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NOTE FOR ALL CHILDCARE PROVIDERS

To all registered childcare providers,

UPDATE ON CHILDCARE RE-OPENING TO ALL PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN

Thank you to all childcare providers and childminders who have continued to support children and families during the stay at home period.

Today the First Minister confirmed that, following a continued suppression of the coronavirus figures, early learning and childcare settings (which includes nurseries, playgroups, and family centres) can re-open to all pre-school children from 22nd February. We have published updated guidance to support re-opening, and further information on this is included later in the provider notice.

Before we need to monitor the impact of these this initial return, along with the trajectory of the virus, before we can commit to any future phases. We hope that in two weeks' time, on 2nd March, we are able to set out some detail regarding the second phase of re-opening. However, at this time, we do not envisage any further return to school or childcare before 15th March.

Childminders have continued to be able to remain open throughout the stay at home restrictions and there is no change to that position as a result of today's announcement.

To continue to suppress the transmission of COVID-19 in the community, and so that we can prioritise every bit of headroom we create to get children back to early learning and childcare (ELC) and to school, everyone must continue to stay at home, except for permitted, essential purposes, at least until the end of February.

The decision to prioritise these children for return to in-person ELC in all settings reflects the crucial role that ELC plays in supporting children's development, and the challenges of delivering this support remotely.

It has also been informed by the evidence that younger children are less susceptible to acquiring and transmitting the virus than adults and older children, and the low risk to staff of ELC associated transmission and outbreaks, when appropriate mitigations are put in place and community prevalence is low, including risks associated with the new variant.

ADVICE AND EVIDENCE TO SUPPORT REOPENING

The decision to reopen ELC to all preschool aged children was taken following a detailed review of the evidence on transmission and infection in Scotland, as well as on the transmissibility and severity of the new variant of the Coronavirus in relation to children and young people. Careful consideration was also given to the impact of

restricted access to ELC on children's wellbeing and development. The advice of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Advisory Sub-Group on Education and Children's Issues, which carried out the review, was published [here](#) on Wednesday 3rd February.

In support of its advice published on the 3rd February, The Sub-Group has also considered its existing advice on the mitigations required to ensure a safe return to in-person learning for staff and pupils. The Sub-Group's advice emphasises that the current mitigations remain vital in preventing transmission of the virus. The Sub-Group echoed recent advice from the New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (NERVTAG) that a step change in the rigour of application of mitigations is required, given the increased transmission risk associated with the new variant. The Sub-Group's latest advice on mitigations can be found [here](#).

On 15 February a Joint Statement from Public Health Scotland and the Scottish Directors of Public Health on the re-opening of schools and childcare was published and you can find that statement [here](#). This statement supports the Scottish Government's approach of reopening childcare settings to the youngest children.

More detail on how the re-opening applies to different providers can be found in **Annex A**.

GUIDANCE ON REDUCING RISK OF TRANSMISSION IN CHILDCARE SERVICES

The suite of childcare guidance (ELC, SAC & Childminding) has now been updated, in partnership with the Care Inspectorate, stakeholder representative bodies, and local authorities, to reflect the latest evidence and public health advice, and also to support implementation.

You can find the guidance here:

- [Early Learning and Childcare](#)
- [School Aged Childcare](#)
- [Childminding Services](#)

Please note that links to the School Aged Childcare and Childminding Services guidance will be updated by COP tomorrow (17th February).

Key changes in the latest guidance are:

- The need to refresh risk assessments in light of re-opening.
- Staff induction and training on appropriate mitigations.
- Reminders and reinforcements around public health measures such as consistency in staff groupings, physical distancing, reducing bottlenecks and the use of face coverings.
- Clarification on blended placements.

More detail on guidance can be found in **Annex B**.

BLENDED CARE

We know that sometimes children and families need to access different types of childcare, and different patterns. However, we know that to support suppression of the virus, it is important to limit interactions where we can. We are asking everyone to continue to limit the number of settings their child attends, ideally attending one setting only. Blended placements can take place, where supported by an up to date risk assessment that has been undertaken in collaboration with parents and all providers involved in the care of the child, and there is agreement that the arrangement is be required to ensure access to high quality ELC and to meet childcare needs.

Where blended placements do take place, parents and providers must consider measures in the guidance around risk assessment, hygiene, and physical distancing. More information about blended care can be found in **Annex B** and is contained within the suite of guidance documents.

TESTING OF CHILDCARE STAFF

The safety of children and childcare staff remains our priority. The evidence continues to show that childcare settings are low risk environments. However, we understand the importance of offering staff and families as much reassurance as possible.

Arrangements are already in place for all ELC and school age childcare staff who are concerned they may have been at risk of infection, and wish to be tested. At the beginning of February, the First Minister confirmed we will introduce a routine testing programme for all staff working in schools and ELC. The initial introduction of this routine testing programme will be available to school-based ELC and childcare staff.

