

Your Ref: -
Our Ref: DM/II
Date: 20 March 2020

Dear Parent / Carer

Together, we face the most challenging times ahead. The clear and consistent advice from the Chief Medical Officer for Scotland is that being at home and reducing social contact will be key to reducing the spread of the Coronavirus in the Highlands. We must help each other to protect our most vulnerable citizens and support our key staff in delivering essential services to our communities with an increased need for health, care and welfare services. In the information that follows I ask for your understanding that the health and wellbeing of your children, your family and your communities are the key priority.

Please read this letter carefully to ensure that you have all the relevant information regarding: --

- School closures
- S4-S6 Senior Phase
- Advice and Helplines
- Key Workers
- Free School Meals

School Closures – Highland – Coronavirus (Covid-19)

As you are aware, it is expected that the spread of the Coronavirus will accelerate significantly over the next few weeks, with the likelihood of ongoing disruption to services including schools.

In response to the escalating Covid-19 outbreak, The Scottish Government following consultation with the Chief Medical Officer and other experts have taken the decision to advise that all schools and local authority early learning and childcare settings should **close to children and young people with effect from 1700 on Friday 20th March 2020**, with the exception of any critical provision to protect the following key interests and groups:

- **Key workers:** to ensure that children of key workers, for example NHS and social care staff, have continuing access to appropriate learning and childcare, potentially beyond the normal school day, that allows their

parents/carers to participate in the national response to Covid-19. A definition of key workers is at the end of this letter.

- **Education continuity:** to ensure S4-S6 pupils can complete course work for national qualifications.
- **Vulnerable children:** to maintain protections and support for children who may be particularly vulnerable in the current circumstances, particularly in respect of free school meals, children with additional support needs and at-risk children.

This step has been taken to help protect the safety and wellbeing of our children and staff. It has not yet been decided when schools will reopen, though the First Minister has mentioned that we should not expect schools to reopen after the Easter break, and that they may not reopen before the summer.

Schools therefore close today Friday 20 March 2020 and will remain closed to routine education and learning until further notice. This will include local authority nurseries, schools, as well as breakfast and after school clubs in our buildings. The Highland Council will continue to communicate with our communities in a variety of ways while the schools are closed. Meanwhile, parents should make arrangements for the care of their children during this period, as the advice is that the safest place for children and young people to be is at home.

For any pupils who need to pick up digital devices (or essential medication) after today please arrange to come in to school on Monday 23 March to collect them. Should any families be unable to do this (for example because the entire family is self-isolating) please oversee an alternative means of getting the item to the family concerned. For example, another family could collect the device and pass it on (taking care to avoid social contact with the self-isolating family).

It is very important that while the schools are closed, our children and young people don't miss out on learning. While children and young people are well enough to take part in learning activities, they are expected to make use of the arrangements put in place by school staff. Teachers have been working hard to gather together resources and Highland Council officers have produced a large bank of online resources that teachers and parent/carers can also use to support learning (<https://www.highland.gov.uk/digitalschoolshub>).

Pupils will be supported by a variety of digital learning and skills resources to support their learning. In Highland, all P6-S6 children have a Chromebook they can use to access the resources their teachers are using with them. For younger children, we would ask parents, wherever possible, to support access to either a sibling's Chromebook or a personal family device. Younger pupils will need to be supported by a family member to access a Google Classroom or Google Hangout (video conferencing). Your children's teachers will provide much more information about this.

Each school has been working hard to identify what the school day will look like, but there is an expectation that pupils will continue to engage in learning opportunities. This will include registering online every day so that teachers know that pupils are taking part and are safe.

Support, resources and advice about online learning is available for staff, pupils and parents at: www.Highland.gov.uk/digitalschoolshub. Further information will follow. If you do not have access to technology or wi-fi, please email clinfoandsupport@highland.gov.uk

S4-S6 Senior Phase

Our older pupils will be thinking about their examinations. The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) has been working with the Scottish Government about the upcoming exam period. It was announced by the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, John Swinney that the 2020 exams will not take place. Qualifications will now be based on coursework, prior attainment and estimate grades. Pupils will be able to access support to complete any outstanding units or coursework on Monday 23rd and Tuesday 24th March. Further information regarding this will come from your child's school.

The Highland Council are developing plans to support any children and young people who are entitled to free school meals and you will find more information about this at the end of the letter.

This is clearly an unprecedented situation which continues to affect all of society. We must come to terms with the outlook that greater social isolation will be necessary in the weeks ahead. It is understandable that we will all face increasing anxiety and uncertainty and it is especially important that we all work together and support our children and young people in these difficult times.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Donna Manson', with a stylized, flowing script.

Donna Manson
Chief Executive

Key Workers

A **definition** of key workers is provided here. There should be a particular focus on:

Key workers in posts which ensure that essential services can be delivered and cover tasks within the local community which support the vulnerable and aid community resilience. This may be slightly different in each community to allow the country to address local priorities. Whilst decisions will be taken at a local level, we would expect this to include consideration of:

- **Category 1** - Health and Care workers directly supporting COVID response, and associated staff; Health and Care workers supporting life threatening emergency work, as well as critical primary and community care provision; Energy suppliers (small numbers identified as top priority already); staff providing childcare/learning for other category 1 staff.
- **Category 2** - All other Health and Care workers, and wider public sector workers providing emergency/critical welfare services (e.g. Fire, Police, Prisons, Social Workers, etc) as well as those supporting our Critical National Infrastructure, without whom serious damage to the welfare of the people of Scotland could be caused.
- **Category 3** - All workers without whom there could be a significant impact on Scotland (but where the response to Covid-19, or the ability to perform essential tasks to keep the country running, would not be severely compromised).

Local authorities should be guided by this definition and prioritise provision of arrangements accordingly. They should consider any circumstances that mean that specific classes of worker are critical in their local contexts.

Local authorities will be best placed to judge what learning and childcare arrangements for the children of key workers are most appropriate for local circumstances. However, they are asked to give particular weight to the use of private and third sector early learning and childcare settings for continued critical provision, to ensure financial support for the sector.

If you consider yourself to fall into the Key Workers category, please visit www.highland.gov.uk/keyworkers from 5pm today (20 March) where you will find an online form to request assistance with childcare.

Free School Meals

For the week beginning Monday 23rd March, a takeaway 'Grab & Go' option will be available for all young people who are entitled to a free school meal. This includes all P1-P3 pupils and all other pupils from P4 and above who are already entitled to this. These will be available from the local Secondary School for your Associated Schools Group and can be collected between 11am and 2pm.

The plans for how this will look after the Easter break will be communicated to you separately, once further arrangements are in place.

There is no need to reapply but for new applications please see the link - www.highland.gov.uk/info/899/schoolsgrants_and_benefits/10/free_school_meals_and_assistance_with_clothing.

Advice & Helplines

We understand that this will be a worrying time for parents and families. Families should continue to listen to official announcements from the government and local authority. Health advice is available through:

- Health Protection Scotland - <https://www.hps.scot.nhs.uk/>
- NHS Scotland 111
- Local GP

For families requiring social care support, telephone or email contact should be made with your usual support worker (social worker, children's services worker or family support Worker). For **out of hours social care emergencies**, the contact number is 08457 697 284.

Please note that from Monday 23rd March, The Highland Council, working with local partners, will provide details of new Helplines being established in response to the Coronavirus situation.