

# DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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**Christopher Stalford**  
**Parliament Buildings**  
**Stormont**

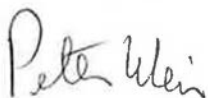
9 June 2021  
AQW 19356/17-22

Christopher Stalford has asked:

To ask the Minister of Education to outline how the Education Authority proposes to re-establish positive links with schools and restore good will to the staff, some of whom are reported to feel very demoralised by the lack of assistance and support during the pandemic.

ANSWER

The Department of Education (DE) is not the employer of school-based staff. Your question was referred to the Education Authority (EA), a response has been provided by the EA and I have arranged for this information to be placed in the Assembly Library.



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## **AQW 19356/17-22 – Assembly Library Document**

### **Cross organisational Link Officer Network**

In response to the Covid pandemic the Education Authority developed a cross organisational link officer scheme. The scheme enabled every school in NI to benefit from an assigned link officer from one of the partner support organisations. Colleagues from EA, ETI, CCMS and CSSC provided accessible, one-to-one telephone and/or email contact to all nursery, primary and post primary schools. They responded at pace to all queries; clarified Guidance as necessary; engaged in conversations to support learning and wellbeing and signposted to further resources. The COLOs reported centrally to enable key themes and issues to be identified and tailored support to be provided. They also acted as a voice for the schools as EA informed DE of the landscape in schools from the COLO feedback; this information was used effectively by DE to amend circulars as befitting the flexibility required to support schools more fully at this time.

This has supported and strengthened the relationships between EA and school leaders during a very challenging time for school leaders. In response to the positive feedback from school leaders about the COLO initiative and their requests to retain the COLO, EA has committed to working with our partner organisations to sustain and develop the model further. EA will ensure that the concept of each school having an assigned officer to provide tailored support and advice will continue in its fullest form and this commitment will enable us to continue to nurture relationships with all school leaders.

## **Supporting the Wellbeing Needs of School Leaders and Staff**

The EA recognised, even before the pandemic, that school principals were leading in an increasingly more complex and challenging climate where stresses and pressures had been exacerbated by reduced funding and teachers' industrial action. In response and guided by global research the EA, in partnership with DE, piloted a coaching programme for school principals. Feedback from participants provided evidence of the positive impact of the programme in terms of enabling principals to develop their leadership style; create time to reflect and plan; support and lead others more effectively; and develop new relationships across their school community. The pilot programme has been extended to ensure that all school leaders can avail of this individual, tailored coaching service. This has been particularly well-received as school leaders manage increased pandemic-related challenges and the subsequent impact on their wellbeing and the wellbeing of their staff has become more sharply visible.

The EA, in partnership with DE, have also co-designed a tangible programme of resilience building and wellbeing support for school staff with the Inspire Knowledge and Leadership Team. The aim of the resilience building and wellbeing programme of support for school staff is to enable school leaders to more fully support and prioritise the health and wellbeing needs of their staff.

This comprehensive package of wellbeing support will strengthen the links with both school leaders and staff and underline the fact that the EA is actively listening and proactively tailoring supports to meet individual school contextual needs.

## **Sharing the Learning Conferences**

Facilitating school leaders to come together to share, and extend, their learning is a key priority for the EA. To meet this objective, the first of a series of 'Sharing the Learning' Conferences co-designed with school leaders was hosted in April with colleagues from Scotland participating alongside principals from across NI. Over 300 principals contributed to, and participated in, the conversational conference and the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

The second series of 'Sharing the Learning' Conferences will enable school leaders in NI to benefit from listening to colleagues from schools in Wales as they share their learning journeys. To harness these working relationships further the EA has committed to hosting a Five Nation Conference in the autumn term. The conference will be co-planned with practitioners and will support the building of even closer partnerships between EA and School Leaders.

The School Development Service are focused on a number of developments:

- We are working with post primary ALCs to develop teaching and learning groups within each ALC
- We will shortly share a framework for Pathways into Partnership, supporting the development of primary area learning communities
- We have been piloting subject specialist clusters and plan to widen this work across all phases and aspects of the curriculum

We are also using the model of "host schools" to support early career teachers, connecting them with specific schools so that they a wider understanding of

school like and how to be a member of staff beyond the experiences that they may currently be having as a teacher within a class bubble.

