

Our Ref LF/CR  
Your Ref

Please ask for Caran Richardson  
Direct Dial 01467 533305  
Email [caran.richardson@aberdeenshire.gov.uk](mailto:caran.richardson@aberdeenshire.gov.uk)

Laurence Findlay  
Education & Children's Services  
Woodhill House  
Westburn Road  
Aberdeen  
AB16 5GB  
Tel: 01467 537438

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[laurence.findlay@aberdeenshire.gov.uk](mailto:laurence.findlay@aberdeenshire.gov.uk)  
[www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk](http://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk)

Parent/Carer

Dear Parent/Carer

The First Minister launched “*Coronavirus (COVID-19): Framework for Decision Making – Overview of Public Engagement*” on Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> May 2020 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-framework-decision-making-overview-public-engagement/>. This provides guidance for local authorities and schools to allow a gradual and phased re-opening over the coming weeks and months. Officers in Aberdeenshire Council have been working over the past few weeks to consider possible scenarios and now that we have national guidance, we will use this to inform our next steps and plans for the future.

It is clear that we will all have to continue to be flexible about learning arrangements for the foreseeable future. While the number of in-school hours possible from August may not be what you are hoping for, I am sure you will appreciate safety must come first and employers are expected to support parents as far as possible.

In terms of how we are supporting plans for schools to re-open across Aberdeenshire, I am currently leading virtual weekly update meetings with all Head Teachers. We will be using these to discuss the latest national advice as this continues to emerge and inform local plans which will be developed in the coming weeks.

In Aberdeenshire we are fortunate enough to benefit from having a dedicated learning estates team, recognised at a national level for their excellent work. They have fed into national discussion around how best to operate within our ‘new normal’ and the many and varied considerations around this. There are many issues we need to resolve over the weeks ahead, including school cleaning, hygiene, catering, staffing and transport, to mention only a few, and our in-house expertise in learning estates planning has already given us a head start.

I should underline, however, that this is a hugely complex task and it will take some time for the plans to emerge locally for each school. We will work to advise of progress being made as soon as possible and your Head Teacher will keep you updated about specific arrangements for your child(ren) as soon as they possibly can.

From the start of the new school session in August 2020, young people will have a mix of class-based learning at school and home learning. This may vary depending on the school your

child(ren) attend(s) because we have over 170 schools across Aberdeenshire, with varying numbers of children and young people attending and a variety of different building designs. Staffing and social distancing requirements will impact schools in different ways as we work to ensure the health and safety of all children, young people and staff. It is important that we take the time to put detailed plans in place for each setting. **The new school year will start on Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> August.** This is a week earlier than planned and has been agreed nationally. The holiday time that has been lost will be allocated at another time and we await further guidance on this.

It is appreciated parents and carers as well as employers will have many questions about the months ahead, not all of which can be answered yet. Here are some of the facts so far about our 'new normal':

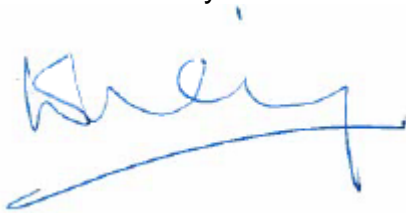
- The phased return to school settings will be offered to staff and pupils who are not shielding, self-isolating and present with no symptoms of COVID-19.
- The main driver for the phased return to school settings is to offer face-to-face education within school buildings whilst minimising the interaction between groups of pupils. To do this settings must:
  - Reduce the size of classes and keep children in small groups without mixing with others
  - Stagger break and lunch times, as well as putting in place clear protocols for drop offs and pick ups
  - Increase the frequency of cleaning, reduce the use of shared items and utilise outdoor space
- Class sizes will need to be reduced and/or the number of year groups attending at any one time will need to alter. This will have an impact upon family groupings, transport and teaching approaches.
- Whilst the local authority had anticipated successful delivery of an increase to 1140 hours of early learning and childcare (ELC) for all 3 – 5 year olds by August 2020, the reduction in available capacity in comparison to the scale of the estimated demand will make this unachievable in the short term. Capacity will have to be reduced to respect and enable appropriate social distancing and mitigation for potential infection spread, making use of the direct/easy access to additional outdoor space almost all our setting spaces have.
- There will be a continued focus on working in partnership with the independent sector to deliver ELC and ensure a coordinated approach.
- Best practice guidance will be developed in order to support the most appropriate deployment of staff, inside and outdoors.
- Ensuring appropriate arrangements are in place for children and young people with additional support needs is also a key focus of Aberdeenshire's strategy work.
- Considerations around an increased focus on outdoor learning are also being thought through, including providing shelter, additional clothing and equipment and further investment in training for staff.
- Planning around facilities management will include an increased focus on signage, and careful planning of entrance and exit points as well as access routes (particularly for larger schools). There is also work ongoing to consider the use of staff rooms, offices and toilets as well as classroom layouts and ensuring rooms are well ventilated.

Whilst individual Head Teachers will share relevant information with you all, the Council will also be looking to share as much information as possible with parents/carers over the next few weeks and we will do this via our website and our social media channels, so please look out for these

communications. I am also meeting with Parent Council Chairs over the next few weeks and will provide more detail, which they in turn can share with their Parent Forums locally.

In very challenging circumstances, schools have adapted very well to providing home and online learning, and young people and parents have responded to this really well. I am in no doubt that we will overcome the challenges ahead and I would like to thank staff across Aberdeenshire for their efforts. I would also like to thank all parents/carers for your continued support and I hope you and your families are all keeping well at this difficult time.

Yours sincerely



**Laurence Findlay**  
**Director of Education & Children's Services**