



Equality Commission

FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

# COVID-19 and Education: Equality Considerations

## SUMMARY



23 June 2020

**1**  
**Executive  
summary**





## 1 Executive summary

- 1.1** The Commission welcomes and acknowledges the range of steps that have been taken across the education system to mitigate the risks of any loss of learning in the response to COVID-19. In tackling the virus, there must be a focus on avoiding the emergence or widening of inequality.
- 1.2** While data from Northern Ireland regarding the equality impacts of COVID-19 is currently limited, information from elsewhere and on pre-existing inequalities in education suggests that there is a risk that the COVID-19 crisis will deepen known educational inequalities<sup>1</sup>, or lead to the emergence of new inequalities, for children and young people now and over their lifecycle.
- 1.3** Urgent action by Government, built on the analysis of equality-disaggregated data and on engagement with key stakeholders, families and communities, is essential to better promote equality of opportunity and avoid the emergence or widening of inequalities in the response to COVID-19.

### Summary of recommendations

- 1.4** Our recommendations, which build upon our existing (2018) calls for action<sup>2</sup>, are:
- **Use the equality duties** to inform decision-making.
  - **Collect comprehensive equality data** to identify equality impacts and shape targeted actions to advance equality.
  - **Maximise collaborative approaches** to identify and respond to barriers to education, involving the families and wider communities of key equality groups.
  - Mitigate the negative impact on children of the **closure of pre-school** settings caused by the COVID-19 outbreak, including for those with disabilities, from minority ethnic communities and new residents.
  - Take action to identify and mitigate potential negative equality impacts arising from **reduced access to formally taught education**.
  - Address any negative equality impacts arising from the **shift to home-based learning**.

1 ECNI (2017) [Statement on Key Inequalities in Education in Northern Ireland](#).

2 ECNI (2018) [Equality in Education Policy Recommendations](#)



- Identify and mitigate potential negative equality impacts arising from any **move to 'blended' learning**.
- Consider the equality impacts of decisions regarding **assessment** and any opportunities to better promote equality.
- Ensure that the **benefits of sharing in education** are maintained now, when schools reopen, and as social-distancing is relaxed.
- Deliver strong and visible leadership to maintain and **promote an anti-bullying culture** within education, and combat the potential for racially motivated negative attitudes and behaviours.
- Assist schools in making effective use of **dual language resources to help Newcomer learners** access the curriculum.
- Identify and address any effects of COVID-19 that **poverty or socio-economic status** may have on the emergence or exacerbation of inequalities experienced by a range of equality groups.





**2**

**Mitigating  
the equality  
impacts of  
COVID-19**



## 2 Mitigating the equality impacts of COVID-19

- 2.1** The Commission welcomes and acknowledges the range of steps that have been taken across the education system to mitigate the risks of any loss of learning in the response to COVID-19.
- 2.2** Equality matters, particularly in a context where initial evidence regarding COVID-19 indicates that the disease appears to have impacts which vary with individual circumstances and equality characteristics.
- 2.3** The context of the COVID-19 virus itself, of lockdown, of emergency measures, and of subsequent gradual and partial re-emergence from them – has the potential to compound existing inequalities and lead to the emergence of new ones. There may be persistent long-term impacts on equality groups, particularly on those equality groups more likely to experience poverty. There is also a need to avoid and challenge negative stereotypes related to equality grounds, and to challenge and avoid any rise in prejudicial attitudes.
- 2.4** In tackling the virus, there must be a focus on avoiding the emergence or widening of inequality. Clearly no-one should be unfairly disadvantaged because of who they are; and protected equality grounds or characteristics should not be a predictor of outcomes. Action now is essential, built on the analysis of equality-disaggregated data and informed by families and carers, communities and wider stakeholders, to mitigate these risks.

### **COVID-19: Equality and Education**

- 2.5** The absence of formally taught education provision for a period of four months or more, followed by potential resumption of formally taught provision on a part-time basis only, will likely result in educational and social impacts across a diverse range of children.
- 2.6** The current Northern Ireland specific evidence base on potential equality impacts due to COVID-19 currently appears limited. The situation is also rapidly evolving. Our recommendations are based on evidence available at this time and may therefore be subject to change and development.
- 2.7** COVID-19 has the potential to exacerbate existing educational inequalities<sup>3</sup>, both for children now and over their lifecycle. Accordingly, our recommendations seek to take account of, and build upon, our existing (2018) calls for action<sup>4</sup> to Government and to the education sector more broadly, to promote equality in education.

