

School Based Member Survey Briefing 3

Comments from members in vulnerable groups – November 2020

Within the EIS November survey, thousands of comments from teachers were collected on issues such as behaviour in the classroom, their health, and wider safety concerns about working in schools. This is the third in a series of briefings, that the EIS will issue to the Scottish Government outlining the experiences of EIS members. Some comments have been redacted to ensure they do not identify individual schools or members.

Key Issues

- 3,501 comments were left by members who identified themselves as being in a vulnerable group in their response to the survey (not all are included in this briefing)
- Clear consensus that the mitigations in place are not strong enough, or are impossible to enforce
- Pregnant members in particular were concerned about the lack of clarity beyond 28 weeks, as some members have been granted home working, or paid leave, and others have not
- Clear evidence that the management of this crisis has exacerbated existing physical and mental health conditions
- Some teachers have taken early retirement, or not sought supply work, because they do not feel safe returning to schools

“I find it hard to believe that there is no transmission in schools. With the sheer volume of young adults in close contact with each other it is insulting to me to be told that there is no evidence of transmission. There is limited evidence of transmission as there is no testing being done in school settings. Our profession is being treated differently from all others - even in level 4.”

“Do not feel safe working in classes of up to 30 pupils whereby many disregard safety measures, putting themselves and others at risk.”

“Although it will be very challenging for many families, I feel that at this point in time a return to home learning for all pupils is justified to control the virus.”

“It is my opinion that teachers are being treated disgracefully, and in insisting that schools remain open at all costs, this is treating teachers as collateral damage in a role as the nation’s childminders! Teacher morale has been low for several years and the added stress and worry of the possibility of teaching non-masked, non-socially distanced, asymptomatic but infected children, is bringing teachers to breaking point. The suggestion

that older recently retired and re-registered teacher should be “used” to replace any teacher absences is particularly insulting to what is considered a “vulnerable group” in any other walk of life. There has been a strong narrative of protecting older people throughout this pandemic, but that would not appear to include older teachers. I am not working at the moment but count this as a mixed blessing. As a WASPI woman with no state pension, I need to supplement my income with supply work, but I am relieved not to be working in this stressful time. Were I actually to be teaching, I would have no hesitation in taking strike action.”

“Are teachers expendable?? Anything promised prior to schools opening has not occurred. Safety measures are not in place. Schools need to go back to blended learning until children can learn correct procedures. Management requires to ensure all guidelines are followed!”

“Although I requested a risk assessment in August 2020, I have heard nothing from management. Staff and pupils are testing positive; however the staff are not being told. There is an overriding assumption that if you catch the virus that you have not been sticking to the rules, and that it is your fault. We are on the front line with pupils who have returned early to school who are not supposed to be there. The council could be employing additional personnel, appropriately protected to help ensure pupils are adhering to measures in place. There has never been a “deep” clean in the school, as the cleaners are not allowed to touch the desks of positive pupils or staff, but as we are not told, we can be sitting at the desk of a positive person without our knowledge.”

“I am exposed to more pupils mainly in the early years where distancing is impossible. I do not feel safe in my workplace despite general measures in place and this is causing me some degree of anxiety as I approach my third trimester.”

“Besides hand sanitiser at the bottom of the stairwell, we have no protection. No bubbles, no staggered breaks, at least 1 class of over 30 children in the room. Recent Covid case in school. (staff member) situation not handled properly by management. I was not notified or asked whether I'd had contact with this person - none of the staff were. No one asked to self-isolate despite the ASNA being in school for 1 whole day minimum of infectious period.”

“I ‘officially’ took early retirement 3 years ago but had been working on a regular part time basis in various school within the authority. Being in my early 60s now I feel I am in a vulnerable group and have therefore made the decision not to work until a vaccine has been administered and/or much more stringent protocols are in place. I do not see how it can be safe for supply teachers to work in a variety of schools and school situations, especially within the primary sector. It is my hope I will be able to return to work sometime soon.”

“I am not personally in a vulnerable group but we all know if I get it, so too does my household! My wife is pregnant and my mother who is 77 with [medical condition redacted] is in our bubble. While I love my job and am thankful for its relative security during these troubling times, I am very concerned about the potential risks I am exposing them to. I would hate to think that I would be the cause of hurting my loved ones even indirectly.”

"I am so scared for myself and baby working in the schools. There is no social distancing, parents are sending unwell children to my class and don't follow school procedures. I'm lucky in the respect that both my headteachers will allow me to work from home as of 28 weeks. It was a very hard battle with HR though. I am concerned for all pregnant teachers who have midwives that are saying to shield because there is a huge danger to us! However, HR keep repeating we are safe. We are not and there is not enough evidence showing there is no risk. There is however a correlation in the increase of still born deaths, Caesarean and ill mothers during March/April 2020. They cannot say we are not vulnerable. Pregnant teachers need national guidance that is fair for all. We are so stressed out."

"I belong to the "clinically vulnerable" category. Many EIS members will be in this category. I have a cardiac condition which means I am more prone to chest and respiratory infections. I am shocked that no meaningful mitigations were put in place for teachers who were shielding / vulnerable."

"I buy my own PPE, I wear a mask and visor during the school day. I have my own risk assessment and I'm okay with it. Feel that now we in level 4 - more stringent measures are required."

"I do feel if it is unsafe to work after 28 weeks pregnant then staff should be paid to work from home as NHS staff are. My local authority says if you feel unsafe you need to start your maternity leave; however, I have heard other local authorities are paying staff to be at home from 28-36 weeks. I feel there should be a Scotland wide decision rather than local authority lottery."

