



The Educational
Institute of Scotland

Mr John Swinney
Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for
Education and Skills
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

LF/KN/DFM 010321
1 March 2021

By email

Dear John

The Scottish Government has declined to support prioritisation of occupational groups as part of Phase 2 of the vaccine rollout and has signalled it will comply with the declared interim policy of the UK JCVI.

The EIS is calling for reconsideration of this position.

Whilst the EIS very deliberately did not call for education staff priority within Phase 1 of the programme, as that was very clearly predicated on those most at risk of death, we believe there is scope within Phase 2 to take a different approach as 99% of that "at severe risk" group will have been covered in the first phase. Within Phase 1 the Scottish Government chose to reorder the JCVI priorities to accommodate its own policy agenda with regard to care homes and we believe a similar approach should apply to schools.

The main argument advanced by the JCVI for its recent recommendation was organisational expediency.

Scotland is a small country, however, and it is in charge of its own vaccine programme – it can vary this to suit its own priorities and keeping schools open is a declared aim of the Scottish Government. Vaccinating teachers and other school staff is a straightforward way of achieving that aim.

Scotland has capacity for 400,000 vaccinations per week; as around 35% of teachers will have been vaccinated under Phase 1, the "organisational challenge" around vaccinating the rest is not huge – it would take literally a few days to achieve.

There has been debate about the level of risk within schools but only last week an ONS survey indicated teaching as the fourth highest "at risk" occupational group. A recent PHS study has shown that teachers are more likely to have tested positive for Covid in

Scotland than the general working population. It has also been reported that the new Covid variant is around 40% more transmissible for pupils than the original.

Even if it is true that the risk to teachers of serious illness and death is lower, you should consider the impact of Covid related teacher absence on the education of young people.

In secondary schools, for example, staff absence over the next period through Covid related reasons could seriously impact on the SQA qualifications. On average staff absences in schools has been around 1,500 per week, at one stage last September peaking at over 2,500.

Clearly this is disruptive to education continuity especially for senior phase secondary pupils, already facing a tight timeline around accreditation processes.

Frankly, it seems short-sighted of the Scottish Government not to utilise the vaccination tool to ensure continuity of education – an action at odds with the political rhetoric about the importance of education to the lives of our young people, which no doubt we will hear more of tomorrow when the Government announces its intentions around the next phase of a return to face to face teaching. Aside from this, vaccination of teachers as a professional group would help assuage the very real fears that teachers have about their safety and that of their families. The negative wellbeing impacts of prolonged stress and anxiety arising from being the only occupational group required to work indoors in relatively small rooms, many poorly ventilated, often with more than thirty people from different households at once, most of whom are not physically distancing from one another, should not be underestimated.

Furthermore, given the caring role that teachers and other education staff undertake, particularly Early Years, Primary and ASN staff, and the difficulties that there are in maintaining physical distance between staff and pupils in these contexts, in omitting to vaccinate teachers, the Scottish Government will have failed to take appropriate mitigating action of the kind that it has undertaken for other frontline care workers.

If a safe and sustainable return to face-to-face teaching is to be achieved, urgently vaccinating education staff should be reconsidered.

Best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Larry Flanagan". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Larry Flanagan
General Secretary