Subject:	**Circular Number: 2022/16**

GUIDANCE ON REMOTE LEARNING

Date of Issue:
15 November 2022

Target Audience:

- Principals and Boards of Governors (BoG) of all nursery, primary, post-primary and special grant-aided schools
- Management Committees of all voluntary providers
- Education Authority (EA)
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS)
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA)
- NI Council for Integrated Education (NICIE)
- Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC)
- Proprietors of Independent Schools
- Governing Bodies Association of Voluntary Grammar Schools in NI (GBANI)
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG)
- General Teaching Council for NI (GTCNI)
- Teachers' Unions
- EOTAS Centres
- Middletown Centre for Autism
- Catholic Schools' Trustee Service (CSTS)

Summary of Contents:
To provide updated guidance on Remote Learning.

Enquiries:

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Governor Awareness:
Essential

Status of Contents:
Advice
Curricular guidance for schools and other educational settings

Expiry Date:
None – will be kept under review

DE Website:
https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/

Introduction

1. The purpose of this circular is to provide updated advice and guidance to schools and EOTAS Centres on the use of remote learning. The guidance sets out high-level principles that schools may wish to consider when evaluating and further developing remote learning programmes and as they plan for a blended approach to learning. The Department is asking that schools keep their remote learning policies under review and continue to have contingency plans in place for the use of remote learning under the circumstances set out in paragraph 5 below. Schools will wish to decide their own approach depending on each circumstance and with due regard to time and time budgets.

2. The Department asked schools to have contingency plans in place for the delivery of remote learning in the event of a school closure, or if a class or any larger group of pupils across a year group need to self-isolate owing to COVID-19. School leaders and staff have continued to provide high quality education to children and young people in difficult circumstances.

3. The need for schools to utilise remote learning has decreased significantly as a direct consequence of the drop in the number of the COVID-19 cases. However, the transmission of the virus has not ceased. Should it be required, the Department's COVID-19 Guidance for schools remains available at COVID-19: Guidance.

4. The use of contingency plans in exceptional circumstances needs to be workload assessed and adequate contingency time provided for in the school's time budget. If exceptional circumstances require the use of remote learning to extend beyond a few days, normal/routine planning time should be used to support remote learning.

Why use remote learning?

5. The case for educating children and young people in the classroom is clear. It is educationally beneficial, which enables pupils to engage with the breadth of the curriculum, including practical subjects, but is also important to their health and wellbeing. **Remote learning should, therefore, only be used as a last resort and in exceptional circumstances** which may include:

   - further outbreaks of COVID-19 in a school which requires whole-school closure, isolation of classes or any larger group of pupils across a year group/school;
   - significant loss of staff which may compromise the safe and effective operation of the school;
   - damage to parts of the school;
   - significant transport disruption;
   - severe weather conditions;

- failure of school estate services (e.g. heating, etc.); and
- other issues as may be determined by the Department (in consultation with the school, as necessary).

6. When consideration is given to utilising remote learning because of staffing shortages, the following should be considered:

- Providing supervised learning for vulnerable pupils, including pupils with Special Educational Needs and those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

- Organising composite classes for short periods if class sizes have also fallen.

- In post-primary schools, a partial/amended timetable, with supervised learning in subject areas where it has not been possible to source substitute teaching cover.

- Prioritisation of continued face-to-face learning for Years 11 to 14 and in particular for pupils in Years 12 and Year 14, who are completing qualifications.

7. Where the need for remote learning is identified, schools should have in place systems for checking that pupils are engaging with their work and procedures for monitoring work completion and engagement across the curriculum (in line with their agreed school policy). Schools will wish to take a pragmatic approach to the delivery of the curriculum by prioritising key knowledge, understanding and skills in each area of learning.

Approaches to remote learning

8. The approaches summarised below are intended to apply when remote learning is used for the exceptional circumstances set out in paragraph 5 above, noting that pupils who are absent from school owing to illness need time to rest and recover.

9. The Department's Circular 2021/01 Guidance on Remote Learning[1] provides advice and guidance to schools on supporting remote learning. It outlines a range of key principles which should underpin schools' approaches to their remote learning programmes. The Department has also simplified its remote learning guidance into a one-page, quick glance document for schools entitled Effective Practice in Remote Learning[2].

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[1] Updated Circular - 2021/ 01 - Further guidance for schools on supporting remote learning | Department of Education (education-ni.gov.uk)
[2] DE-EFFECTIVE-PRACTICE-IN-REMOTE-LEARNING.PDF (education-ni.gov.uk)

10. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)[3] has found that the effectiveness of remote teaching is determined by many of the same factors that also determine the effectiveness of classroom teaching, for example:

- ensuring pupils receive clear explanations;

- supporting growth in confidence with new material through scaffolded practice;

- application of new knowledge or skills; and

- enabling pupils to receive feedback on how to progress.

11. The EEF has developed a range of planning and reflection tools which schools and teachers may find useful when developing their remote learning practice. The planning framework sets out a learning sequence with five approaches to learning – activate, explain, practise, reflect and review – and provides example tasks and activities within each approach.

12. A focus for schools when planning for future remote learning should be on developing an e-learning repository of learning materials including pre-recorded lessons. Online video lessons do not necessarily need to be recorded by teaching staff at the school. For example, suitable high quality lessons developed by external providers could be provided in lieu of school-led video content. All schools are encouraged to plan actively for the eventuality that they may need to provide remote learning in any of the exceptional circumstances outlined in paragraph 5 above. Such contingency planning needs to be considered strategically with due regard to teacher workload and time budgets.