We are working through the logistics of making the same testing available to stand-alone local authority ELC settings, and settings and services in the Private, Voluntary and Independent sector. The Childcare Testing Programme Team will be in touch in the coming week with more information about the testing itself and will make requests for information from settings to support the delivery of the testing.

In the meantime, childcare staff in stand-alone local authority settings, and those in Private, Voluntary and Independent nursery settings, can continue to access asymptomatic PCR testing [through their employer](#) if they have concerns about having been exposed to the virus.

PARENTS/CARERS

The most up to date information can be found on [Parent Club](#).

It's important that parents know it's safe for their children to return to ELC. Settings will need to communicate any new arrangements to parents in advance of children returning, particularly where there are new routines and procedures that children and families will need to understand and follow.

Parents and carers can continue to reduce the risk of the transmission of COVID-19, and support the reopening of ELC and schools, by:

- Following any guidance from your setting, particularly about pick up/drop off;
- Wearing a face covering at pick up and drop off;
- Maintaining physical distancing of at least 2 metres from other adults at all times; and
- Hand washing/sanitising before and after pickup and drop off.

ELC settings should ask staff and parents and carers to be vigilant for the symptoms of COVID-19, and to understand what actions they should take if someone develops them, either onsite or offsite. It is essential that people do not attend a setting if symptomatic. Everyone who develops symptoms of COVID-19 must self-isolate straight away, stay at home and arrange a test via the appropriate method.

The most common symptoms are:

- new continuous cough;
- fever/high temperature; and
- loss of, or change in, sense of smell or taste (anosmia).

All staff and parents and carers should be advised that anyone with these symptoms, or who has had contact with a family/community member with symptoms, should not attend or should be asked to return home. They should also be told to follow [Test and Protect procedures](#).

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Information about the financial support that may be available to private and third sector providers and childminders is available on the Scottish Government's website and updated regularly at:

[Information for private and third sector childcare providers about business support](#)
[Information for Childminders about business and financial support](#)

FURTHER SUPPORT AND INFORMATION

In order to support the reopening of childcare services we will be sharing best practice examples and we are organising online interactive webinars on the guidance.

Remember to keep an eye on Twitter where we will keep you updated on the latest changes; answer your questions; share ideas and best practice; and celebrate the fantastic efforts of the childcare sector to support Scotland's children and families. Follow us @ELCScotGov for the latest updates, information and sharing of practice.

We will continue to keep you updated with important information and updates through the Care Inspectorate and through the childcare sector representative bodies.

Thank you again for everything you do for Scotland's children and families, particularly in these challenging times.

Alison Cumming

ANNEX A: DETAILS OF ACCESS FOR DIFFERENT PROVIDERS

CHILDCARE SETTINGS FOR PRESCHOOL AGED CHILDREN

Childcare settings can re-open to all children from 22nd February, using [updated guidance](#).

SCHOOL AGED CHILDCARE SETTINGS

The current position for school aged childcare settings remains. Only children of key workers and vulnerable children can access school age childcare settings (other than childminding services).

We are taking a cautious approach to the gradual re-opening of services that present the lowest risk in the first instance to minimise any potential spread of the virus. As such, Out of School Care and other settings providing School Age Childcare will still be subject to the restrictions i.e. they are able to open but only for the care of keyworker and vulnerable children.

School Aged Childcare guidance has been updated to reflect the latest evidence and advice across all childcare sector and can be found [here](#). When community transmission levels allows, this will be extended to a wider range of children, as part of a phased re-opening of education.

CHILDMINDERS

As is already the case, and to reflect the lower risk in small settings with fewer opportunities for adult to adult transmission, childminders caring for fewer than 12 children can continue to operate under updated [guidance](#) for children of any age.

Childminders caring for 12 or more children at a time can care for all children of pre-school age, and for children of any age who are the children of key workers or other priority groups, from 22nd February.

This represents a slight easing in the current restrictions for larger childminding settings – those caring for 12 or more children. However, children of school-age who are not the children of key workers or other priority groups should not begin attending a larger childminding setting again at this time. Like other childcare settings, these settings should be restricted to supporting pre-school aged children.

The following table summarises the childcare that provision that will be available from 22nd February.

Child's Age	Childcare Provision
Under school age	All children under school age can return to ELC/ childcare, in their normal settings including childminders. Only essential informal childcare is permitted. Only children, and not their parents, should enter the home of another household.
School-aged	Children of key workers and children in other priority groups can continue to access childcare.