Teacher professional learning continues to be available across a number of areas including digital creativity and outdoor learning. Resources and links to webinars are also available on the Supporting Learning site -

<https://sites.google.com/c2ken.net/teacherprofessionallearning-ea/home>

## **HEALTH AND WELLBEING - EA HEALTHWELL**

### **Background**

In January 2020 the Health and Wellbeing Strategy and Action Plan was approved. The approved Strategy Action Plan included the Organisational Enabler (3) “to Create Healthier Working Environments”. This highlighted the need to develop and implement a flexible and dynamic Health and Wellbeing Programme for staff.

In Year 1 (2019-20) Management introduced the inaugural Health and Wellbeing Programme (EA HealthWell) to staff. This was a 6-month programme in year one.

### **2020/21 provisions**

EA HealthWell Programme initiatives, events and campaigns were directed to meet the needs of staff in response to the COVID-19 pandemic / Education Restart and beyond. Provision at a high level included:

- 180 health and wellbeing sessions/ initiatives/ campaigns provided online for EA staff.
- Over 5000 staff engaged directly in the sessions provided to support staff health.
- Over 5000 staff also engaged in sessions design to promote healthy bodies in work.

- Financial wellbeing sessions delivered to approx. 400 staff.
- Accessibility was enhanced during the period by developing an **open access catalogue** of courses which now contains 22 distinct courses.
- Programme evaluation finished at over 80% satisfaction rating overall (no individual sessions scoring below 70%)
- In 2020/21 higher levels of engagement and participation in the programme relating to staff in schools were recorded. We note over 50% engagement across the sessions provided linked to the theme of supporting Healthy Minds at work.

**EA HealthWell Hub development.** “The hub” was fast-tracked in late March 2020 to meet the immediate needs of staff during the early stages of the pandemic period. The Hub now has over 20k users and over 40k active sessions since inception. This includes over 87.5k programme related views with over 60k unique views (as at 31 March 2021).

### **What is available right now?**

EA HealthWell Programme Phase 1 overview

- **4 month phase – April- July**
- **98 sessions/ initiatives/ campaigns**
- **Combination of popular and new sessions**
- **Promotion of the online catalogue of sessions**
- **Phase 2 commences in August.**
- **Phase 3 commences in November.**

Every phase of the programme is promoted in partnership with EA Communications through a variety of channels to maximise our reach to staff.

We seek to continuously improve everything we do and are open to feedback on what we offer and should add.

To view the phase 1 of this year's programme [click here](#)

### **School accessibility**

All sessions are available to schools based staff and leaders in school. Following feedback we have revised dates and times of most sessions to better facilitate schools. The programme is also released to schools in advance of corporate staff to support school accessibility.

### **Other HR or cross directorate provisions**

- 5 million wellbeing fund (CYPS to outline)
- Toolkits – Working from Home/ EA Staff Health and Wellbeing Guidance/ and Responsive Working.
- Formal staff guidance on supporting to school / the workplace (with regular updates/ revisions).
- FAQ development and updates throughout period
- ICT/ Ergonomics provision project to enable staff to work from home
- Flu and COVID vaccination campaigns



