

SAFEGUARDING

Remote and blended learning challenges and approaches

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Introduction

On 20 March 2020, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, pre-school settings¹, schools and educational organisations across Northern Ireland closed to children, young people and learners². In the interim, children, young people and learners have engaged in remote learning at home either through paper-based materials provided by their organisation, online learning materials or a combination of both. Currently, the situation in regard to the COVID-19 is changing rapidly and organisations are at various stages of devising safe, effective and efficient arrangements for the beginning of the 2020/21 academic year.

The effect of such sudden, unplanned changes impacts differently on the mental health and wellbeing of individual children and young people and it can be difficult to plan for. It is important for organisations to consider not only the mental health and wellbeing of their children/young people, but also the mental health and wellbeing of parents/carers and their teaching and ancillary workforce. Key to managing this is maintaining strong community links and relationships to plan additional and multi-agency support for children/young people, their families and the staff. Therefore it is very important to continue to signpost potential sources of help within communities.

With this in mind, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) is sharing practice that is in place in organisations that have responded both pastorally and creatively. The ETI believe this practice is necessary to ensure that children, young people and learners are supported throughout this time. Maintaining supportive relationships is key to children, young people and learners achieving and succeeding, so it is important that there is a good level of contact between staff, children, young people and learners and their families.

On 20 March 2020 the Education Authority Child Protection Support Service (CPSS) issued a document to schools outlining what the service believed was good practice in terms of maintaining contact with children, young people and families, multi-agency working and remote learning. This has since been updated with the help of C2k. The CPSS have also provided safeguarding and child protection guidance to school clusters. *“Education Authority: Safeguarding Children Guidance for Schools and EOTAS Centres During COVID-19 Arrangements”*.

While the principles of effective safeguarding practice in schools (as outlined in the Department of Education (DE) Safeguarding and Child Protection in Schools 2017/04) have not changed, practice has been impacted by the current restrictions imposed by managing COVID-19. The CPSS have maintained regular email contact with school safeguarding teams to share safeguarding practice and provide guidance and information on a variety of safeguarding themes. The feedback the service has received from schools on the emails has been positive. The information is also shared with the Department of Education and the ETI.

¹ In this instance, this refers to pre-school settings, nursery schools, nursery units, day care 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 attend their own school or a C-19 cluster school.

The Department for the Economy wrote to all principals and Chief Executives to provide Safeguarding, Care & Welfare Advice for Colleges Supporting Children, Young People, Adults at Risk of Harm and Adults in Need of Protection. This includes a list of collated materials from a number of organisations who have published particular guidance on mental health considerations relating to the COVID-19 outbreak.

While this paper focuses on the challenges and approaches particular to safeguarding during the closure of schools and educational organisations, it recognises how inextricably linked these are to the holistic emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people. Within the sections that follow, a summary is provided of the challenges and potential approaches to safeguarding that have been discussed with the ETI. The approaches and exemplars that follow that follow are based on engagement between ETI District Inspectors and organisations across education and training; however, an evaluation of their impact and effectiveness is not possible at the present time.

Safeguarding challenges

- To support effective safeguarding processes, while schools and organisations are closed, there is a need to update contact information and share it with the children/young people/learners and their parents/carers along with necessary external support agencies. There have been cases where the organisation is closed and the usual contact details (email and phone) are no longer answered. This has led to Social Services being unable to make contact with organisations in response to new safeguarding concerns or in relation to ongoing cases where there is already Social Services involvement. CPSS has acted as intermediary in many cases for social workers seeking contact with school principals or Designated Teachers; however, CPSS are not in a position to provide private contact details directly to Social Services owing to GDPR.
- The impact of the absence of day-to-day contact with more vulnerable children and young people which has been reported as one of the factors contributing to the decrease in child protection/ safeguarding referrals to Social Services.
- The reported increase in domestic abuse cases during Covid-19 and the impact it has on the children and young people in the families concerned as they return to education/training.
- A need to have updated policies reflecting a change to e-learning practices. When using technology to provide remote teaching and learning, policies and procedures should be in place to support and protect staff and learners. It is also particularly important to issue and reinforce regularly safer internet and keeping safe messages.

