

2nd Letter to Edinburgh Councillors

7th December 2020

Dear Councillor

I am sending a follow-up to my earlier email regarding the necessity of Edinburgh schools moving to remote learning on 21st and 22nd December. I should be grateful if you would discuss its contents with your fellow councillors as a matter of urgency. I look forward to hearing your views, whether as individuals or as a group response from each party.

I should begin by saying that CEC officials have worked hard to support schools in an incredibly difficult time. When it has come to supporting individual teachers who find themselves in difficult circumstances due to covid-19, I have generally found managers to be humane and caring, and reasonable solutions have usually been found. More generally, Facilities Management and others continue to make tremendous efforts to help manage a school estate that, in some cases, feels almost as if it was designed to make coping in a pandemic impossible. That rates of infection and self-isolation in our, often very overcrowded, schools have not been higher than they are is a tribute to exhausting, draining levels of vigilance and work by staff and pupils right across the city. But maintaining these efforts is coming at a huge cost. People are tense, exhausted, stressed and often simply terrified.

I am sure you, like me, have read lots on social media saying things like “why are teachers complaining - staff in shops/public transport/care homes have it far harder.” This is both unhelpful and, in some cases, not very enlightening. For example, in most shops, everything is designed to maintain 2m distancing - numbers are limited, checkout staff are given screens, there are strict queues. This is not happening in our schools. In primary and special schools, it is frankly impossible to maintain any physical distancing. Further I remind you that our special schools have pupils who are 15 and 16 years old, which in terms of infection puts them in the young adult category, yet their disabilities mean that staff are in constant close physical contact with them, they cannot wear masks and they may well pull off any mask or visor the adults around them are wearing. In our mainstream secondaries, there are often 30 S5 or S6 pupils in a small classroom - even if staff have found a way of rearranging the desks so that they are 2m distant from the pupils for the bulk of the lesson, maintaining this whilst helping individual pupils with problems is virtually impossible. And ventilation is a continuing worry that CEC officers are working hard to address but that is not amenable to easy solutions. Beyond this, staff working in other sectors have more flexibility around when to take holidays, and many have already booked time to enable them to spend a few days away from risky environments before visiting vulnerable family members - an option not open to anyone working in a school.

School staff have, for months, been dealing with all of the issues listed above, have been working in what they generally feel are some of the least covid-secure workplaces going, and have, at the same time, been doing all they can to support the health, wellbeing and learning of pupils. And our pre-pandemic problems haven't gone away - indeed, many have been magnified. Distressed pupils are lashing out, so that staff are being kicked, bitten and hit. There is not enough resource to be able to meet pupils' individual needs - and many agencies that used to provide specialist support can't currently come into schools because of covid safety measures. Secondaries are feeling *huge* pressures because of continuing uncertainty around Higher and Advanced Higher exams, and what seem unmanageable demands from SQA regarding National 5 teacher assessment. Many of the things that both pupils and teachers find most rewarding are either impossible or massively curtailed - including all the usual festive activities that would normally be such a feature of this time of year. Is it any wonder that so many staff *and pupils* are feeling completely burned out? I have spoken to more and more individual members who are clearly on the edge of breakdowns, who

pretty obviously should not be at work, and yet who continue to come in for the sake of the pupils and their colleagues. This *cannot* continue. Either we find ways of supporting staff, or more and more will break. And the impact of *that* on pupils will be worse than anything.

I have already explained to you why so many staff were so devastated when the Scottish Government decided not to make a national decision that all schools should move to remote learning after 18th December (obviously with appropriate provision being made for vulnerable children and children of key workers). Whilst not allowing for a full period of quarantine, it would at least have given people a few days away from the risk of becoming exposed and having to self-isolate, and given a chance for some to access tests (school staff already have access to asymptomatic testing, and the EIS is raising the need for lateral flow tests - if appropriate for university students before they go home, why not school staff who are dealing with pupils only a few months younger than those students?). It would have relieved the burden on school leaders, who have to do so much work on contact tracing and, with a later closure of schools, may well be required to be involved in this on Christmas Day. It would also have been a huge help to many parents, who are worried about the risks involved in sending their pupils into school for the last few days before Christmas - I suspect large numbers will, in fact, choose to keep their children at home after 18th. Were we to move to remote schooling those pupils will have some learning and teaching for the last few days, whilst the likelihood now is that parents will say they are sick so that they can keep them off, and thus there will be no educational input for those pupils, and increased disruption for the ones who do go into school buildings. The Scottish Government's decision also seems to fly in the face of European Union advice about precautions before loosening restrictions before Christmas and about supporting key workers.

Encourage employers to allow people to work from home or from the place where they intend to spend their end-of-year festivities some days before and after – preferably around seven days, whenever possible. This will allow workers to self-quarantine before engaging in social or household gatherings, or events and/or before coming back to workplaces. Where the remote working is not possible, employers must put in place measures that would allow safe return to work

In addition to the pandemic fatigue, the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of populations should not be underestimated. The concern and destabilisation felt by the population at large can be particularly acute amongst the most vulnerable groups such as older adults or people with underlying health conditions, those living alone, or persons with disabilities. Health and care workers are particularly exposed, and best practices to reduce the impact on these and other front-line workers should be promoted.