## Overview of EA HealthWell Programme sessions complete during 20/21

<b>Healthy minds</b>	<b>Healthy Bodies</b>
<p>Variety of mental health sessions to over 5000 delegates. Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mental Health Awareness Sessions for Managers – 200 managers trained.</li><li>• Mental Health Awareness Sessions for Staff - 200 delegates.</li><li>• Bespoke schools support for approx. 2140 staff.</li><li>• Personal resilience sessions – 204 delegates.</li><li>• Bite-sized Managing Stress Building Resilience sessions for 500 staff.</li><li>• Inspire sessions on Resilience/ Fear and Anxiety (multiple variations) delivered for 440 staff.</li><li>• Schools session on growth mindset and wellbeing for 369 school based staff.</li><li>• Menopause awareness sessions for 715 managers and staff.</li></ul>	<p>Programme of activities/workshops to support staff physical health. Engaged over 5000 staff across this theme.</p> <p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• EA step challenge (Step into Spring) 267 staff participated.</li><li>• Nutrition sessions – 390+ delegates plus over 2692 views of recorded sessions.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Sleep Well - 55 live audience + 1138 views of recording.</li><li>- Female hormone balance – 82 live delegates + 846 views of recording.</li><li>- Stress less – 59 live delegates + 708 views of recording.</li></ul></li><li>• Variations of Exercise classes e.g. Yoga, Pilates, Hiit, Move and Stretch, Zumba and BLT.<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- 400 delegates involved live plus 570 accessed pre-recorded sessions channel in partnership with NICSSA (Channel has over 150 home workouts).</li></ul></li><li>• Bespoke schools support for approx. 960 staff.</li></ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expansion of Mental Health First Aider Network – increased to 165.</li> <li>• Mindfulness – 140 delegates.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Addiction support - 20 delegates reached.</li> <li>• Cancer Focus N.I. – 40 live delegates reached and over 390 accessed the recordings.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Financial Wellbeing</b></p> <p>Financial Education sessions – 390+ delegates</p> <p>Examples include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consumer council sessions (Budgeting at Christmas; Awareness of scams; household bills; and flights) 58 delegates.</li> <li>• Financial Wellbeing 43 delegates.</li> <li>• AVCs – 32 delegates.</li> <li>• Free Will service – 88 attended.</li> <li>• Retirement support – 171 delegates viewed this open access module.</li> <li>• Bespoke schools support for approx. 60 staff.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Giving Back</b></p> <p>Family Christmas Appeal: EA wide schools and services charity initiative supporting the Family Christmas Appeal. Over 17k raised.</p>

## **EA Psychology Service**

The EA Psychology Service, have remained fully operational throughout the pandemic and amended its practices and procedures in line with safety measures advised by the government including periods of lockdown. Schools were advised through formal communication of any changes to working practices and provided with contact details for all psychology offices across the EA. This has helped ensure continuity in terms of service delivery including consultations and assessments at all stages on the Code of Practice.

The Service established a Restart helpline to offer advice and support on SEN to schools in August 2020 educational psychologists contacted each of their schools to offer support during their transition back into schools. Over the last year they have used a blended approach which has been dependent on PHA guidance, many schools have received their full complement of time allocation despite the difficulties COVID has presented and staff have worked hard to maintain close working relationships with their schools during this challenging period.

## **Getting Ready to Learn Programme**

The Getting Ready to Learn Programme implementation was reviewed considering the COVID pandemic and has been fully operational throughout. The Getting Ready to Learn team have been proactive in supporting settings throughout this challenging period. We have been focussing on providing settings with high quality support as well as resources to share with parents to continue to encourage learning at home. These resources also supported settings with the implementation of the programme during this time.

580 Pre-school settings participated in the programme during 2020/21. Participating settings had access to the following during 2020/21:

- funding allocations to support the implementation of the Getting Ready to Learn Programme. It was agreed with DE that during this year settings could use their allocated funding to 'gift' home lending packs to children and their families to support learning at home during this challenging period;
- resources to support the delivery of the four Getting Ready to Learn themes.
- samples of good practice shared through case studies.
- access the Getting Ready to Learn website - all resources and guidance materials were posted on the website.
- 18 Transforming Practice Sessions were delivered throughout the year - these sessions were all facilitated through online platforms.
- a 'parent tab' was developed on the GRtL website to share key resources for parents as well as signposting parents to other relevant services.
- support from the Getting Ready to Learn team via email, telephone, TEAMs cluster sessions and on the GRtL website.

A consistent, high quality, service was delivered digitally to all participating settings despite the challenging circumstances.

### **SENIS (MLD)**

SENIS (MLD) continued to provide advice and support to school staff throughout both periods of school closure due to Covid-19. Requests from teachers for advice and guidance were continually received and responded to. SENIS (MLD) also linked in with school staff re. differentiating work tasks at home and supporting schools (and parents) to differentiate and set tasks to best support learning during the periods of school closure.

SENIS (MLD) training was moved online so that staff could continue to avail of training programmes, i.e. supporting pupils with MLD in KS2 and Post-primary phases.

Since the return of school at the end of August 2020, SENIS (MLD) staff have proactively provided advice and support to schools, as required and requested.

## **AAIS**

AAIS continued to provide advice and support to school staff throughout both periods of school closure due to Covid-19. Requests for teacher support were continually received and responded to. AAIS also linked in with school staff re. differentiating work tasks at home, establishing routines and preparing for transition on returning to school in September 2020.

