

Council's plans for reopening of schools meeting with opposition

Opposition councillors will all lodge opposition at next week's Council Policy and Sustainability Committee, outlining the ways that they want the reopening of Edinburgh schools to be managed.

Young people in the city are due to return to school on 11 August 2020, but under arrangements proposed by The City of Edinburgh Council, only a third of pupils will be permitted in school at any one time.

This means that pupils will only attend in-person lessons once or twice per week, with Fridays being set aside for teachers to plan learning from home activities.

The respective motions being brought forward by parties outside of the Council's SNP-Labour minority administration will be debated and voted on next Thursday.

The Green Party motion asks The City of Edinburgh Council to action the following:

- explore every possible measure to maximise teaching time spent in schools – for example, recruitment of more teaching staff including using teaching assistants, requisition of additional teaching space, outdoor learning and online lessons by teachers.
- include in Council plans the ability to quickly respond to further changes in Scottish Government guidance on

social distancing in order to be able to maximise time in school.

- cost and communicate to the Scottish Government Education Secretary Council plans requiring additional expenditure.

Cllr Steve Burgess, Green education spokesperson, said: “The plan for schools needs to be revamped. I get how hard arrangements are. Allowing for safe distancing, hand hygiene, transport and all the rest is a nightmare. However, I don’t think that the one third model is the best solution. Too many families are already finding it hard to cope and it’s the families who are struggling the most who will get left furthest behind.”

The Liberal Democrat group motion will ask The City of Edinburgh Council to:

- develop proposals to open up appropriate community centres, church halls and other safe spaces to provide extra classroom capacity.
- ask Council Leader, Adam McVey, to write to The Scottish Government requesting new funding which would allow additional qualified teachers to be recruited to provide further capacity across the city and also to fund extra classroom capacity.
- support and facilitate, when national health and scientific advice allows, families of children from the same class to share childcare and allow more parents to work.
- explore school partnerships/hubs in locality areas in order to share capacity and stop any geographical ‘lottery’ on the teaching of our children due to individual school excess capacity.
- call on The Scottish Government to amend national movement restrictions and associated guidance, when it is considered safe to do so, in order to allow close family members to help with childcare and home learning.

Liberal Democrat councillor for Almond, Louise Young, said: "As things stand, the plan put forward by Edinburgh Council risks failing pupils and working parents. It is why we want to force a radical rethink to boost in-school teaching and better supports working parents.

"This is a moment which demands creative thinking and imaginative solutions. However, it also requires the Scottish Government to put its money where its mouth is and provide the funding needed, both just to use additional buildings but also for the extra teachers which the Council needs to recruit."

The Conservative group motion will ask the council to instruct a report from its Executive Director for Communities and Families detailing how classroom time can be increased for the return to school in August.

The Conservatives say that the report must include:

- details on how at-home learning will be delivered through technology and physical resources.
- cost and feasibility of utilising under-capacity schools, and repurposing other Council and Edinburgh Partnership buildings to support additional classes and establishing the teaching resource required.
- expanding the time school buildings are available for students to learn; including opening on Fridays and extending the school day, to include not only teaching time but supervised individual study.
- offering secondments to any qualified teachers to support school learning that are currently employed by the Council but are not working as teachers inviting volunteers from qualified individuals, including teachers who have left the profession, those with other UK or international qualifications and those close to completing their teaching qualifications, to assist in supporting learning.
- establishing the increase in classroom time that could be delivered if social distancing was reduced to 1.5m or

1m.

Conservative education spokesperson Cllr Callum Laidlaw said: “The council’s current plans for pupils to return to school for, in many cases, just a day week, risks widening the attainment gap and creating a lost-generation receiving only the most basic level of teaching.

“As the lockdown eases, our priority should be getting the majority of pupils back into the classroom for the majority of time, allowing parents to get back to work and children to catch-up. Our motion calls on the Council to get creative and come up with solutions that respond the demands of parents and pupils to fully reopen our schools.”



Councillor Ian Perry, Education Convener PHOTO © The Edinburgh Reporter

Cllr Ian Perry, the Education Convener, said: “Our schools are working really hard on plans to see if they can achieve 50% of pupils coming into school at any one time. Teaching a third of pupils is a minimum requirement to make sure we meet the current physical distancing and health advice so schools can reopen safely.

“It has always been our intention to maximise attendance as long as it is safe to do so and where there are appropriate

facilities to accommodate pupils and staff – their health and wellbeing is our top priority and that remains the case.

“We fully understand the concerns parents have over the amount of learning and teaching their children will receive when schools reopen in August. We know how important it is for a child’s learning and development to be in school with their teachers and peers as opposed to learning at home so I want to reassure parents we’re doing everything we can to increase the number of days their child will attend.

“Measures include using other Council buildings in our estate which may be suitable for learning and recruiting additional teaching staff. We look forward to continuing dialogue with The Scottish Government as our plans progress.”

The City of Edinburgh Council announced plans to ensure a safe return to school for pupils and staff in August. All pupils will return on 11 August, a week earlier than the dates previously set.

Noa Hoffman is the Local Democracy Reporter covering Edinburgh. The Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS) is a public service news agency: funded by the BBC, provided by the local news sector, and used by qualifying partners. Local Democracy Reporters cover top-tier local authorities and other public service organisations.