- Concerns regarding the use of online remote learning platforms or communication methods given the reported national and international hacking with incidents pertaining to serious breaches of safeguarding legislation.
- The use of social media platforms and Apps to maintain contact with children/young people while ensuring necessary safeguarding procedures are in place.
- The main concern for ApprenticeshipsNI providers is the fact that high numbers of apprentices have lost their jobs or been furloughed - particularly in the hospitality and catering, retail and hairdressing and beauty sectors.
- A major challenge for most European Social Fund (ESF) projects is that they do not have the IT infrastructure for remote learning and on-line support for their participants.

Approaches taken to overcome safeguarding challenges

- Organisations are reminding their children and young people to adhere to the online safety procedures as practised in their organisations.
- Organisations have ensured continued access for children, young people and learners to their local counselling services during this time of closure.
- In-school counselling systems have been set up, whereby pupils who had already been working with the counsellors in school, will continue using online platforms.
- Support staff within FE colleges have continued to provide services to students, including referral to in-house counselling provision which is delivered remotely.
- Organisations are ensuring that they make regular contact with their more vulnerable learners, ranging from daily contact to at least on one occasion per week.
- Pre-school settings are maintaining parental contact through online communication apps and platforms such as Seesaw, Facebook and Air Messenger. The key focus is to encourage the children to play, read together and get fit which will support mental health and emotional wellbeing. There is also a focus on supporting parents with the emotional needs associated with isolation.

- Pre-schools have shared information (in story format) for parents to enable them to speak to young children about COVID-19 and to help them to make sense of what is currently happening in a non-threatening child-friendly way.
- Schools offer support mechanisms for pupils' social and emotional wellbeing, based on existing relationships and care, including maintaining in-school counselling systems remotely, whereby pupils had already been working with the counsellors in school, and/or there is the retention of already established counselling slots for pupils with external agencies remotely with the Designated Teachers/safeguarding teams overseeing this aspect of provision.
- Schools continue to provide remotely weekly assemblies to year groups.
- Schools providing updates by pupil and parental apps and signposting to a range of external agencies, for example circulating the weekly COVID-19 Family Support Hub Newsletter.
- Schools focusing on vulnerable pupils, those with SEN and pupils from disadvantaged families including; for example, classroom assistants keeping routine communication going with the pupils they usually support via phone, email and online learning platforms.
- Schools responding to requests from social workers to facilitate provision for children and young people with child protection issues.
- School leaderships, including governors, focusing on the mental health and wellbeing of staff.
- Schools are making the school community aware of support of the school Chaplain, and Pastoral Team, and the SENCO.
- EOTAS centres have provided all pupils with telephone support lines that signpost numbers of support organisations if they require help. Centres remain open if pupils need to contact staff during school hours.
- Youth sector: FLARE (the Facilitating Life and Resilience Education) team is continuing to provide mental health support to young people via social media, mobile calls, etc.
- Youth sector: EA are continuing to support young people specifically under paramilitary threat, using online platforms or in 1:1 work by their key worker from START (Supporting Teenagers Away From Recurrent Trouble) programme.

- The EA CPSS have provided all schools guidance and ongoing safeguarding updates. This has included safeguarding guidance in relation to online teaching, contact with children and young people and providing pastoral care at a distance. They also provided tailored contact numbers for a range of agencies for children and one for young people. The CPSS helpline remains in operation to support schools with any safeguarding concerns during this period.
- The Public Health Authority have produced a video for children to support them in coming to terms with bereavement through COVID-19. <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/COVID-19-coronavirus>
- The South Eastern HSC Trust Learning & Development Team in conjunction with South Eastern Domestic & Sexual Violence Partnership have produced a training resource for staff about Safety Planning where there is domestic violence and abuse.
- The FE colleges continue to work with their students as the colleges have the infrastructure and learning platforms already in place. While there is some variability, the staff in colleges contact their more vulnerable learners and provide ongoing personal support - all of the colleges can link learners up remotely with student support services including telephone counselling services.
- WBL organisations are providing apprentices with information, advice and guidance on COVID-19, mental health and wellbeing.
- WBL organisations are focusing on ongoing contact and support to ensure the health and wellbeing of their participants. Projects are posting information around mental health, suggestions for being positive and keeping structure to daily life, using small projects with a focus; e.g. cookery, gardening, dance, etc.
- Many participants in WBL projects which cater for participants with disabilities and the long-term unemployed fall into the category of having underlying health conditions and are self-isolating. In this context the organisations have instructed all staff to keep in daily contact with all clients on caseloads and move support to that of mental health and physical wellbeing through this crisis. They are putting together care packages of different activities for staff/clients/families and getting these on social media and shared daily with staff to share with clients. The safety of staff, participants, volunteers and the local community is their utmost priority and they don't want to put anyone at risk.

