

LEARNING SUPPORT CENTRES

Curricular challenges and approaches

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Introduction

On 20 March 2020, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, pre-school settings¹ and primary, post-primary and special schools across Northern Ireland closed to children and young people². In the interim, children and young people have engaged in remote learning at home either through paper-based materials provided by their setting or school, online learning materials or a combination of both.

Currently the situation in regard to COVID-19 is changing rapidly and schools are at various stages of devising safe, effective and efficient arrangements for the beginning of the 2020/21 academic year. It is anticipated that the balance between classroom-based teaching and learning combined with a range of remote learning approaches will vary between individual schools, as well as for individual year groups, and change as the academic year progresses, with school attendance, dependent on medical and scientific advice, returning to pre-COVID-19 patterns.

Planning for blended learning approaches in the learning support centre (LSC) is dependent on factors such as: the number of staff and children and young people; the size and layout of the LSC and/or school; and, the availability of suitable teaching and learning spaces for each curriculum/subject area. The leadership and management of change is crucial in planning for blended learning approaches; a number of considerations need to be taken into account, including the well-being of pupils and staff; the curriculum; the uncertainty of the arrangements for examinations and assessment, and health and safety.

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) was commissioned by the Department of Education as part of the Continuity of Learning Programme, to provide guidance on effective ways in which the curriculum could be tailored (planned for, implemented and assessed)³ across the range of areas of learning and subject areas for a phased return for children to full-time education. The Department asked for a series of pieces of work which would reflect the changing circumstances in which schools are working to provide up-to-date advice and guidance on an ongoing basis. This publication represents the first phase of that work, is offered as an additional supplement to the support documents already available and should be read alongside the primary and post-primary ‘Remote and blended learning: curricular challenges and approaches’³.

The Curriculum, Qualifications and Standards Directorate of the Department of Education (DE) has initiated a number of projects to ensure that appropriate action is taken to secure, as far as possible, the learning of pupils at home and in school, during the current pandemic and beyond.

¹ In this instance, this refers to all DE pre-school settings, nursery schools, nursery units, private pre-school settings, voluntary pre-school settings and Irish medium pre-school settings.

² Other than the children of key workers and vulnerable children who continued to attended their own school or a C-19 cluster school.

³ [Primary - Remote and blended learning: curricular challenges and approaches](#)



Supporting Learning

The Department of Education's Continuity of Learning Project, **Supporting Learning** provides support for teachers and parents working together so that pupils continue to learn at home and through school.

[The DE publications](#) provide guidance and support for schools as they plan for the reopening of schools and the 2020/21 academic year; this is supplemented with more detailed [Supporting Learning⁴ guidance which includes](#) resources, guidance materials and case studies to support blended learning. There is also the [Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education](#) and [CCEA curricular guidance](#) to support curriculum delivery of the statutory Northern Ireland curriculum in schools.

The context for learning support centres

Advice and guidance documents are available for all school sectors and much of the considerations and advice will be applicable to learning support centres (LSC), autism specific classes, speech and language/communication support classes, partial hearing classes and physical difficulty classes. For the purpose of this guidance the term LSC will be used for all support centres and classes.

As with all pupils, those attending LSCs have varying levels of skills for using technology to access learning. Some families have limited access to computers or tablets, printers, or internet connection and those who have access to such devices may be sharing them between siblings and parents/guardians who are working from home. While staff may have lent out computers and provided hard copies of work, there have been varying levels of pupil engagement, confidence, motivation and support for the learning available to them. Whilst there were no dedicated meetings between ETI and LSC staff, in a variety of other meetings school staff have referred to the specific difficulties experienced by pupils attending LSC. In particular they report that the distribution, marking and returning of work requires careful management, including the distribution of paper learning resources for pupils.

