we have available, designed to be necessary and proportionate to our aim of reducing the significant harms people are experiencing from COVID-19, and introduced only after a full analysis and weighing of wider impacts.

You will have noted from the First Minister's statement that we are not imposing mandatory travel restrictions at this stage and, specifically, we are not insisting that people cancel any half term breaks they have planned.

However, in general, we are advising people living in Greater Glasgow & Clyde, Lanarkshire, Ayrshire & Arran, Lothian and Forth Valley not to travel outside the health board area they live in, if they do not need to. We are also advising people in other parts of Scotland not to travel to these areas if they don't need to.

In developing the measures announced today we have sought, to the greatest extent possible given the challenging situation with the virus, to protect people's lives from unnecessary disruption and to support their mental health and wellbeing.

Protective measures in schools

You raise the matter of supporting physical distancing in schools by employing additional staff and supporting the expansion of the school estate to accommodate them.

As you are aware, the current guidance on school reopening is informed by the scientific advice we have received to date. Our guidance makes clear that altering class size and composition is one option that schools can consider to help maintain distancing. While the employment of teachers is a matter for local authorities, against a backdrop of the highest teacher numbers since 2010 and the highest number of primary teachers since 1980, we have provided £75m for local authorities to recruit additional teaching staff in support of education recovery.

At the current time the advice and evidence we have available to us, which is shared regularly with CERG members, does not in my view support a conclusion that there is a need for tightening of physical distancing requirements in schools. However, we continue to monitor this closely, and local authority plans for blended learning remain an important contingency in the event that this position changes in the future.

On the matter of ventilation, you will be aware that a meeting was held earlier this week on draft updated guidance, with EIS colleagues in attendance. Officials were grateful for the helpful feedback provided at that meeting, and are working to finalise updated guidance for dissemination shortly. The revised guidance has benefited from expert input from a range of organisations including Health Protection Scotland, and aims to strike an appropriate balance between providing adequate heating and ventilation whilst minimising the risks of transmission. Positive feedback has been received from the Health and Safety Executive on the most recent draft, which will be discussed at CERG on Thursday 8th October.

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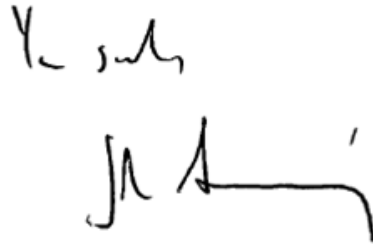
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Finally, on the matter of previously-shielding staff, a discussion on this matter is scheduled for the next CERG meeting. While the Scottish Government will propose some updates to the next version of the school reopening guidance to ensure greater clarity, current advice from clinicians and the Deputy Chief Medical Officer is that an approach involving individualised risk assessments remains appropriate. I will be happy to discuss this further with you and other CERG members later in the week.

I look forward to continuing to work constructively with you and your members on the significant challenges that lie ahead for our education system, with a view to ensuring that schools remain safe, open and welcoming for our staff and children and young people.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Swinney', written in a cursive style.

JOHN SWINNEY

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