

## **Letter to Special Needs Assistants on Government Plan to reopen Special Education**

1<sup>st</sup> February 2021

Dear Colleagues,

I am writing to you to confirm that earlier this afternoon (1<sup>st</sup> February), Fórsa's Education Division Executive Committee (EDEC) decided to support the latest proposals from the Department of Education to re-open special schools and special classes in the context of wider moves to enable the entire school service to revert on a phased basis to in-person learning from the end of February.

The new reopening plan will enable special schools to open from 11<sup>th</sup> February, with 50% student attendance each day. Special classes would then reopen for all their students from 22<sup>nd</sup> February. Discussions will commence this week on the further phased reopening of primary and post-primary services from the end of February.

The EDEC noted that significant improvements have been made to the reopening plan for special education since the first proposal for full reopening was announced on 6<sup>th</sup> January. These are:

### **The overall number of Covid-19 cases**

When the initial plan was announced by the education minister on 6<sup>th</sup> January, the country was in the midst of an alarmingly high rise in the number of daily Covid cases. Some 6,521 new cases were announced for 6<sup>th</sup> January, rising to 8,428 cases the following day.

The number of cases has steadily reduced since then. It is now close to 1,200 per day, with NPHET projecting that numbers will continue to decline throughout February. The EDEC noted that special education remained open during October and November, when daily cases ranged between 600 and 1,200 per day.

Having taken account of the clear public health advice that cases will continue to decline throughout February, the EDEC determined that returning to limited in school services was at least as safe as it was last term, if not safer given the improved safety and mitigation measures agreed.

## **Public health position on reopening special education**

The HSE will continue to test close contacts in schools and has now resumed this service in the wider community. Enhanced regional public health teams will continue to support schools with advice and interventions as required. To date very few SEN staff have tested positive for Covid-19 since schools reopened in September. For instance, in the last week of the last term 852 tests were carried out on close contacts in schools, including 100 tests on adults (staff) in special education, with a positivity rate of 3%. In evidence to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health on 22<sup>nd</sup> January, the deputy chief medical officer confirmed that reopening special Education involved up to 5% of the school population returning to on-site provision, and that this would not have any adverse effect on community transmission rates.

We the CMO or DCMO being asked to confirm that the reopening of special education is as safe as it was last term and that such confirmation will be communicated publicly prior to the limited reopening on 11<sup>th</sup> February.

## **Limited, rather than full, reopening**

The initial reopening proposal was to have all SEN services open from 11<sup>th</sup> January. This was revised in the second reopening proposal, which said 50% of students in special Schools would attend, with full attendance in special classes where additional space could be utilised. The availability of additional space in schools for special classes will assist with maintaining social distancing and ventilation. Previous plans also called for all SNAs in mainstream classes to report for work whereas the third plan only covers Special Schools and Special Classes with mainstream provision being dealt with in talks on reopening all of primary and post primary services.

## **Improved PPE for staff**

The initial reopening plan did not contain any improvements in PPE. The new reopening plan provides for the recommended surgical masks to be used by SNAs and teachers. Staff in special schools will finally have access to the same levels of PPE as in the HSE where aerosol spreading procedures are carried out. Schools can apply for additional funding for PPE if required.

## **More protections for vulnerable staff**

Fórsa and the INTO secured necessary protections for staff with medical conditions that put them at high risk if they contract Covid-19. And for staff aged over 60, who all fall into the same high risk category.

These staff groups will not be required to work in classrooms during the phased reopening as they can work remotely with students who are not attending school, who will need

remote support from an SNA. Substitute SNAs can be employed to cover absences as required.

### **More protection for pregnant SNAs**

Unlike previous versions of the reopening plan, SNAs who are pregnant will not be required to attend work. They will work remotely with students. This is due to new research on the health status of pregnant workers in healthcare settings and, as a precaution, pregnant SNAs and teachers will not be asked to return to the classroom.