"I don't feel I have been supported at all whilst being pregnant during the pandemic and having to return to full time work. The council have not allowed me to work from home and any emails I sent to the government for support and advice I was given a shoddy reply about social distancing which is impossible in the classroom. I understand supported grievance is in place with yourselves, however, this would cause me more anxiety and stress as I have to return to the workplace at some point. My duties have not been altered in anyway within the school. I find it unfair some schools are allowing working from home as an option on full pay from 28 weeks or altering roles within the school. I am currently 30 weeks and feel very unsafe and on my own. My mental health is being seriously impacted."

"I have a high BMI, and I also have concerns as I live with my husband and young daughter who are both in the vulnerable category - my daughter is asthmatic and has been hospitalised with this previously, my husband has asthma and is also on a variety of strong medications due to having bipolar disorder and sleep apnoea. The risk assessments in place are specific to me and the questions do not consider my family circumstances."

"I told my HT in August that I was 13 weeks pregnant, still not had a risk assessment done. I don't particularly want to work remotely or blended learning but if we are moved into Tier 4 we need to be safer!"

“Mental health condition. Currently badly affected by the measures in place in schools, restrictions and worry over guidance not being followed. Currently signed off sick with anxiety & depression.”

“My mental health - at the moment mainly severe anxiety causes me to have poor sleep on a Sunday-Thursday evening causing nightmares about coming to work when I feel not enough is being done to limit student interaction outside of school.”

“No consideration has been given to those who had to shield. It's a case of 'get on with it'.”

“I want to be in school, I love my job. I cannot be asked to choose between my health and career though. At what point will local authorities recognise that there is a small workforce of shielded teachers who could be utilised at home. It seems very short sighted to be trying to force people with genuine medical concerns into a workplace that is not safe for them.”

“Very afraid of catching the virus and the unknown effects to me or my unborn child. I feel that social distancing is impossible in all areas of teaching.”

“Currently off work sick. Supported by GP and midwife but not supported by council.”

“Council have told me I'm not vulnerable being pregnant and I've to either come in the same as everyone else or go off sick. I've had to go off sick due to the current situation and the anxiety that it has caused. I've felt that they have ignored my other health issues as well as being over 28 weeks pregnant where there is an increased risk of premature labour or being admitted to intensive care if I catch the virus. Have not felt supported at all by the Local Authority.”

“I have felt that everything is against me in any process of attempting to get work from home as I have no support this doesn't mean I am happy with the situation. If my region goes to level 3 or things get out of hand in school area, I will be going to GP to ask for work from home. Currently just feel abandoned by everyone.”

“Our school is trying its hardest to ensure our safety but the reality of working in school and maintaining the highest level of mitigation is relentless and the additional effort this entails on top of additional workload should not be underestimated.”

“We are now in discussions about returning to school as the school can't cope without me in position and they were happy for me to work from home previously. I have had 3 OH assessments and along with them and consultant and GP they all recommend that I work from home.”

“Working from home is an option in tier 4 only. As a very high-risk candidate due to chemotherapy I feel these options should be made available in tier 3 too for some.”

“I feel strongly that our area of Highland was a model of online teaching over lockdown and that we could move to a blended/fully online model with ease. However, I think that the current obsession with keeping schools open at all costs is driven by the poor experience of pupils in some other local authorities. Scot Gov and Ed Scot should be looking at ways in which equity can be addressed on this matter so the whole country could be ready for a move 'home' if needed. Notwithstanding this, it is unlikely that Highland as a whole would need this, but I feel that the finger has not been on the pulse here by Scot Gov and Ed Scot.”

“I feel more priority should be given to the health and wellbeing of both pupils and staff from Covid. It appears this is being undermined and schools are expected to carry on as normal despite the fact the rest of the population is working from home and therefore not being exposed to the virus as much. It is a very real worry as teachers do not have appropriate safety measures in place and the reality is that younger children cannot socially distance. Teachers are feeling very undervalued and unprotected as more staff and pupils test positive.”

“I feel strongly that the advice given to staff teaching ASN is completely unsatisfactory. Staff are working in unsafe environments on a daily basis with no mitigations and no guidance.”

“I have 3 kids of my own and yet am expected by parents and senior staff to not only teach my classes in front of me but also be a remote learning teacher for those isolating while collating meaningful evidence for worse case scenarios and also while putting on a brave face so as kids don't become anxious. Well guess what, this is so physically and mentally draining that my own family time is suffering hugely. We cannot keep functioning like this there is bound to be one small thing that breaks the camel's back and you will have a domino effect in schools of teachers who are barely holding it together. SMT want to pretend all is fine but they are not having to constantly patrol corridors to enforce one way systems, constantly remind kids to wash hands and wear masks clean and sanitize desks. How will I feel if I take something home to my kids, my elderly parents? We are being hung out to dry at all costs by the government.”

“I understand the importance of schools remaining open and agree with this, wherever this is safe to do so. I think it is vital, however, that we break the silence and publicly admit that children are transmitting the virus within a school setting and that staff are now in a position of great risk. The general feeling in many schools just now is that this is a whitewash, staff safety is an afterthought and, for want of a better description, we are cannon fodder. A proper picture of the amount of schools affected by Covid MUST be built up to demonstrate how high the level of risk is here and the silence on this this matter must end. The Government is ignoring us because keeping schools open at all costs, including negating the health and safety of staff, is their mandate - unacceptable!!!”