During the pandemic school staff report that they have increased e-mail and phone contact with the pupils in LSCs and their parents to offer pastoral and practical support and engage them in their learning. Some schools have also created a specific LSC area within google classroom to support pupils attending the LSC. However, teachers, classroom assistants and pupils have missed the individualised support provided, interaction in learning and realise the importance of re-establishing social relationships and rebuilding friendships.

⁴ This project involves the Department working collaboratively with Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CNaG), the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (CCEA), the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the Controlled Schools Support Council (CSSC), the Education Authority (EA) and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI).

All pupils attending LSC classes will have individual education plans and these may need to be adapted on returning to the classroom to meet any additional or changes in learning needs. [The Middletown Centre for Autism](#) remote training and resources are found to be very helpful to schools, particularly those pupils with autism and their parents. LSC co-ordinators and special educational needs co-ordinators recognise the importance of collaborative working, involving school staff and external agencies to identify pupil need and support staff to meet these needs with appropriate advice, support and training.

Challenges for delivery of the curriculum

- There may be a negative impact of change on many pupils, some of whom are also dealing with anxiety, loss, grief and trauma. Returning to school will also involve further changes for pupils from home and expected school routines. Keep parents well-informed about plans for reopening, and prepare the parents and pupils for what to expect when returning to school, including clear information on the school day and new routines; this could be added to the school website. Videos and/or Social Stories⁵ may also prove helpful.
- The effect on individual pupils of the changes they have experienced will vary greatly and will require careful consideration and planning by the school staff. Provide reassurance to pupils who may be anxious.
- Risk assessments for pupils and staff may need to be completed quickly; however, these will need sufficient time to consider the complex needs of some pupils. Risk assessment templates are available from the Education Authority⁶.
- Consultation with parents about their child's engagement in home learning will be very important; it may reassure parents to explain that the information is to inform planning and to support any catch-up lessons.
- Guidance for parents on how their child's specific needs will be addressed, including any revisions to their individual education plan (IEP) will be very helpful. Parental, pupil and relevant external agency input is important in identifying and supporting needs.
- Consider the school uniform and whether it is sufficiently easy for the pupils to dress and undress themselves, and can be washed each evening. If not, consider changing to easy care, inexpensive clothing.
- Pupil transport arrangements to and from the school may have been changed. Ensure that parents, pupils and staff know and understand the details.

⁵ [Pandemics and the Coronavirus](#)

⁶ [EANI – Qualitative Risk Assessments](#)

- Whole school training on free accessibility features within educational platforms may help staff in planning and supporting the learning and teaching for pupils accessing LSC support. For example, exploring features, such as text to speech conversion. For some schools, professional development for all school staff on providing remote learning has been highly beneficial. Some parents have joined school training sessions on remote learning; this has reportedly raised their skills and they have appreciated the opportunity.
- Plan carefully with staff the sequence of the day from the point the pupils arrive at school. You may decide on different entrance and exit points for the pupils to the LSC to enable better social distancing.
- Plan the classroom to minimise social contact and maximise personal space, and ways to explain to pupils the need to adhere to the routines.
- Consider the arrangements and access to toilets and handwashing for pupils attending the LSC and how regular hand washing could be built into timetables. Consider the cleaning arrangements for sensory rooms and/or equipment.
- Review the arrangements for assembly, and inclusion in mainstream classes to take account of any requirements for social distancing arrangements. Plan break and lunch times; have clear staff rota and duties in place to support the pupils.
- The LSC teacher and co-ordinator may consider the grouping of pupils and the selection of learning materials to meet pupils' needs and interests, whilst minimising personal contact. Build in time daily to review issues that may arise. Plan to meet with staff to discuss the pupils' experience of inclusion and/or progress in the mainstream learning environment.
- Staff will want to assess, baseline and track their pupils' progress and response to interventions, addressing learning and social and emotional needs. Some schools plan for pupil baseline assessments to include the attention span of the pupil, ability to engage, work independently and with others, use of their communication system/s, behaviour needs, and the need to regulate their emotions and sensory responses. Targets within the IEP, or day to day personal targets may need to be revised.
- Staff are aware that their pupils may have regressed in curricular and social skills; however there may have been enhanced opportunities for pupils to practise their skills in a variety of situations in the home. All of these factors need to be taken into consideration for each pupil.