3 ECNI (2017) [Statement on Key Inequalities in Education in Northern Ireland](#).

4 ECNI (2018) [Equality in Education Policy Recommendations](#)



**3**

**Recommendations**





## 3 Recommendations

**3.1** This section sets out our current advice and recommendations for legislation, public policy and/or service provision relating to potential equality issues in education due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***Use the equality duties to inform decision-making.***

**3.2** In Northern Ireland public authorities are required<sup>5</sup> to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity and to have regard to the desirability of promoting good relations generally and including when developing COVID-19 related policies.

**3.3** These are continuing duties and are important duties to observe, even in the context of COVID-19<sup>6</sup> when policies may need to be developed at pace. The Commission has issued an advice note for public authorities<sup>7</sup> on implementing the Section 75 duties and continues to provide advice to public authorities during this time.

### ***Collect comprehensive equality data to identify equality impacts and shape targeted actions to advance equality.***

**3.4** To inform effective responses, tailored to the specific circumstances and needs in Northern Ireland, we recommend that all relevant measures are not only tracked in aggregate but also tracked for the impact on individuals from across each of the Section 75 equality grounds.

**3.5** Education information systems (such as C2K) should collect and disaggregate data by equality ground to identify any differential impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on educational access, attainment or progression.

**3.6** Departments and public authorities, including statistical agencies, should in general ensure that where they are collecting data they should do so across the full range of equality grounds so that the design, delivery and review of any changes to law, policy or service provision is improved by access to comprehensive analysis. We recognise that there are some limitations to meaningful data disaggregation, however where robust to do so disaggregation would provide greater information to inform the better targeting of policy interventions.

<sup>5</sup> ECNI website, [Section 75 duties](#)

<sup>6</sup> ECNI (2020), [The Section 75 duties when developing COVID-19 related policies](#)

<sup>7</sup> ECNI (21 April 2020) [Section 75 duties when developing COVID-19 related policies](#)





***Maximise collaborative approaches to identify and respond to barriers to education, involving the families and wider communities of key equality groups.***

- 3.7** Action should be taken to ensure that transparent and accessible information is available, and that stakeholders from across the range of equality categories are fully involved in developing and delivering solutions in response to the impacts of COVID-19 generally, and for specific equality groups.
- 3.8** Harnessing relevant expertise and experience, including in rapid response scenarios, will better enable the identification of key issues and the delivery of more effective outcomes.
- 3.9** Developing programmes that involve families and wider communities, alongside education providers, in delivery will further inform and enable targeted local responses to specific barriers to education for pupils and learners across the range of equality groups.

***Mitigate the negative impact on children of the closure of pre-school settings caused by the COVID-19 outbreak, including for those with disabilities, from minority ethnic communities and new residents.***

- 3.10** The loss of over one term of pre-school education will have a detrimental impact on children's development, in at least the short term. Those for whom it usually has the most significant impact, including children from minority ethnic communities and new residents<sup>8</sup>, and children with disabilities<sup>9</sup>, will likely feel the loss most acutely.
- 3.11** Steps must therefore be taken to identify and mitigate any particular equality impacts in Northern Ireland so that COVID-19 does not unfairly impact upon the educational progression and trajectory of children from specific equality groups.

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<sup>8</sup> DE (2017) [A compendium of evidence on ethnic minority resilience to the effects of deprivation on attainment](#)

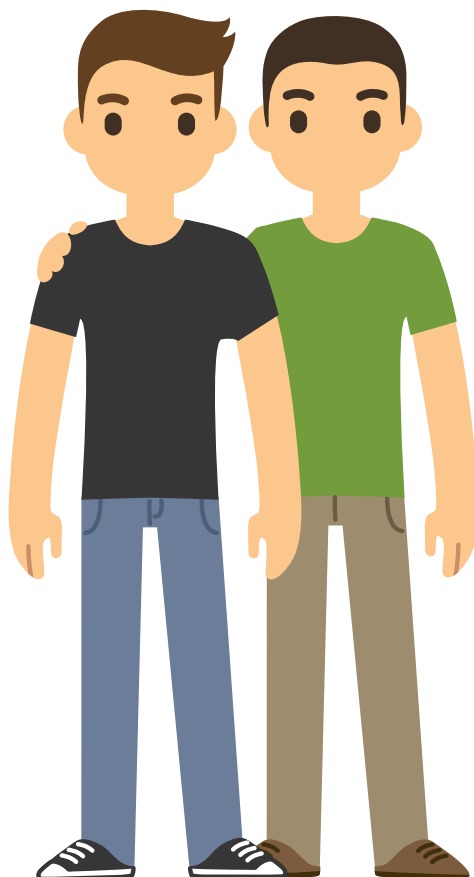
<sup>9</sup> DE (2015) [Study of Early Education and Development: meeting the needs of children with special educational needs and disabilities in the early years](#), page 11