AAIS training was moved online so that staff could continue to avail of training programmes, e.g. transition training and an adapted recovery curriculum document taking the needs of ASD into account, and suggested reasonable adjustments was created and shared with schools.

Since the return of school at the end of August 2020, AAIS staff have proactively provided advice and support to schools, as required and requested

## **SEND**

The SEND Implementation Team has continued to support schools throughout the pandemic. Face to face training was cancelled which allowed staff to prepare resources to support school SENCO's in their role. The team also prepared resources for parents to help them understand the various processes. Resources included SEN & Medical Categories

leaflet, Role of the SENCO leaflet, Transition Planning Policy, School Development Day Packs, Views of the Child Action Plan, IEP's during the pandemic, move from 5 to 3 stage of the Code of Practice, guidance on SEND Monies expenditure, Whole School Educational Provision, Special Educational Provision and Access Arrangements. The team has a password protected website which houses all resources as well as a monthly blog. In addition the SEND team have a mailbox which schools can use to make queries and a member of the team then follows this up with a reply email or telephone call. If required the team member will arrange training or information session that can be delivered virtually or in setting.

As part of our work to transform our special educational needs services for our children, young people and their families, the Statutory Assessment & review Service has changed the way a request for statutory assessment is made.

The paper-based process, which users found complex and time-consuming, has been replaced by a new online form which is designed to be intuitive and guides the user through the process step-by-step. We've also set up a dedicated team to help with advice and request-related queries, who can be reached by calling the SEN Helpline on 028 9598 5960.

### **SEN Early Years Inclusion Service**

EA SEN Pupil Support Services continued to provide support to parents, schools, children and young people throughout the pandemic. Considerable energy and professional expertise went into providing remote support including the development of an extensive resource suite on the EA Website, the development of online training, arrangements for advisory support and

signposting to other relevant services. Development around use of technology, provision of remote service delivery to educational settings, staff, children and their parents has been progressed by all service areas and lessons learned with a view to continuous evaluation and improvement. We have developed a hybrid blend of remote and on-site support for our service users and this is delivered in line with Health and Safety and PHA guidance.

The SEN Early Years Inclusion Service (SEN EYIS) remained fully operational throughout the Pandemic. The service provides the following:

- **Information and training** - available to all service users
  - We continue to increase our range of resources and short online trainings for parents and early years setting professionals on the SEN EYIS web tile. <https://www.eani.org.uk/services/pupil-support-services/early-years-inclusion-service-sen-eyis>
  - We provide training for leadership and early years practitioners. This can be accessed by all early educational settings via the Children and Young Peoples Training portal. <https://www.eani.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-11/Supporting%20Children%20and%20Young%20People%27s%20Training%20Booklet%20V3.7%20131120.pdf>
  - Queries to the service can be made by contacting any SEN EYIS office by phone. Phone lines are operational during office hours and a voice message facility is available.
- **Workshops, advice and tailored programmes** –available to families and early educational settings of children referred to the service by the Early Years SEN Panel
  - We continue and extend our themed cluster menu for parents to include early years transitions and make direct telephone contact to offer places where appropriate

- We continue and extend our themed cluster menu for pre-school settings to include early years transitions and make direct telephone or email contact to offer places where appropriate
- We continue to provide direct early contact by telephone with the parents of all newly referred children. The purpose of this call will be to introduce the service, gather information and provide initial support.
- Parents and educational settings currently working with an assigned team member are contacted by their link or can get in touch before that using contact details provided by their link.
- Following EA Health and Safety guidance, the service is delivered on a blended basis. Where an on-site visit is required all relevant EA Health and Safety risk assessment processes will be adhered to.
- All forms of electronic/digital communication available to the service are used to facilitate support. These may include:
  - Telephone
  - Email
  - Social media
  - Website
  - Other digital platforms

Website resources available to service users - hyperlinks

Cognition and Learning

Sensory Processing

Social, Behavioural, Emotional and Wellbeing

Social Communication and ASD

Language and Communication

Early Years Transitions

Stepping Stones to Pre-school: Online Training for Parents

Rise NI



Self Help Skills

Literacy

Sensory

Language and Communication

SENIS (SLD)