Exemplars

Pre-school settings

Example 1: The pre-school setting consulted with the parents due to an awareness about connectivity issues as they wanted to keep in contact with the children during the period of closure. The parental preference was for communication by phone through 'Air Messenger'. Videos made by the staff are pre-recorded and can be downloaded at a suitable time by the parent. These have a different focus each week and include the staff reading stories, reciting rhymes and singing songs. The staff maintain the social contact with the children through their parents and feel that the contacts by phone are meeting the need to support families who may simply want to talk about something is impacting in the home.

Example 2: The nursery principal emails the Social Worker of a Looked After Child for any updates/concerns/care planning meetings that she may need to attend remotely. They have posted videos on Facebook to address the area of Personal Social and Emotional development e.g. videos celebrating a child's Birthday when it comes up and talking about feelings and how they miss them but are thinking about them all the time. Feedback from the parents has been very positive.

Example 3: The nursery setting makes weekly contact with the grandmother of a looked after child to check in with her and the children. The grandmother is very grateful for the call and would seek reassurance that she is using the learning packs appropriately. Surestart are also in weekly contact with the grandmother.

Example 4: The nursery setting has a school app which all parents signed up at the beginning of the school year. Through the school app the Principal signposts parents to Parenting NI and other agencies in relation to emotional and mental wellbeing. She also included links to the food banks for her parents. She has set up call divert from the school phone number so that she can still be contacted by parents when they have a query.

Primary schools

Example 5: The school have been collating information about the response of hard to reach children and those in poverty and have about 20% of children that they are focussed on. There is a whole-school focus on safeguarding and prevention of risk to children. The school staff have identified vulnerable parents who are not coping and have built up relationships to engage with them through school and have agreed to offer respite through childcare. They are being proactive and utilising information from teachers to respond to children's home problems before they become a crisis, as well as being able to welcome children into school to help with personal needs and self-regulation and establish a safe daily routine.

Example 6: The school has compiled a 'Keep in Touch' list of pupils who have a statement of SEN, or are considered vulnerable in terms of pastoral care. In addition they have also identified a small number of families who they could tell had not been interacting via online learning. One of the SEN/Pastoral care team contacts each of those parents on a fortnightly basis by phone to maintain contact and offer support. They have also maintained contact with the social workers of those families with current Social Services intervention. The school updates the contact list regularly through feedback received from teachers, to see if there are additional children who may have been maintaining contact online but 'drop off' and who the staff feel they need to check in with.

Example 7: The teaching staff provide two-way communication via the Seesaw platform with all families contacted at least twice per week. Vulnerable families are contacted by the nurture teacher via Seesaw on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and additional contact is made via phone. All parents were given the info@ email address plus the local hub family support contact details.

Example 8: The designated teacher makes regular phone calls to parents of those children the school feels are vulnerable; touching base and supporting families. In addition the principal amended the school website for children in order that safeguarding and child protection reminders and support material are accessible for them. The website includes online links to Middletown Centre and Autism NI support materials.

Post-primary schools

Example 9: The school has well-established community links and relationships that have enabled them to plan additional support for their families; in particular catering for vulnerable pupils and their families. They have developed a co-ordinated approach with external agencies including youth workers, PSNI and the St Vincent de Paul. The school has highlighted to families that access to food service requires self-referral and have ensured that newcomer families have the language to have that conversation. The staff use the Seesaw App to provide an 'emotional check-in' each morning and have a strategy in place to follow-up on any pupil not engaging. There is a Safeguarding team member on each remote learning platform and a provision for confidential messaging re pupil safety and signposted numbers (e.g. ChildLine). Key staff are in place with monitoring responsibilities for quality of learning and pupil engagement.

Example 10: The school is part of a cluster with a local nursery and primary School. There are regular zoom meetings with leadership of the 3 schools and they work together. They held a joint fund raiser for parents to support local frontline workers and produce a weekly community Newsletter, which includes information, advice, counselling, activities and general local interest stories.

Example 11: The school have weekly 'pastoral' assemblies via Google Classroom - either whole year groups or individual form classes. While reinforcing the message to keep up with work set, these forums also offer support and signposting to those pupils who may need additional help - whether academically or pastorally.

