



13th May 2020

Fórsa Submission to the Department of Education and Skills on Contingency planning arrangements for 2020/21 school year

The re-opening of education workplaces potentially from September 2020 raises many challenges and questions for staff and students. This submission seeks to highlight the specific concerns of Fórsa members working across the education sector in Higher Education, Education and Training Boards and the Schools sector.

Strict adherence to the requirements set out in the 'Return to Work Safely Protocol COVID-19 Specific National Protocol for Employers and Workers' published on 8th May 2020 will be required if the safety of both staff and students is to be maintained.

The protocol sets out a bipartisan approach to maintaining safety in the workplace with specific obligations on employers and workers respectively. Genuine consultation between management and staff will be key to the successful management of re-opening the education sector to ensure that arrangements can command the confidence of all stakeholders.

Managing such obligations will pose specific resource based challenges for smaller employers predominantly in the schools sector whilst larger employers in the Higher Education sector will be responsible for the health and welfare of thousands of students and staff. Therefore the primary concern that Fórsa wishes to set out relates to funding.

There are many requirements for premises to be altered and made safe to protect against the transmission of Covid-19. All these measures require funding, for instance many Schools cannot effectively comply with handwashing protocols without the availability of running hot water, public counters in all workplaces will need to be fitted with screening and employers will need adequate supplies of appropriate PPE such as face masks, gloves and hand sanitisers. These measures cannot be adequately funded from existing resources and employers will need additional resources and budgets to enable them to re-open in safe manner. Without adequate funding the education sector will not be able to comply with public health advice nor with the return to work safely protocol.

We also wish to highlight the specific challenges posed by the need to deep clean buildings and to regularly sanitise work surfaces. Deep cleaning is a specialised task requiring expertise. We wish to make clear that employers should not attempt to redeploy staff to carry out deep cleaning where this is outside their area of expertise. This is particularly relevant to the Schools sector.

We believe the Department should now consult stakeholders on the development of sector wide guidance based on public health advice and the safe return to work protocol that encompasses the following issues:

Health and Safety

The return to work safely protocol contains clear provisions in respect of managing the health of staff including catering for staff with underlying health conditions which should be reflected in any guidance sent to employers and staff. Specific mention should be made of the necessary provision for staff who are registered as disabled who may need an enhanced risk assessment before returning to work.

Childcare facilities remain closed, the Government anticipates these services being permitted to re-opening on a phased one day per week basis from 20th July 2020, in the event that such services are not fully open and accessible to staff at point of re-opening the education sector education employers should continue to facilitate remote working for those staff with child care responsibilities, this situation should be re-assessed in the light of development on re-opening primary schools as child care obligations will remain as a problem for many staff until both childcare services are open and schools are also open.

Clear hand hygiene protocols should be developed based on existing guidance as applicable to staff and students. As stated above improvements to infrastructure may be required in respect of the availability of hot water. Employers will need to establish hand sanitation stations at key points on their premises and also ensure such facilities are regularly serviced and cleaned. A similar approach will be necessary in respect of elder care responsibilities for vulnerable adults.

All employers should seek the advice of occupational health services and develop a referral pathway relating to Covid-19. As stated in the return to work safety protocol staff exhibiting symptoms of Covid-19 need to be clearly advised to return home, self-isolate and seek advice and treatment.

School secretaries and caretakers working in independent schools do not normally have access to the Employee Assistance Service that is made available to Teachers and other public servants. The provision of occupational health and employee assistance service should now be on an 'all school' basis.

The extent to which Covid-19 testing can be made available for staff and students prior to a return to the workplace should be assessed closer to the re-opening date and a decision on offering testing must be based on public health advice and availability of a testing service.

Communication and Consultation with staff

Employers should establish consultation fora involving recognized trade union representatives to develop plans to deal with the threat of Covid-19. Such fora should utilise national public health advice and specific guidance for education workplaces in developing clear plans to address risk and ensure that those plans are effectively communicated to all staff, students and parents as appropriate. Arrangements for conducting learning whilst maintaining social distancing will require staggered student attendance and such plans must be discussed and developed with trade unions.

Measures such as mandatory temperature checks or the wearing of masks should only be introduced on the basis of national public health advice and must be clearly communicated prior to implementation.

The effective monitoring and evaluation of social distancing measures and other safety protocols will be important if workplaces are to operate safely. Proposals on monitoring compliance with public health advice must be discussed with trade unions who should be made aware of any consequential changes to normal working arrangements.