- Should a blended curriculum be in operation, with periods of school based and of home learning, pupils will need clear timetables for both settings. It may be helpful to provide visual timetables and supports⁷ as well as written timetables for pupils, including those who would not usually need both. Colour coding to highlight changes of rooms or subjects may be useful for the pupils.

Approaches taken or planned

- Consider providing a nurture-based Northern Ireland Curriculum (NIC) for pupils when they return to school, in order to settle and reassure the pupils thereby enabling well-being and effective learning.
- Consider planning for blended learning approaches for the NIC. Teachers working together to plan and share ideas for different curricular areas may prove to be time efficient for schools, for example a group of teachers working specifically on a bank of resources, which could be adapted as required for the LSC.
- Some schools plan to keep class and staff teams together in the first term of 2020/2021 to allow teachers with the knowledge of the pupil's attainments pre-Covid-19 to make more accurate assessments and plan effectively.
- Revise the staff handbook to ensure that communication strategies, health and safety procedures, safeguarding, mental health and wellbeing, and positive behaviour management are all updated and clear for all. Plan induction procedures for new staff and pupils.
- Pupils of all ages who are moving to a LSC for the first time, will benefit from thorough information gathering and sharing amongst relevant staff, focusing on pupils' holistic needs.
- Provide clear communication routes and times for parents to contact staff and discuss their child's learning and progress.
- Pupils may want to discuss their remote learning experiences, for example, positive developments in life skills and difficulties they may have been having. It is important to celebrate successes and personal achievements during remote learning. Step by step, individualised and clear guidance is essential in supporting pupils to access remote learning.
- Staff may need to focus particularly on each pupil's literacy and numeracy skills, using strategies such as teacher modelling, investigative work, real life contexts for learning and games to consolidate literacy and numeracy skills. Additional links with external agencies may be required to support pupils.

⁷ [Supporting Individuals with Autism through Uncertain Times](#)

- Highly individualised support for each pupil, involving favourite activities may prove to be particularly engaging for pupils when returning to the classroom environment. Pupils may not have had access to assistive technology during periods of remote learning, support to improve future remote learning experiences should be individualised for each pupil.
- In order to re-engage pupils in their learning, staff may find it beneficial to review topics such as managing change and learning to learn. For example the KS3 In Sync⁸ personal development programme may prove useful in enabling cross-curricular learning.
- LSC teachers will want to focus on developing the year seven and year ten pupils who may experience increased anxiety with the transition to a new LSC or with greater integration into the mainstream school for KS4 studies. This will require careful planning, collaboration and communication between primary and post-primary staff to prevent pupil disengagement or frustration.
- LSC and mainstream staff should provide timely opportunities for year 11 pupils to discuss their subject choices as required.
- Staff may wish to provide Year 12 pupils with additional and ongoing advice and support to make decisions around future education, training and employment opportunities. For pupils who were in year 12 and have now transitioned to the next stage of their education, sharing information with new providers will be important in supporting the pupil and staff to manage change effectively.
- Pupils in the LSC may require access arrangements for examinations which reflect their normal way of working. The LSC co-ordinator and special educational needs co-ordinator may wish liaise with the pupils and relevant staff to ensure that these are in place. However, pupils may need time to adjust to the new learning methods before their ability can be reflected accurately in an assessment.
- Teachers in LSCs may find storing banks of remote videos on the school website useful for future use, including remote video lessons from the teacher at home which have proved to engage well pupils.

