

## **Ministerial Briefing Paper – Whether to close schools early before Christmas - prior to the scheduled closure date of Friday 18 December**

**3 December 2020**

### **Introduction**

There has been an increase in the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in schools since schools returned after the autumn half-term break. The number of confirmed cases and the frequency of cases has risen more significantly during the second half of November and into December. It should be noted, however, that the drivers of these positive cases are, predominantly, community based, with the overall increase in prevalence connected to social events in gym and hospitality venues.

The rise, nonetheless, has caused concern amongst school communities and the wider public as the direct contacts of index cases in different classes and year groups across primary and secondary schools have been required to isolate in relatively large numbers. Isolation for pupils and staff can be up to ten days following a confirmed case.

The autumn term is scheduled to finish on Friday 18 December with schools returning after the Christmas break on Monday 4 January. There have been requests from staff, parents and teaching unions for early school closure, with schoolwork being moved remotely as was the case during the lockdown earlier this year.

Consideration has been given in this briefing paper to the efficacy of closing schools a week early, with schoolwork being delivered remotely. Those requesting this cite the following two arguments:

- There is an increasing rate of COVID in schools which school closure will curtail;
- Parents and staff are concerned that isolation requirements following a confirmed case in the last week of school will result in families isolating over the Christmas period.

There are other considerations to note for the operation of schools leading up to the Christmas break:

- School leaders and union colleagues are concerned about the availability of supply staff to support the day-to-day operation of the school, due to relatively high levels of staff absence; and
- The impact of remaining opening on vulnerable staff (linked to the point above).

The current assessment by medical and public health policy officials is that the number of cases in schools remains low and that school settings are not significant vectors of transmission. The recent cases seen following half-term and more recently are the result of

cases arriving in schools from infection that has spread from hospitality, in private functions, from fitness groups and from private parties.

### **The current policy position**

Following the closure of schools during the lockdown period the following medical advice was received by the Minister from the Scientific Technology Advisory Cell (STAC) supporting the policy to fully reopen and keep schools open:

There has been continued extensive discussion at STAC on the growing evidence of:

- The limited effectiveness of school closures on decreasing the infection rate at this stage of the curve;
- The low likelihood of children contracting the virus;
- The low likelihood of children spreading the virus to others;
- The low health impacts of Covid-19 infections in children; and
- The **increasing** wider health impacts of school closures on children and parents/carers.

Since schools started to reopen during the second half of the summer term following the period of lockdown, full school opening to enable physical learning has continued to be the policy of the Minister and the Government.

### **Key considerations for schools remaining open until the end of term**

The following advice is provided to the Minister to support in determining whether or not to close schools early before the scheduled Christmas holidays are due to commence.

### **There is no strong medical or public health supporting argument for the early closure of schools**

The Scientific Technology Advisory Cell (STAC) has provided the following advice with regards to schools remaining open until the end of the term:

- There is limited effectiveness on curtailing the spread of the virus by closing schools. Whilst there has been some spread of the virus to children on the island, the majority of this was from adults to children and most likely did not take place in the school environment, but rather through household contact or social activity outside of the school environment.
- The vast majority of other jurisdictions, particularly in Europe, which have actually gone into a second lockdown have kept schools and educational establishments open throughout.
- The evidence continues to show that the health impact of the virus on children is low.
- There is increasing evidence of harm by keeping children out of school for longer periods both to them and potentially their families. Further, it is understood that there is emerging evidence that academic outcomes are directly related to the number of days that children spend in school and the more days missed correlates with poorer outcomes. This will potentially affect individual children's life chances and, as a consequence, their health in the longer term.

## **Childcare implications for parents/carers whose employment needs to continue uninterrupted**

During the lockdown period a Critical Workers and Vulnerable Children's Hub was created. Places in schools were made available for identified pupils. Consideration has been given to doing this again. However, this is more challenging now as the numbers requiring places would be higher (due to not being in lockdown – more parents will require support to enable them to work) and staffing is more problematic (due to relatively high absence rates in some schools).

Closing schools early will have a significant impact on those required to work. Although a hospitality circuit breaker has been announced, retail outlets remain open. Many will now work from home and the challenges of juggling home learning, childcare and work in the home was very evident during the earlier lockdown.

Often childcare arrangements fall to grandparents, many of whom will be impacted by the new government advice provided to the over 70s. In addition, there is also concern of illegal and, in all probability, unsafe childcare arrangements being put in place. We have already been made aware from representation from Romanian and Polish community organisations that their communities will be seriously impacted should schools close and have asked for schools to remain open.

## **There will be an impact on learning for all pupils**

Pupils have missed unprecedented teaching days resulting from the pandemic. Although online learning has been made available, all recognise this is not a substitute for face-to-face learning. Although all phases are impacted, there is particular concern for those pupils preparing to sit exams in the Spring and Summer term. A further loss of teaching will compound those days already lost.

Consideration has also been given to moving online learning only to older year groups where the prevalence of COVID has been higher (e.g. Years 11, 12 and 13). However, this is not recommended for the reasons outlined above. In addition, there is concern that there will be a downside to school closure, particularly for older year groups, in terms of unstructured socialising outside of school/college settings.

Finally, moving to a blanket system of remote learning disproportionately impacts on children from lower income backgrounds. Some will not have access to any or suitable technology, meaning their remote learning experience will not be comparable with others who have better access and support for their learning. Every day of remote learning will continue to compound the attainment gap between children from lower and higher income families.