Example 12: The school uses Facebook and Instagram to connect with pupils and families. Teachers leave messages for their year group or form class and the school have created a 'local heroes' piece on past pupils who are key workers. Staff make weekly calls, specifically to those pupils on our vulnerable list, and have Year heads and Form Teachers calling home to all within their year group. The school specifically call those pupils who appear to not engage with online materials and offer hard copy work for all pupils in batches of 4 weeks.

Special schools

Example 13: The school have established updated protocols with the Designated Teachers responsible for child protection and safeguarding during school closure. Clear guidance on the use of video conferencing has been disseminated to all staff. Mental health support for parents has been shared through the See-Saw App and followed up individually by the designated teacher when required. Remote access to counselling services has been co-ordinated for pupils already in receipt of counselling. Clear communication between the designated teacher and the counselling service has been established with regular telephone meetings. New referrals are picked up, initially by the school and shared with Counselling services. The principal has direct access to all activities and responses on the Seesaw App.

Example 14: The school communicates with parents and pupils through their Facebook page and Seesaw app. Staff provided links to useful websites and resources to support wellbeing and are in daily contact with parents to monitor pupil wellbeing and answer any parental questions/concerns. Personal development is one of three weekly tasks completed by pupils, for example yoga, cooking and meditation. Parents have been provided with resources to support their children, e.g. sensory stories and visuals to create schedules. Following a survey with parents and pupils which highlighted that YouTube was the most used platform, the school has launched their own channel to share staff videos with parents/pupils.

The schools counsellor is available every Monday from 9 am - 3 pm. Parents have been notified of the procedures to request a slot. The school is also reviewing their critical incident policy and approach to bereavement and support for pupils should this be required.

Example 15: The school is using the Seesaw App to communicate with parents. There is regular communication between staff regarding learning and pupil wellbeing. Barnardos counselling is available online to support pupils. Parents have been notified how to complete a referral using the online form and can seek support from staff if their child is anxious. The Senior Leadership Team have a weekly safeguarding meeting and contact has been maintained with social workers to update records. The school launched an online wellbeing week.

Youth settings

Example 16: A group of Youth providers in one area produced a 'Stay at Home' online video for social media, aimed at reminding young people of the need for social distancing and to reassure young people at a time when many are frightened.

Example 17: An EA Youth Service 'Stay Connected' online application has been developed and piloted in youth settings in the Derry and Strabane Councils, with the aim of encouraging young people to register for support. They select from a range of support needs including: loneliness; mental health; support services; meals; medical supplies; physical health; emotional health; and other. This service has now been launched on social media platforms with links. Responses are monitored by youth service staff and reference made to appropriate support leads as appropriate.

Education Other Than At School (EOTAS)

Example 18: The centre manages exceptional teaching arrangements (ETA) for pupils with medical conditions and also Time Out for Positive Steps (TOPS) full time provision for pupils with mental health and anxiety. Pupils on ETA are very vulnerable, many with very serious mental health issues. Staff contact each pupil when they are scheduled to teach them, so most pupils are contacted three times each week to check on their welfare. Resources for pupils in TOPS are put on the website and staff use Google Classroom and invite pupils to participate.

Example 19: The centre provides a weekly newsletter with techniques for children to manage stressful situations and strategies for parents in managing the children and staying positive. The newsletter includes games and challenges set by staff and suggestions for family films to view that they can discuss online each week. Staff contact the children frequently using google classroom. Initially the centre provided boxes of groceries for families of pupils in need.

Example 20: The centre uses video conferencing to keep in contact with pupils. Staff are in telephone contact with pupils each week and parents and pupils know that they must answer the call from staff. Referrals are made through EA if calls are not answered. The centre provided boxes of groceries for all families at the beginning of lockdown. The centre monitors very closely vulnerable pupils and have acted when concerns have arisen. All staff have been given work mobiles and all pupils have been given their numbers to contact them if worried or anxious. Staff are proactive in contacting pupils in their mentor group. The manager of the centre is pro-active in monitoring the levels of contact and maintaining contacts with parents.

Work-based learning settings

Example 21: The organisation which has charitable status has set up a 'Hardship Fund' which will be used to provide financial and practical support for both trainees and apprentices.

