



UNISON Scotland response: Return to Education– June 2020

UNISON is Scotland's largest trade union with members across the public, private and third sectors. Our members are key workers schools and early learning and childcare settings in roles like early learning practitioners, classroom assistants, technicians, janitors, cleaners and providing support to children with Additional Support Needs. We therefore welcome the opportunity to respond to the committee's call for evidence.

Evidence

UNISON's survey of education staff shows the vast majority are anxious about plans for more children to return to schools and nurseries. Before they return we need clear guidance about how we keep children and staff safe followed by safe implementation of the guidance. Education budgets were already challenging therefore there will need to be substantial funding in order to put measures into place to ensure safe learning and care.

In order to move forward safely workers need clarity about:

- testing to ensure staff and children who are a-symptomatic don't come into settings
- infection control: hand washing regimes and equipment, cleaning settings and equipment appropriately, thoroughly and regularly and the provision of materials to be used by staff throughout the day when needed
- social distancing measures in place where appropriate
- agreement on and provision of appropriate PPE, particularly for healthcare and intimate care and maintaining supplies of PPE.
- training on how to implement infection control and use of PPE
- adjustments for staff in or living with/caring for people in high risk categories

The education estate is extremely varied so a lot more work needs to be done on the ground to ensure safe return. This will require risk assessments in individual settings and specific responses to issues raised in the assessments. Many staff and pupils have specific health conditions and Additional Support Needs. They will need an individual assessment too. Staff were already concerned about infection control in schools before Covid-19. Budget cuts have led to reductions in cleaning staff and how often education settings are cleaned. There will have to be a substantial increase in how often and thoroughly schools and early learning settings are cleaned if we are to avoid the spread of the virus.

An effective testing programme will be essential to safe opening. While there appears to be some evidence that the children may have a lower risk of severe illness from COVID-19 that is not the same for staff or indeed family members of children and staff who may contract COVID-19 in schools and take it back home. Members are particularly concerned about children from families who are not following the rules and the risk they pose to other pupils, their families and staff if they are carrying the virus into schools and early learning settings. Returning to work with children and the other extra efforts made by

staff who are currently working will have to be acknowledged as part of the overall process of recovering from coronavirus.

UNISON surveyed members before the First Minister's statement on the reopening of schools. The **Key findings were:**

- 78% of staff who are working with pupils and families at the moment are concerned about their safety at work,
- 27% say they know risk assessments have taken place but are not confident that action has been taken to respond to issues raised.
- 25% are not aware that any risk assessments have taken place
- 10% say they have had training on Covid-19 health and safety e.g. infection control, correct use of PPE or carrying out a Covid-19 risk assessment
- Only 24% felt that establishments were cleaned often enough to keep them safe from Covid-19
- 46% did not feel they had enough PPE, 42% didn't know what they should have and 12% felt there was enough PPE.
- 43% say their workplace does not have the staff, resources and expertise to ensure all health and safety measures and risk assessments are in place. 19% felt they were. The rest did not know.
- Of those who had children of their own, less than 10% felt it was safe for their children to return to school or nursery.

quotes from staff in survey:

"I am really concerned every time I need to go to school and work with children where I am not confident they or their families have not been in contact with other people."

"PPE just getting implemented now and risk assessment only meeting primary/secondary hubs not early years environment."

"Kids with Additional Support Needs aren't able to comply with any social distancing measures and many require personal care"

"At present I feel ok at work as we are following government guidelines and we only have a small number of children in. I do feel more concerned about schools reopening as normal."

"You cannot social distance in a nursery, I have been caring for NHS children who are 13 months old, so need changed, comforted, put to sleep"

"I work in an ASN schools, a lot of our children don't understand social distance, also social distance is not possible when carrying out personal care duties and assisting with moving and assist duties. I am worried that we will have too many children in one class who will not be able to comply with social distancing and although we have PPE the children will pull off face coverings and rip aprons from the staff etc I struggle to believe the children and staff will be safe."

A key issue will be infection control practices in school and early learning centres. UNISON has been raising concerns for sometime about the impact of budget cuts on cleaning regimes. Previously classrooms were not cleaned daily. This is clearly cannot go on. There will need to be clear science based guidelines on cleaning standards and ensuring they are kept, as well as cleaning materials available to clean surfaces and equipment throughout the day should that prove necessary. There will need to be a substantial increase in the numbers of cleaning staff in schools.

Toilets will require special attention. Supplies of liquid soap and disposable hand towels must be maintained. Throughout establishments there will need to be hand washing facilities and gels and wipes as well as routines in place to ensure that staff and children use them frequently. For example washing hands on arrival, between activities, after breaks, before and after lunch etc

New regimes for school lunches will be needed. Again it will need local evaluation. What can be safely provided will vary from location to location depending on the size, shape and age of school dining halls and kitchens. There will also need to be cleaning of tables etc. Again staff will require training and PPE.

The detail of PPE for needs to be agreed based on scientific advice and equipment and training on the use of the equipment will need to be provided. This will need to include healthcare, administration of medicines and intimate procedures which take place in schools and early learning settings. Issues like pupils spitting at staff and dealing with violence will also need to be evaluated through a risk assessment of some children. Trade unions must be involved in risk assessment and mitigation planning for any risks. The assessment should be shared with staff and union representatives. There also needs to be staff training on risk assessment and infection control.

Funding

Before this crisis local authorities were feeling the effect of years of cuts (7.6% since 2013/14 – While Scottish Government funding decreased by only 0.4%, ¹ Budget cuts meant that councils were struggling to provide existing services before the crisis, far less having the capacity to respond to the new demands that have arisen. They are rightly looking to the Scottish government to ensure that they have the resources to meet the new demands. One lesson that has to be learned from this crisis is that we need stronger more resilient local authorities. These need to have the capacity not just to provide their own finances but also the powers to develop and sustain local networks of supply and provision of essential products and services.

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¹ Audit Scotland report).

<https://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/report/local-government-in-scotland-financial-overview-201819>