***Take action to identify and mitigate potential negative equality impacts arising from reduced access to formally taught education.***

**3.12** Action should be taken, in collaboration with learners, their families, and the broader community, to identify and address key equality issues, including any associated with:

- The loss or reduction of access to full-time formally taught provision with trained teaching and/or support professionals;
- The extent to which supports including specialist equipment, personal care or assistants for children with SEN and disabilities will be in place outside of formally taught environments (schools, including special schools or further or higher education settings);
- Any impact of reduced social interaction with peers and teaching professionals, including for those requiring specialist or language support.





**3.13** Consideration should also be given to the provision of dedicated programmes of formally taught education to provide ‘catch up’ learning for those most adversely affected by the loss of learning due to school closures. Such programmes should take account of lessons learnt from relevant programmes in Northern Ireland – for example, the Delivering Social Change ‘Literacy and Numeracy Programme’ which used newly qualified teachers to deliver tuition to children and young people who were ‘struggling to achieve even the basic educational standards’<sup>10</sup>.

**3.14** We also have previously highlighted<sup>11</sup> the positive outcomes of a number of extended schools and full service community network programmes and we recommend that existing support programmes are redesigned so far as possible to provide remote services at this time.

### ***Address any negative equality impacts arising from the shift to home-based learning.***

**3.15** Action should be taken, in collaboration with learners, their families, and the broader community, to identify and address key equality issues, including any associated with differences in the effectiveness of the home learning environment, including:

- access to appropriate space to learn and study;
- access to educational or curriculum support materials;
- the accessibility of digital materials – either due to access to IT equipment or broadband, or the accessibility standards of the materials themselves;
- the circumstances and abilities of parents, carers or siblings to support learning – including in the context of wider family, caring and/or work commitments;
- access to related specialist support and equipment – in particular for those children with disabilities or special educational needs; and those in need of language or wider support – including Traveller, Roma and Newcomer children;

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10 OFMDFM (10.10.12) [Ministerial Statement](#)

11 ECNI (2018) [Equality in Education: Policy Recommendations](#)



### ***Identify and mitigate potential negative equality impacts arising from any move to 'blended' learning.***

- 3.16** The social, emotional and academic impacts of returning to part-time taught provision, and a 'new-normal' of social distancing will present challenges to learners and families.
- 3.17** As more parents and carers return to work outside of the home, potential differential impacts of blended (home and formally taught) learning upon families, and the children and young people within them, must be built into planning.
- 3.18** Particular concerns arise for certain equality groups. Action should be taken to identify and address key inequality issues, including any associated with:
- How children and young people with particular disabilities, such as autism, or special educational needs will be supported to adapt to a changed or changing learning environment;
  - The risk that children and young people with traditionally lower attendance and transitioning rates such as Traveller and Roma children will not return to school or have lower attendance rates than previously;
  - That children and young people who have, or perceive themselves to have, fallen behind their peers due to an inability to engage in home-based learning may disengage from formal education. This potential disengagement may be exacerbated when attendance is part-time and phased.

### ***Consider the equality impacts of decisions regarding assessment and any opportunities to better promote equality.***

- 3.19** Given decisions that older children, specifically those at GCSE, AS or A-level, will not this year be required to sit examinations, consideration should also be given to how any equality impacts might be mitigated or eliminated, both with regards to exam grades and any differential impact on the ability of individuals to continue in education or progress to further or higher education.
- 3.20** For younger children, in the context of post-primary transfer, the current intention to delay slightly<sup>12</sup> but continue with exam-based assessment for post-primary transfer has the potential to also result in differential equality impacts.