	<p>All other school-aged children can access formal childcare with a childminder caring for fewer than 12 children. These are the only registered settings where formal childcare for these children is permitted.</p> <p>Only essential informal childcare is permitted. Only children, and not their parents, should enter the home of another household.</p>
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ANNEX B: GUIDANCE – DETAIL

The COVID-19 Advisory Sub-Group on Education and Children’s Issues discussed the mitigations required to support reopening of ELC at their meeting on 9th February, and their advice can be found [here](#). The Sub-Group’s advice emphasises that the current mitigations remain vital in preventing transmission of the virus.

We understand that there will be concern about returning to full provision given the emergence of more transmissible variants of the coronavirus. However, all of the evidence we have indicates that the mitigations we have identified are the right ones. We know that when these mitigations are used, ELC and childcare settings remain low risk environments. That why it’s more important than ever that we all do everything we can to make sure that we are following the public health measures in the guidance.

Back in 2019 we created the #TeamELC – this symbolised the collective Team effort right across the childcare community to ensure the best start in life for all children and for Scotland to be the best place for children to grow up, flourish and reach their full potential. COVID-19 has made things challenging but #TeamELC has exceeded all expectations at how they’ve adapted to the challenges of COVID, continued to provide love, care and nurture to children and families (even from a distance) and still continue to work towards the August 2021 date for the ELC Expansion. We remind you all of the #TeamELC approach as we ask you, when we re-open, to do all that we can as individuals, as settings and collectively as a Scotland wide team to ensure a safe reopening of ELC, so that other childcare sectors can re-open as quickly as possible, and so that we can keep childcare open.

For all childcare settings, public health guidance continues to emphasise the importance of:

- enhanced hygiene and cleaning practice;
- limiting children’s contacts by managing cohort sizes;
- maximising the use of outdoor spaces and access to fresh air;
- strict adherence to self-isolation for those who have symptoms, and to other Test and Protect measures for all; and
- 2 metre physical distancing between adults and the use of face coverings.

CHILDCARE STAFF

Our collective responsibility is to enable all staff to feel confident when returning to the workplace. As settings plan to welcome back children and families and staff, staff wellbeing must be protected. Staff will need time to re-connect, to meet, talk and 'check in' with each other. We’ve added specific sections to the guidance which give advice on ensuring staff safety and wellbeing on their return to work. These include:

Risk Assessments

- Further guidance on risk assessments and a requirement that these be refreshed in the context of the reopening of ELC to all children.
- A reminder that risk assessments are updated appropriately for the autumn/winter period, to consider issues around ventilation and heating/warmth.

Staff induction and training

- A requirement that inductions for new staff must include guidance on the setting's approach to ensuring distancing by adults as well as routines to ensure good infection prevention and control.
- An emphasis on the need for clearly defined training sessions for staff on the risk mitigations set out in this guidance.

Staff adhering to public health measures

- A new section to encourage settings to maintain as much consistency as possible in the staff who work together when planning working patterns.
- A reminder that the requirement to physically distance applies during breaks and outside of the work environment, as well as while staff are on duty.
- A suggestion that, where there are identified bottleneck areas within the setting, signage may be used to remind staff to wear a face covering when passing through these areas to reduce transmission risk.
- Further reinforcement of the guidance on the use of face coverings, to reduce the risk of adult to adult transmission.

BLENDED CARE

It remains very important to continue to minimise the number of contacts and risk of transmission, and to maintain progress in suppressing the virus as schools and the ELC sector re-opens more widely. As has been the case, parents and carers should be encouraged and supported to limit the number of settings their child attends, ideally attending one setting only. For children who attend more than one setting, consideration should be given to ensuring their child only attends the same setting(s) consistently.

Risk assessments must be refreshed in the context of the re-opening of ELC to all children and in the context of new variants of concern. Existing blended placements may continue provided they are supported by a refreshed risk assessment that has been undertaken in collaboration with parents and all providers involved in the care of the child, and there is agreement that the arrangement continues to be required to ensure access to high quality ELC and to meet childcare needs.

When increased demand for blended placements arises due to the wider re-opening of schools and nurseries these requests should also be risk assessed and considered together, on a case by case basis, by local authorities, providers and parents. This risk assessment should take account of the importance of children's wellbeing and protecting their access to high quality ELC which supports families' needs.

Where it is judged that a child should attend multiple settings, either ELC settings, childminders or other settings, consideration should be given to:

- how they are supported to ensure good hygiene practices (washing hands, not sharing resources, etc.) when moving between settings, and how their contacts with other groups of children are managed, based on an appropriate risk assessment in each setting.

- childminders and other key workers may undertake drop-off and pick-up from other ELC settings but physical distancing with other adults must be maintained.
- sharing of record keeping across settings, to assist with any Test & Protect process. Any records should be managed in way which is consistent with the requirements of GDPR and setting privacy policies.