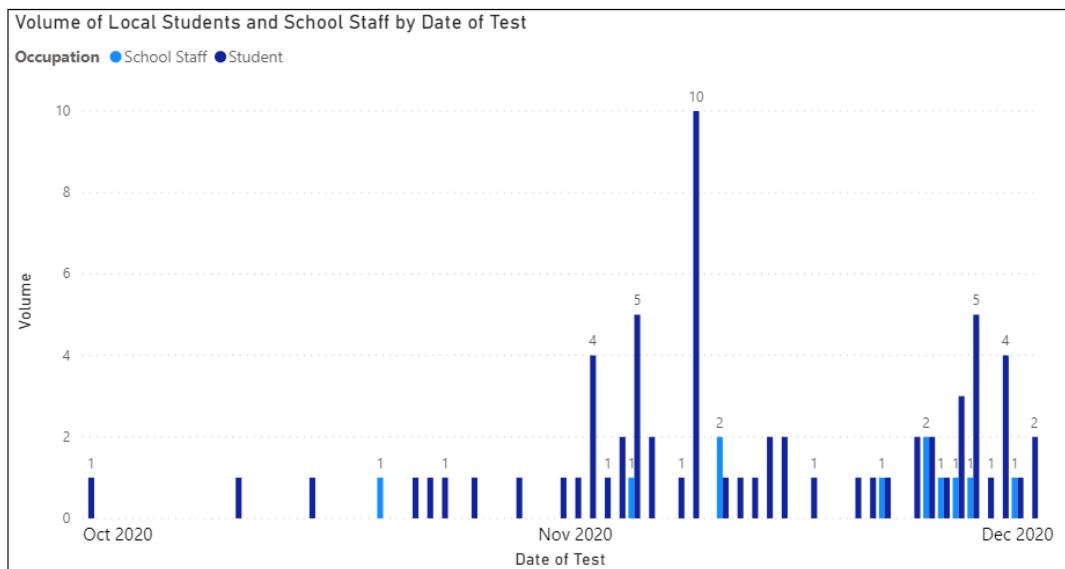
## **There will be an impact on vulnerable pupils and safeguarding**

It is fully recognised by education and health professionals that the school environment is a safe place for all pupils to learn. The lockdown created vulnerability for some families, and it is anticipated this will be exacerbated by a longer Christmas holiday resulting from early school closure.

## **Isolation and Christmas**

There have been requests by parents, school-based staff and union officials to close schools early and move to remote learning in the final week of term. By doing this this will ensure that should a confirmed case be identified in school those requiring to isolate will complete their period of isolation (following negative tests) before Christmas day. This is an emotive and compelling request when the importance of Christmas for families is considered. However, any decision to close schools for the entire school population (approximately 15,000) should be balanced against the numbers of pupils who may be required to isolate following confirmed cases in schools in the final week of term. Since the beginning of November there have been 68 confirmed pupil COVID cases in Jersey schools and 10 COVID cases for staff. The spread of these cases is shown on the table below:

**Table 1 – Number of cases by date of test (students and staff)**



## **Recommendation**

It is fully recognised the increasing levels of anxiety of parents, staff and children resulting from increasing numbers of COVID-19 cases in schools. This is compounded further by the desire of some to not have the Christmas break impacted following a requirement to isolate resulting from a confirmed case in a school in the final week of term.

In the light of these issues and advice received, the following is presented to the Minister for consideration when deciding whether to close schools earlier than the scheduled end of term date of Friday 18 December.

- The Medical and Public Health policy view is that the Minister should maintain the strategy of schools remaining open (previous advice refers). There is no new evidence to indicate that schools should close early and, if they were to close, this would be contrary to the medical advice.
- The current policy of the Minister and Government is to keep schools open as the educational and welfare benefits for pupils attending school outweighs the risks posed by the virus. Early closure of schools leading up to Christmas will be a change of policy

and will potentially undermine the message about the relative safety and absolute importance of school-based learning and teaching. If island-wide cases are to rise over the Christmas period pressure may increase to keep schools shut, making reopening more difficult.

- There is little evidence to suggest that COVID-19 is spreading from within schools. The surge in cases following the half-term break and over the previous two weeks has been driven through socialising outside of schools.
- It is recognised that early school closure will have a greater impact on lower income / vulnerable families in terms of childcare, a loss of education and the impact on safeguarding.
- Early school closure will create additional and prolonged vulnerability for families, which is impacted further by the Christmas period.
- Although Contact Tracing is under pressure with growing numbers, there is a recruitment drive to increase staffing levels. The Head of Contact Tracing has confirmed that closing schools should not be viewed as a solution to easing current pressures on the team. Further, more sophisticated ways of determining direct contacts are evolving, especially in the secondary phase, again helping to reduce numbers going into isolation, as well as alleviating pressure on the Contact Tracing service.
- Other jurisdictions have kept schools open during lockdown. Jersey would be undertaking something different from countries where COVID has already been more prevalent.
- Consideration must be given to relaxing absence codes in the final week of term. Up until the final week the message should remain clear that all pupils should be in school. During the final week, although pupils should be encouraged to be in, if they do not attend due to COVID-19 related anxiety then they should be marked as an “authorised absence”. Those that choose not to attend will not be provided with any remote learning as the default position for learning remains in school.