Concerns on the provision of safe office facilities and safe classrooms

The necessary 2m social distancing measures pose challenges in ensuring that staff can work safely in office accommodation, planning will be required to ensure that social distancing can be maintained in shared office spaces. This may require employers to identify additional office facilities or to consider different attendance patterns which must be agreed with trade unions. Using shared offices also presents challenges regarding the sanitization of work surfaces and clear plans and advice on this should be provided.

Work in classrooms and lecture halls cannot continue as before and student numbers will be thus affected in order to maintain social distancing.

The work of Special Needs Assistants and Teachers needs to be carefully considered as normal practice would involve close physical proximity in many instances. Specific guidance will be required on this and it is suggested that in respect of the work of SNAs consultation should now commence with Fórsa to develop national guidance on this matter in advance of the re-opening of the schools sector.

Annual Leave

Normal leave arrangements in the HE and ETB sectors should now be reviewed with a greater number of days available for carry over as an exceptional measure.

We enclose in an appendix a list of questions and queries raised by Fórsa members from across the sector that might prove helpful to the Department when considering the various issues associated with the safe re-opening of the education sector.

Yours Sincerely,

Andy Pike
National Secretary
Fórsa Trade Union

Appendix 1.

GENERAL CONCERNS	
1	Entrance to school/ college grounds – by bus, car, cycling and walking – traffic control? Will there be staff hired to monitor the mass groups? Buses disembarking -social distancing of exiting passengers.
2	Additional doorways to be used for entrance to the Buildings to ensure social distancing?
3	Automatic doors where possible, or else doors to be left open. Ok in the warm weather but not in the winter.
4	Marking out social distances on floors and corridors
5	Sanitisers located at all entry/exit points – Monitored for use?
6	Bins placed beside sanitisers for disposal of waste tissues etc and ensure regular and safe emptying of bins
7	Signage with safety messages in all areas, suspended, on walls and on the ground (including offices and classrooms/labs etc)
8	How are the corridors, breakout areas etc. going to be monitored to ensure social distancing?
9	Restriction on number of students who may visit a function area i.e. library, canteen, bathrooms, helpdesk etc. must be monitored and controlled. How will this be done? Will there be guidance regarding numbers per measured area?
10	Will audits be carried out on individual offices, labs, classrooms etc? Lecture theatre, lab and classroom how to determine capacities? How will computer labs operate with 2 metre distancing?
11	Will PPE be supplied such as masks and gloves?
12	Staff training – Social distancing may be a problem. We may not all have the same understanding of Social distancing at present.
13	Road map set out by government i.e. 'Remote working will be maintained for all those who can do so'. Will this continue?
14	Great concern in colleges that are being used as a testing centre. What is going to happen when staff/students return i.e. will it still be a testing centre? People may only wish to go to the campus for testing purposes.
15	Will Department of education be producing any videos for training?
16	One to one tutorials/assessments/student staff meetings. Can these take place safely?
17	Bathroom usage, entrance to bathrooms, door openings, cubicles doors, all areas of possible infection transmission
18	Childcare for staff- will working from home be facilitated for those who have difficulty sourcing childcare?
19	Perspex screens for reception/helpdesks/library issue desk etc. Can offices introduce student appointments rather than drop ins, and only one student at a time.
20	Canteen usage- money- should card and contactless payment systems be introduced?
21	Lift usage? Cleaning of lift buttons?
22	Stair usage – should there be single traffic on stairs- one for going up another for coming down- what if there only one access stairs to an area??
23	Use of pairs or teams to work together in admin or library
24	Printer and photocopy usage- cleaning of control pads? Distance between machines? Franking machines and postal equipment usage and cleaning
25	Phones- cleaning of phones- there are curtesy phones available for student use to contact institute staff- how to maintain safe usage
26	Guidance on handling post and packages

	Library Specific Issues
27	Lending Books- how long should they be quarantined after use? Some guidance in other countries suggests 10 days for books that have laminated covering, and less time for non-laminated material. The virus does remain live on objects for various periods of time
28	Computer keyboard cleaning- computers used for finding material in library
29	Should a book retrieval policy be introduced rather than allow people to browse the shelves
31	Furniture cleaning in library
32	Will there be funding for ebook provision?
33	Will there be additional funding for online resources
34	Partitioning of study areas- is distancing enough?
35	Should students sit opposite each other in study areas?
36	Circulation of air- guidance for aeration of buildings where many people will be entering and leaving
37	Student hubs should be closed off or only one student allowed at any one time
38	Staff should not be asked to patrol social distancing in the library or elsewhere or retrieve books or other jobs that are not normally part of their job description.

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