### **Childcare for schools staff**

The initial reopening plan did not take into account the difficulties that SNAs with school aged children currently have in accessing childcare. The decision to classify schools staff as essential workers means that staff can now access subsidies should they need to source provision.

Staff can also avail of parental leave or unpaid leave if they are unable to secure appropriate childcare before the full reopening of schools. The EDEC noted that this difficult situation would encompass 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> February, prior to the mid-term break, and the final week of February prior to the proposed reopening of primary schools at the end of the month.

Fórsa will be issuing further advice on an individual basis to members affected by this problem.

### **Review of school transport**

Both the previous reopening plans stated that school transports would operate as usual. The new reopening plan states that students will retain their place in the transport scheme, but parents will be offered a grant if they prefer to transport their child to school themselves.

The EDEC noted that, when considered alongside the reduction in numbers attending special schools, this measure was the best outcome possible and that the measures should reduce the number of students using transports.

### **Covid-19 vaccination for SEN staff**

The EDEC noted that there was a clear, demonstrable need to reopen special education as soon as it is safe to do so, and that this could not be further delayed by insisting that staff be vaccinated prior to returning to work with students.

Unions have now been informed that SNAs will be prioritised within the first 30% of the population to receive the vaccine. We do not have an indicative timescale, but we anticipate

the vaccine being made available to SNAs once the very vulnerable groups and frontline health workers have all been vaccinated.

SNAs have been moved up the schedule into the first third of the population to receive the vaccine, further clarification on timescales will issue once the national programme is finalised.

### **Serial antigen testing**

Fórsa has continued to argue for antigen testing to be made available to staff. The EDEC noted that the Northern Executive last week announced proposals to commence antigen testing of SEN staff in special schools soon. The union has sought similar provision in the Republic. The HSE advice on antigen testing is that it is not accurate and not recommended for use in schools by the WHO. This is disappointing and discussions between the unions and the Department of Education are continuing.

### **Better Covid-19 risk assessments in schools**

This new reopening plan does contain a new requirement to update and refresh the pre-existing Covid-19 response plan in each school, in accordance with nationally-agreed 'work safely protocols'.

Schools must obtain completed 'return to work' forms from staff, or verbal confirmation that there has been no change in health status since last term.

New advice will issue to parents on when to keep children at home and when it's safe to send them into schools based on symptoms. New guidance on ventilating classrooms will issue to schools.

Schools will also be advised to assess their compliance with cleaning regimes and all other aspects of their risk management plans. Lead workers representatives must be available to assist with this process in advance of reopening.

### **Flexibility on student attendance**

Unlike previous versions of the reopening plans, the new version allows flexibility should parents not wish to send their child into school for some or all of the week. Local flexibility can be used to ensure that in special schools where 50% attendance is possible. Remote support from SNAs will be available on days students cannot attend. When special classes reopen, SNAs will have to continue remote support for those students who do not attend School.

## **The Fórsa EDEC decision**

The EDEC took account of all elements of the reopening plan and the continued progress made in reducing Covid-19 transmission as a consequence of the current Level Five public health restrictions. It determined that the reopening plan is as safe as possible.

The range of improvements secured since early January will ensure that the risk and mitigation measures will be more effective as staff return to schools from the middle of February.

SNAs have continued to support students throughout the school closures and the EDEC welcomes the belated decision of Government to officially designate SNAs as essential staff.

The EDEC concluded that the new reopening plan represented a significant improvement on previous proposals, to the extent that the executive could support the plan and encourage all SNAs who are able to return to the classroom to engage with the proposals and to resume badly-needed in-person supports for their students.

Fórsa took the correct decision not to support previous plans to reopen schools on the basis that we did not believe the reopening would be as safe as possible. This final plan for reopening our schools will enable SNAs to return to in school supports in the safest manner possible.

We have always known how important SNAs are to their students, perhaps the most positive development over the past few weeks is that the public and the media now finally appreciate the real value of our SNAs who provide such essential services and supports to vulnerable students.

Yours Sincerely,