13. Ideally, e-learning activities should last around 10-30 minutes for primary age pupils and 30-45 minutes for post-primary age pupils. Schools should aim to utilise the multimedia aspects of e-learning through visuals, video and audio where possible. Providing links to videos, online experiments, animations and podcasts can be very helpful by providing pupils with different ways of explaining concepts, assisting those who are less confident, and to work in lieu of teacher-led explanation.

14. It is important, as much as possible, to adjust existing practice and resources to ensure they are still engaging for pupils working remotely. For example, providing pupils with handouts that would have been used in the classroom can be confusing without the teaching to accompany it, particularly if there are large amounts of text to be inserted. Schools will wish to consider how they might adapt these to ensure they provide simple and clear explanations of work which supports the needs of pupils. Where possible, schools should aim to ensure the

[3] Education Endowment Foundation | EEF

resources provided are appropriately differentiated by pupils' ability in order to provide a positive learning experience for all pupils.

15. Schools recognise that providing feedback to pupils is a key consideration and e-learning tools provide opportunities to give regular, whole class and individual feedback to pupils while they are learning remotely.

16. The Department is also cognisant of the caution suggested by a number of teaching unions in relation to livestreaming lessons. It is, of course, a matter for individual schools, in conjunction with their staff, to determine whether livestreaming represents an appropriate learning approach for their school community and to ensure that all child protection and safeguarding procedures are appropriately followed.

17. A particularly important aspect of remote learning is the opportunity it offers to focus on pupils as independent learners. This supports the further development of the cross-curricular thinking skills and personal capabilities, particularly self-management and management of information. This may include helping pupils to organise their learning, set goals and reflect on their learning and performance.

18. Additionally, schools should, where possible, provide pupils with the opportunity to collaborate in discussions and group assignments and share their learning with their peers in small groups and online forums. Creating small groups or pairs to share thoughts, peer mark and give feedback on each other's work can be very beneficial. During longer periods of remote learning, this can help maintain a social connection and avoid feelings of isolation and encourage pupils to continue working with others as they learn.

19. Another approach to remote learning is 'flipped learning'. This is a pedagogical approach where pupils first explore new course content before a lesson by viewing a pre-recorded lecture, video or digital module, or completing a reading or preparatory assignment. In-class time is organised around pupil engagement, inquiry, and assessment and typically entails the use of active learning strategies, including case studies, investigating problems or structured discussion. In the context of remote learning, the concept of flipped learning is important as aspects of course are online and pupils will need to explore new content independently. In this context, it is important to note that schools can currently maintain the 'flipped' portion of learning through live class sessions or setting activities for pupils to engage in remote collaboration such as posing questions for pair or small group discussion, or setting shared assignments.

20. Remote learning can also provide opportunities for collaborative and clustering arrangements between and within schools to explore co-planning and co-teaching; for example, to provide thematic experiences which offer learning across the curriculum. In some post-primary schools for example, subject departments are dividing the planning and resourcing work between them, with a

different teacher perhaps taking the lead for different year groups. This can maximise teachers' time and reduce duplication of effort.

Barriers to remote learning

21. The Department is aware that all pupils do not have the same levels of home support nor do all households have the same level of access to resources, particularly printing facilities, internet connection and data and devices such as tablets and laptops.

22. Schools should give careful consideration to the barriers pupils may experience when accessing remote learning and work to overcome these barriers. Schools will continue to help overcome these barriers by distributing school-owned laptops or other devices and supplementing digital provision with different forms of remote learning, such as providing access to printed resources or textbooks. Schools may find it helpful to maintain an up-to-date record of which pupils and families do not have sufficient devices or appropriate internet access.

23. Schools should consider how they ensure resources are available for pupils without online access, including through distribution of hard copy versions, which include guidance on completion of the activities, model explanations and answers to assist pupils and also parents in supporting their child's learning.

Communication with parents and carers

24. Schools are already aware of the importance of keeping parents and carers informed of the reasons for and purposes of remote learning and its likely duration. As noted, schools should endeavour to ensure that parents and carers have clear guidance on how to support pupils at home and that both parents and pupils understand the expectations on how many hours they should be learning and how to participate in remote learning, for example, how to submit assignments. The EEF has provided a guide for schools about how to communicate with pupils and parents – Link Here. In particular, parents, carers and pupils should be made aware of the standards of behaviour expected while using remote devices and working online (in line with school policy).

E-learning

25. Should remote learning be required, the Department recommends that schools engage with pupils on an ongoing basis through the wide range of e-learning platforms available rather than provide hard copy or emailed resources alone, if at all possible.

26. Technology can potentially increase both the quality and quantity of remote learning that pupils undertake. The use of e-learning platforms can provide additional opportunities to motivate pupils, establish a daily routine and give

ongoing feedback which helps to keep pupils engaged and enhance their learning experience. Notably, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has stressed that the success of all pupils during this period and particularly those from disadvantaged groups, is linked to maintaining a close relationship with their teachers.

27. The Department has not directed schools to use specific e-learning tools or platforms nor should they be compelled to do so. This will vary according to the pupil profile and the individual subject and task context. However, the C2K system provides a secure platform and a range of tools to support teaching and learning.

Engagement, feedback and assessment

28. Schools will wish to consider what monitoring and assessment of pupil progress is feasible during periods of remote learning.