Brussels, 2.12.2020 COM(2020) 786 final
COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE
COUNCIL
Staying safe from COVID-19 during winter

Whilst a national decision would have been preferable, it is the fact that we are **Edinburgh** employees. It is City of Edinburgh Council that has the ultimate responsibility for our health and wellbeing, as well as for the quality of education in our schools. It has the power to better cater for both by making a decision to move to remote learning for 21st and 22nd December. If you require further evidence of why this decision is essential, here are just a few examples of the messages I have received from members since Thursday.

I, and several of my colleagues find ourselves in a horrible position where we will have to work Monday & Tuesday and the head home to families untested. I'm travelling to the Republic of Ireland early Wednesday morning so a test after school on a Tuesday is not possible for me as I will not have results on time.

I have two grandfathers that are in their 80s, and a brother and a father with asthma that I will be putting in danger by going home. I'm gutted with today's announcement.

I live alone and won't be able to go home this Christmas since my Dad is shielding. Those 2 days would make a big difference for isolating and time to get tested. I'm more worried about my mum and dad's mental health if they don't get to see my brother and I at Christmas. Hopefully we can reach a sensible resolution.

We NEED those two days!!!! For our vulnerable family members and for our burnt out sanity! Praying the common sense decision comes through.

Many thanks for your email and it is clear that you will argue the case for home learning on the 21st and 22nd of Christmas. As a teacher who has had to isolate owing to covid and transmission being present in my classroom, it is heart-breaking that the government has made this decision. I feel for the children who will have to isolate, management who will be calling people for contact tracing asking them to isolate, staff who will be isolating alone and families who will get the call too late (once they have already met with extended family). I just wanted to email to show the level of anger in response to the government's decision.

There's a mix of anger and folk crying here. It's the total disregard for our safety, would have been such an easy step to take to protect us.

I also include one that should particularly concern you, as it comes from a school leader (I have removed a few details to preserve anonymity)

The announcement today was an incredible blow and I felt the sadness around my school (I'm depute at ...) but also for myself. Since August, my school has been under staffed and the only word I can use to describe it is tense. My school now has lost x PSAs to PSO posts and x teachers are signed off with stress. This is adding to the tense feeling. This week my business manager tells me that if one more person goes off unwell the school would be unsafe to have open, but with no supply teachers or PSAs we are at a loss. Our only option is to continue to use SLT to cover as many things as possible in a day. Staff are anxious and stressed and I do not feel I can continue to prop up the staff or do any more break and lunch covers as well as trying to do my job and support the teachers and PSAs. I understand staff are worried to be in more than 2 bubbles a day but on a day to day basis I am in more than 5 between break/lunch covers, supporting pupils' behaviour, supporting staff and covering classes. I realise my role as a member of SLT means I am in more but at what cost? The announcement today has left me absolutely heartbroken that schools continue to be undervalued.

Surely you can see that failing to recognise the strains on school staff, and failing to move to remote learning for the last two days of term, will be the final straw for many? I genuinely believe that we will see a huge surge in sickness absence, especially due to stress and mental ill health, if significant numbers of people are either forced to forego visits to loved ones, or make such visits and then find they have brought infection home. Conversely, were Edinburgh to listen to the pleas of its workforce, and move to remote working for those two days, I think it would do a huge amount to make staff feel valued and supported, and have a significant positive impact on morale. This has to have a longer-term beneficial impact on schools. I cannot believe CEC would not be able to make appropriate provision for those children who really do need in-school provision for those two days -

I, for one, do not have plans to visit vulnerable relatives, and would happily volunteer to work in a Hub, were that to be the best way of supporting vulnerable children. Indeed, by *targeting* support on 21st and 22nd, we might actually be able to do things that would have more positive results for those children than anything that can be provided if all schools are kept open for all children.

Whilst I believe that the above give logical, educational, and pupil and staff welfare reasons why the decision to move to remote learning is the correct one, I do want to raise two other points.

Increasing numbers of members who feel unsafe at work are demanding that the union ballots for industrial action over a failure of duty of care on the part of our employers. A failure to listen to staff and move to remote learning would, I feel, be the tipping point for many. I seriously believe that industrial action in our schools is moving closer - something I am sure we would all want to avoid.

If you do not support a move to remote learning on 21st and 22nd December, then you clearly feel that schools are safe working places. Thus I would ask each and every one of you to agree to spend those two days in schools. Not making socially distanced visits to school libraries or assembly halls, where you can be photographed standing 2m away from a small number of pupils who are all wearing masks, but actually doing what all school staff are currently doing: teaching pupils in overcrowded and poorly ventilated rooms; sitting beside individual pupils who need help with reading; supporting distressed pupils with complex additional support needs; walking through crowded corridors at break and lunch. Having spent those two days in those circumstances, you should then be happy to visit your most elderly and vulnerable family member on 23rd, and spend Christmas with them. If you are not prepared to do this how can you, in all conscience, ask school staff to do it, particularly when a better alternative is available?

As I said at the start, I hope you will urgently consider this, both as an individual and with your fellow councillors. I am happy to discuss the matter further, whether with individuals or groups. Most importantly, Edinburgh members will want to hear from council leaders, who carry the ultimate duty of care for council staff, that they are prepared to take necessary decisions to fulfil that duty of care to employees, pupils and families in the city. I trust I will be hearing from you soon?

Kind regards

Alison

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