Conclusion

The pupils in learning support centres will need time to settle and accept the changes in their home and school environments therefore schools envisage that their personal, social and emotional well-being will take precedence. The pupils will all have had individual experiences of home learning and may have developed or lost skills. Detailed planning by staff will be crucial as each pupil returns to school, parents and pupils may require reassurance that they will be supported in adjusting to the new arrangements.

⁸ [Insync – Key Stage 3 Personal Development – Year 10](#)

It is recognised that preparing policies and procedures to enable the change from classroom to remote learning, blended learning and face to face classes takes considerable time. Schools that delivered training to staff and parents in how to use the technology have found this to be particularly helpful. Sufficient time to enable the pupils to become used to their new school day and routines will be essential, school staff can enable this by providing individualised familiar and preferred routines and activities. Risk assessments will be important to guide staff in providing consistent and appropriate support for pupils.

Schools may wish to consider enhanced communication with parents in a variety of formats so that parents gain confidence in sending their child to school, and develop improved insight and knowledge into what works well for their child in order to provide effective home education.

School leaders, in consultation with their boards of governors, know the context and unique circumstances of their setting or school, and are best placed to make the detailed decisions required when it comes to the safety and wellbeing of their pupils and staff and how they can best deliver the curriculum to their children and young people.

There are a number of factors that will inform the delivery of the NIC for schools in a way that meets the needs of the children and young people and the context within which it is being delivered.

- Whilst we know that many children and young people are incredibly resilient, their mental health and wellbeing is, and will continue to be, a priority for us all; therefore, mental health and wellbeing will need to feature appropriately in curriculum delivery.
- Planning for learning will need to take account of the learning of the children and young people during the period of solely remote [distance] learning, thereby re-dressing and maintaining standards – whilst the context will be different, the principles of effective assessment for learning are the same.
- The need to consider the minimum entitlement of the Northern Ireland curriculum for schools, including the development of wider skills and dispositions; therefore, organisations will need to think about what aspects need to be delivered face-to-face in the classroom environment, what aspects can be delivered remotely online or supported by parents in the home learning environment, and what aspects may not be able to be delivered owing to the context within which the school is operating.

[The Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework](#) provides a framework to support the organisation's discussions and reflections which are continuing and will evolve in planning to address the specific challenges and priorities that will be faced in the next academic year as a result of COVID-19.

Resources



Publications include: [Curriculum Planning 2020/21](#), [The New School Day Guidance](#), [Guidance for Schools on Supporting Remote Learning](#) and [Guidance on School Development Planning for 2020/21](#).

A [CCEA video](#) that can help explain to parents what the Northern Ireland Curriculum is all about, how it is a framework that covers all 12 years of compulsory education from age 4 to 16.

[Home Learning – SEN](#): This list of resources may be helpful for schools and parents/carers of learners with SEN at home. Most CCEA materials are designed for teachers delivering the Northern Ireland Curriculum in schools, including the ones listed below. However, the resources selected include many activities that can be adapted to use at home with learners with SEN.



[‘Every Sport for Everyone’](#) means that every sport can be adapted in some way to include all players, with and without a disability. A disability can refer to an intellectual disability, a sensory disability or a physical disability. It is important that every individual is included in sport and this can be achieved across all sports.

[Quest for learning](#) is a guidance and assessment resource to support teachers and classroom assistants of learners with profound & multiple learning difficulties (PMLD), providing ideas for and pathways to learning.

[The Prerequisite Skills](#), or more commonly known as Q Skills, are an assessment resource to support teachers and classroom assistants. The skills described in the resource build towards Level 1 in the cross-curricular skills for Communication, Using Mathematics and Using ICT.

[Inclusion & General Strategies](#): Advice on Learners with Additional Needs; Hearing Impaired (HI); Inclusion; Physical Difficulties; Specific Learning Difficulties; Speech & Language; Visually Impaired.



[The Middletown Centre for Autism](#) has a range of resources for learning, support and assessment, including remote training and resources are found to be very helpful to schools, parents and pupils.

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