

Coronavirus – all primary school pupils going back in a fortnight

The Scottish Government has announced that in view of recent figures, which have shown a decrease even since last week, it will be safe to reopen primary schools to the remainder of classes – Primary 4 to 7 from 15 March.

At an address to parliament earlier today the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said that regulated childcare including breakfast and after-school clubs for primary school pupils will also begin again from that date.

At the same time secondary pupils will receive both high quality remote learning and some in-school teaching. Councils will decide how to balance this based on local needs.

Senior phase students (S4-S6) who are taking national qualifications will have priority for face-to-face lessons in school.

Next week the government will announce new safety guidance to support this return to the classroom and Education Scotland will issue practical guidance for schools.

Local authorities will be urged to provide more opportunities for outdoor learning to support young people's wellbeing.

Colleges are allowed to have 5% of learners on campus at one time. They are also to prioritise senior phase pupils.

It is expected that all school pupils will be back at school full time after the Easter holidays, although this is dependent on the number of cases continuing to fall.

First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said: "I can confirm that the next phase of reopening education will take place on 15 March. From that date – unless new evidence or new circumstances force us to reconsider – all children in primary 4 to 7 will go back to school on a full-time basis and all primary school children will be able to return to regulated childcare.

"All secondary school pupils will return to spend some time in school from 15 March – with a clear expectation that all secondary school pupils will be back in school on a full-time basis after the Easter holidays.

"The phased approach to school return is firmly based on the expert advice that we have received. It is the best and also the most sustainable and enduring way to get as many children back to school as possible, as safely as possible."

All secondary pupils will continue to be required to observe two metre physical distancing while in school in the period immediately after the Phase 2 return. This is in addition to existing measures, including the use of face coverings. School transport will operate with the same physical distancing rules as public transport.

Primary school pupils in P1 to P3 returned to school last week along with some secondary pupils who need to carry out practical work in school.

Now the government has put in place funding for councils, additional investment in education recovery with £60 million to pay for extra teachers, support staff and cleaners. There is also twice weekly at home testing on offer for those who

work in schools, or any facilities attached to schools. This is to be rolled out to standalone childcare as soon as possible.

Ruth Davidson MSP, the Scottish Conservative leader at Holyrood, said: "This latest SNP U-turn comes after Scottish Conservative pressure and will be welcomed by pupils, parents and teachers who know there is no substitute for learning in a classroom.

"While today marks a gradual speeding up for a return to schools, the First Minister's latest announcement was also typically vague and only prolongs uncertainty.

"No-one wants to risk an increase in cases by moving too quickly but pupils deserve better than guesswork based on the SNP's drip feeding of partial information."

Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar has called on ministers to 'focus on recovery', praising frontline workers and welcoming evidence of the vaccine's efficacy.

In his first appearance in the chamber as Scottish Labour leader, Mr Sarwar also urged the SNP government to do more to support children struggling with mental health issues as a result of the pandemic.

Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar said: "It is 12 months since the first Covid-19 case was identified in Scotland, and in that time we have seen our frontline workers, our NHS staff, our social care staff and all our frontline workers continue to go above and beyond, and our heartfelt thanks to every single one of them and their families.

"The vaccine roll out is the light at the end of the tunnel, and it's great to see the evidence of its efficacy, giving us all hope. But as lockdown restrictions begin to lift, I urge the government to also focus on recovery, and I will support all efforts to bring our communities together and to rebuild

our nation. That must be our collective priority for everyone across this Parliament.”

Scottish Liberal Democrat leader Willie Rennie said:“Perhaps it was unwise for the First Minister to sneer at other governments making up dates when she has already changed the dates that she set out last week. The three-week review has suddenly changed to a weekly review.

“The First Minister has made this last-minute change to school opening without issuing any fresh guidance and has dumped the problem on teachers to fix. In her opinion, teachers are just expected to accommodate the situation, almost as if the already existing issues and difficulties the teachers have repeatedly experienced during this pandemic do not exist.

“If two thirds of the class are at home teachers will need to juggle the competing demands and additional workload that will come with physical and online teaching. There are no more hours in the day, it is impossible to expect our teachers to perform miracles on a daily basis. Teachers are already exhausted. This is not the way to reward them.”