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12 BBC NI News (11 May 2020) [NI transfer tests delayed in COVID-19 crisis](#). Accessed 12 May 2020



- 3.21** The Department may wish to satisfy itself of the consistency of its approach, in a context where it has moved to support alternative (non-exam based) assessment methodologies for older pupils at GCSE, AS and A level (which will subsequently be used to facilitate transfer to later stages of education); but not for younger pupils where transfer to post-primary grammar education will still be permitted and facilitated in a number of instances<sup>13</sup> by exam based assessment (post-primary transfer to some grammar schools).
- 3.22** The Commission has also identified a range of concerns about the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak upon the academic, social and emotional development of children, and the need for effective and concerted action to overcome them. Any considerations regarding the continuation of examination-based assessment for post-primary transfer should be considered in these contexts.
- 3.23** A number of post primary schools which usually use the GL and AQE test results to allocate places have announced that they will not use academic selection this year. As with older children, there is a need to consider and mitigate any equality impacts arising from any alternative methodologies or criteria that are adopted.

***Ensure that the benefits of sharing in education are maintained now, when schools reopen, and as social-distancing is relaxed.***

- 3.24** The positive impacts of sharing and social contact should not be lost as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. We recommend that a focus on sharing in education is maintained at a Departmental, management and schools' level.
- 3.25** We note a reference in a June 2020 Department of Education circular<sup>14</sup> on remote learning that:

*Remote learning provides 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.*

13 BBC News NI (29 May 2020), [Transfer test: Five Catholic grammar schools scrap academic selection](#). Accessed 21 May 2020

14 DENI (5 June 2020) [Guidance for Schools on Supporting Remote Learning to Provide Educational Continuity, Circular 2020/05](#)



- 3.26** Action should be taken now to ensure that shared classes, projects and experiences can be planned and progressed while meeting social distancing and other requirements.

***Deliver strong and visible leadership to maintain and promote an anti-bullying culture within education, and combat the potential for racially motivated negative attitudes and behaviours.***

- 3.27** High-level leadership, including from Principals, senior management and Boards of Governors, is essential to ensuring the consistent and robust implementation of policies and practices designed to address bullying, including bullying experienced by children and young people across the equality grounds. Education providers should proactively promote awareness of the existence, content and intent of their anti-bullying policy and procedures; and respective roles, responsibilities and expected behaviours.

- 3.28** Evidence is currently limited as regards the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon the attitudes and potential behaviours of children and young people in Northern Ireland towards certain minority ethnic groups, but there is the potential that negative attitudes could be exacerbated. Action is required to address this.

***Assist schools in making effective use of dual language resources to help Newcomer learners access the curriculum.***

- 3.29** The Department of Education and Education Authority should take action to ensure that any potential negative impact on Newcomer pupils' language development and social interaction with peers is mitigated, including through the effective dissemination of dual language resources and provision of IT equipment.





**3.30** We note that Newcomer children, entitled to free school meals, are to be prioritised in the Education Authority scheme<sup>15</sup> to loan laptops to pupils. We however recommend that provision for internet access, where required, is also made available at the same time.

**3.31** Barnardo's 2015 research Feels Like Home<sup>16</sup> pointed to a number of areas of good practice including after school clubs, translated newsletters and a growing use of technology to communicate with parents. We recommend that steps are taken to maintain contact with, and between, these pupils.

***Identify and address any effects of COVID-19 that poverty or socio-economic status may have on the emergence or exacerbation of inequalities experienced by a range of equality groups.***

**3.32** In all of the Commission's work, we are mindful that the barriers and inequalities experienced by equality groups can be exacerbated by poverty and social exclusion.

**3.33** In this context, we again highlight the link between poverty and social exclusion, and wider inequalities, and stress the need for urgent action to address poverty and social exclusion experienced by a range of equality groups.

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15 [Statement from the Education Minister to the Ad hoc Committee \(21 May 2020\)](#)

16 [Kernaghan D, Webb MA and Cariddi C, \(2015\) Feels Like Home: Exploring the experiences of Newcomer pupils in primary schools in Northern Ireland](#)







## 4 Conclusion

- 4.1 The Commission welcomes and acknowledges the range of steps that have been taken across the education system to mitigate the risks of any loss of learning.
- 4.2 While data from Northern Ireland regarding the equality impacts of COVID-19 is currently limited, information from elsewhere and on pre-existing inequalities in education suggests that there is the potential for a range of equality impacts in Northern Ireland.
- 4.3 Alongside setting out a number of recommendations, this document has sought to remind how the equality duties, equality-disaggregated data, and engagement with families and communities can inform effective responses by government and others to COVID-19. Prompt action is required to avoid the emergence or exacerbation of inequalities.





For further information visit: [www.equalityni.org/Education/COVID19](http://www.equalityni.org/Education/COVID19)

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