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ADES, COSLA & others



PANDEMIC FLU : AH1N1 (SWINE FLU) UPDATE – SCHOOLS & NURSERIES

19 October 2009

This note continues the sequence of periodic updates on the AH1N1 (swine flu) situation for Directors of Education, the Scottish Council of Independent Schools and others which I instigated when this first impacted on Scotland back in May.

Since the start of the current term, in August, several dozen Scottish schools have been affected in varying degrees by increased absence rates. The reason has not proved to be suspected or confirmed swine flu in all cases, but the need to manage the developing situation, to liaise as necessary with the local Health Board, and to keep parents well informed – sometimes also having to deal with a measure of unhelpful media hype - has often proved challenging. I would wish to express our gratitude to the way in which you and all of your staff, both in schools and at headquarters, have worked together to manage and deal with the situations arising, calmly and professionally, and in the best interests – both the health and education interests - of all concerned.

Absence recording – weekly (and daily as necessary)

The system of local authority weekly returns, indicating trends of absence rates (pupil and staff) across schools has now largely bedded in and we appreciate the time that your teams are taking to collate, summarise and let us have that information. It helps to build up a national picture of overall absence rates and trends, although to date the instances of abnormal rates of absence in individual schools have not tended to show any obvious regional patterns. Instances have been quite scattered and tended to focus on individual schools, not necessarily spreading to those nearby.

A particular thank you to those of you who have been faced with outbreaks in individual schools and who have let us know, immediately, and followed that up with daily detailed reports until the level of absences (pupils and/or staff) have returned to normal. Ministers have much appreciated the quality of information supplied and the concern to ensure that they have the very latest picture. At any given time, something of the order of 20 schools

have been affected across Scotland by higher than normal absence rates - usually over a period of 2 to 3 weeks although in some cases rather less than that.

Keeping parents informed

The importance of this cannot be over emphasised. A template “letter to parents” was circulated by John Bissett on 16 September for use as appropriate after discussion with your local Health Board. It has already been extensively used - in some cases with adaptations to address local circumstances – either the Headteacher’s or an NHS signature. I would encourage its continued use when the need arises to explain to and reassure parents about the situation in a school and the action being taken.

Planning assumptions

I included the latest UK planning assumptions from the Director of Civil Contingences at the Cabinet Office in my update of 17 July. To date they remain the most recent assumptions, although they are kept under continuous review. I shall advise further if and when they are updated or superseded.

Business continuity plans and readiness

Given the prospect of staff shortages due to illness or caring for others who are ill, I have no doubt that each of you will already have been urgently reviewing your business continuity plans and readiness of the systems you have in place to monitor the situation and inform decisions you will be taking to endeavour to maintain business as usual, as far and as long as possible. To my knowledge there has only been one instance in Scotland so far, where the rate of staff absence in a school has approached anything like the rate of pupil absence. In that case, although half the staff were absent, so were half the pupils, so with a bit of ‘adjustment’ of classes it was not difficult to keep the school open.

The SNCT has turned its attention in a very welcome way to a number of aspects of the potential disruption from this pandemic. SNCT Circular 09/15 *Swine Flu Pandemic: Maintaining Continuity of Education* was issued on 25 September.

There are two principal drivers behind trying to keep schools open if at all possible. The first is the serious disruption to the continuity of pupil's education that closing schools for a period would cause. That loss cannot easily be caught up. The second is the severe implications for the rest of the economy and for the maintenance of front-line (eg health) and other emergency services if schools and nurseries close and parents have to take time off work because of that and the fact that group childcare facilities may also be curtailed.

Lessons learned from experiences since August

Lachie MacCallum has spent a deal of time on the telephone to schools that have been affected by swine flu since August, all with a view to collating and sharing their experiences more widely - setting out some of the ‘lessons learned’ and things to think about, for the benefit of those who have yet to experience the impact.

The results are attached (as a separate document). We hope they are helpful.

Hygiene in schools

The simple message here is please return again and again to the charge - impressing on schools, staff and pupils how good hygiene practices can make a real difference in helping to limit the spread of this virus. Proper use of tissues, frequent hand washing, and keeping communal surfaces clean is essential. Please make sure that schools know how important it is to provide abundant supplies of tissues, soap and gel, and of hot water.

HMIE have been asked to and will be paying particular attention to hygiene facilities and practices on visits and during inspections.

The vaccination programme

As you will all know, the public vaccination programme is about to commence, focusing initially on groups that have been identified as being at highest risk from the virus (for instance those with medical conditions – children as well as adults - which make them particularly vulnerable to flu and its effects). Your local Health Board may already be in contact, regarding aspects of the vaccination programme. Ministers will continue to be guided by the medical experts on the next phase(s) of the programme.

Contacting us here in Victoria Quay

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The three of us are at your disposal if we can assist in any way.

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