Example 22: The organisation is very concerned about the effect of closure on their most vulnerable young people. Many of the young people have very disruptive and unhealthy family circumstances and see the organisation as a safe haven in which they get care and welfare along with education and training. In the event of a full closure of the organisation, these young people would have nowhere else to go and are likely to end up on the streets engaging in anti-social behaviour, including increased drug taking. The organisation has remained open for the most vulnerable, implementing social distancing protocols to support the young people during the extended closure.

European Social Fund projects

Example 23: The Health and Wellbeing Officer in the organisation continues to have regular contact with the learners who have emotional health needs to ensure this support is ongoing in addition to their learning support. They give out packs to the young people and are maintaining contact with them through Facebook, texts and phone calls. The team are continually reviewing and assessing each young person to identify the most vulnerable and those with the most serious issues. They are keeping contact logs and are contacting the more serious cases on a daily basis.

Example 24: The project reported that it is very difficult for an employability project like theirs which carries out most of its work on a one-to-one face-to-face basis. The flip side to this lockdown is that they are still very busy because many people are being made redundant or being furloughed. The reality for many of these people (particularly those working in non-essential retail or hospitality) is their job might not be there when restrictions are lifted, as the business they worked for has had to close. The project continues to provide services to clients (both existing and new) via phone and email and also platforms such as zoom, WhatsApp and Facebook. As this way of working is new, they are proceeding cautiously and exploring issues with regards to data protection and safeguarding. They have developed processes, procedures and guidance notes for staff to allow them to support people in need.

Conclusion

When organisations re-open to children, young people and learners, it will be important that the re-opening is managed well by making sure that: contact is positive; teaching promotes the development of emotional health and wellbeing; and opportunities are provided for children, young people and learners to seek help when they need it. As children, young people and learners are welcomed back to education and training, a number of important safeguarding principles remain:

- the best interests of children, young people and learners must always continue to come first;
- if anyone in the organisation has a safeguarding concern about any child, young person or learner they should continue to act immediately; and
- children, young people and learners should continue to be protected when they are online.

Education and training providers need to satisfy themselves that any new policies and processes in response to coronavirus are not weakening their approach to safeguarding or undermining their child protection policy. It will be especially important that wider re-opening risk assessments and related Health and Safety risk assessments are appropriately linked into their approaches to child protection (and adult safeguarding as required). The CPSS has issued in June 2020 a Sample School Child Protection Policy COVID-19

Key actions

- Building confidence in both staff, learners and the wider community that learning can resume safely - rebuilding relationships and creating a foundation for learning.
- Supporting staff to re-connect, and to deal with their own anxieties and stresses before they can help learners deal with theirs.
- The development and sharing of clear protocols and procedures for effective hygiene and keeping safe practices to build and sustain confidence.
- Updating safeguarding and child protection policies and procedures to ensure that they are fit for purpose in the new context to include, but not limited to: identifying new safeguarding concerns about individual children, young people and learners as they see them in person following re-opening; reinforcing what staff should do if they have any concerns about a learner; confirming safeguarding reporting arrangements; the continued importance of all staff and volunteers acting and acting immediately on any safeguarding concerns, including new concerns; and the ongoing importance of working with Social Services and all relevant safeguarding and welfare partners. Organisations can use the updated phase specific ETI Safeguarding Proforma to self-evaluate their safeguarding policies and procedures - available on the ETI website by the end of July 2020.
- Ensuring that the Staff Code of Conduct reflects the current context and that staff are clear about safe hygiene and keeping safe protocols, and online safety,
- [Curriculum planning 2021 Circular 2020/06](#) - 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 prominently in curriculum delivery when settings re-open. Organisations need to have due regard to promoting the positive emotional health and wellbeing of all learners, engaging in recovery conversations and providing opportunities for them to share their experiences of organisational closure and express their feelings and concerns alongside positive outcomes.
- [The Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework](#) provides a framework to support organisations in discussing and reflecting on how to address best the specific safeguarding challenges and priorities that may be faced in the next academic year owing to 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](#).

[The Safer Schools App](#)

How [children and young people](#) can access essential support services, food provision and emotional support.



EA - [Safeguarding Guidance](#) during C-19.

Online counselling and support for ages 9-25 through the EA Youth Service stay connected website at [Youth Online](#).

Guidance for Schools and EOTAS Centres [Online Teaching Methods](#), Contact with Children and Families and Multidisciplinary Working.

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