Contingency Framework for Vulnerable Children and Young People when schools/education settings are directly impacted by COVID-19 restrictions

Date of Re-Issue: 3 September 2021

Audience:
- **Principals and Boards of Governors of all grant-aided schools;**
- **Independent Schools;**
- **Education Authority;**
- **Council for Catholic Maintained Schools;**
- **Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta;**
- **Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education;**
- **Governing Bodies Association;**
- **Statutory Pre-School Providers;**
- **Controlled Schools' Support Council**
- **EOTAS centres**
- **Middletown Centre for Autism**

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1. Introduction

This Contingency Framework for Vulnerable Children and Young People will be kept under continual review by the Department and updated as appropriate.

There is cross-departmental recognition on the key role schools, education settings, and other key stakeholders play in ensuring the well-being of children and young people both in relation to their educational progress and emotional well-being, health and development.

As such any COVID related education restrictions would only be used as a last resort and will only be initiated following an Executive/Minister of Education decision in an attempt to manage the spread of COVID-19.

The main guidance can be found at [Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings in Northern Ireland.](#)

This contingency framework is designed to set out the expectations on how vulnerable children and young people (VCYP) should be supported in the event that schools and education settings are directly impacted by restrictions put in place as part of the COVID-19 response.

The Executive has supported the importance of the prioritisation of education throughout the pandemic. The evidence is clear that being out of education causes significant harm to learning, life chances and impacts on children and young people's (CYP) mental and physical health. This is especially true for our VCYP. In addition, it is recognised that face to face teaching is the best form of education, and schools and education settings are the best place to provide this in a controlled and safe environment.

If there is a decision for some form of restrictions which impact directly on schools and education settings, the support model offered to VCYP would be managed on a tiered basis with the aim to maintain onsite education, where possible, and provide a suitable support plan that meets the individual needs of the VCYP (as defined below).

2. Definition of Vulnerable Children and Young People

The definition of Vulnerable Children as set out in the cross-departmental Vulnerable Children and Young People's Plan 2020 is: (https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-cross-departmental-covid-19-vulnerable-children-and-young-peoples-plan)

- *A child who has an assigned social worker because he or she is a child in need, in need of protection (or on the child protection register) or is a looked after child.*
- *A child in need includes young carers, children with disabilities, and children living in families where there is domestic abuse, substance abuse, and / or mental health difficulties.*
- *A child who is receiving support from, or has been referred to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS).*
- *A child who has a statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN), a child who is accessing EOTAS, or a child who normally accesses Education Nurture Units.*
- *A child who is 'on-the-edge' of receiving support from children's social services.*
- *A child who is in need, including in need of protection, but whose need is not known to statutory services.*

- *A child who is not known to statutory or voluntary and community support services but who is vulnerable because their family is under increased pressure due to Covid-19 related circumstances.*
- *A young person who was previously a looked after child, whether or not they are receiving support from statutory services.*
- *A child who has been placed for adoption.*
- *Asylum seeking and refugee children and children whose parents have no recourse to public funds.*

3. Identification of VCYP

It is recognised that school and education staff know their CYP and family needs best, through on-going engagement with parent/carers. In implementing this framework, schools and education settings should work closely with parents/carer's, CYP as appropriate, Education Authority (EA), and Health and Social Care (HSC) Services as necessary, to identify VCYP in accordance with the cross-departmental definition detailed above.

Schools and education settings should use information already available to them through the school's pastoral care systems, and their knowledge of children and families to identify those children who are vulnerable and/or those most vulnerable.

Schools and education settings should consider those who would benefit from being within the school or other education settings in order to facilitate their access to the same/similar remote or blended learning programmes offered to their peers.

A record of the decisions taken in relation to VCYP and/or the most vulnerable under this framework must be kept by the school/education settings (Annex B).

If a school or education setting requires further advice or guidance on the placement of VCYP, they should liaise with the school's Educational Welfare Officer, their Special School Support Officer, Cross Organisational Link Officer (COLO) or other relevant EA and HSC staff.

Where a parent/carer considers their child to be vulnerable and believes that they should be considered in line with this plan, the **first point of contact** is the Principal of the child's school.

Where a placement is unable to be facilitated, the parent/carer can contact the EA www.eani.org.uk for further review and resolution, as appropriate. This may require consideration by a multi-agency/multi-disciplinary decision-making forum to fully understand the VCYP and family needs in the context of the prevailing public health advice.

The school and education setting has the primary responsibility to identify VCYP at each of the levels detailed below. This should be done in consultation with the parent(s)/carer(s), EA, HSC staff as necessary and should take account of the views, wishes and feelings of the CYP as appropriate.

4. Contingency Framework

This contingency framework is designed to be implemented only in the event that the Executive/Minister decides to restrict access to schools for the management of COVID-19. The framework is designed to be agile, flexible and responsive to regional and where necessary local circumstances.

The guiding principle for any decision making under this framework will be that any restrictions to attendance of pupil's onsite are kept to a minimum,

subject to review and will cease to apply as soon as the public health and scientific advice indicates it is appropriate to do so.

Schools should make plans and consider how they would operate in the event that these restrictions become necessary, including how they would maintain contact with VCYP, provide suitable support, and deliver high-quality learning, as appropriate. This is in line with the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 2003 Article 17 which places a statutory duty on Boards of Governors to safeguard and promote the welfare of its pupils; and Article 18 which places a statutory duty on Board of Governors to have child protection measures in place.

Existing safeguarding and child protection arrangements will continue to apply: https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/circular-201704-safeguarding-and-child-protection-schools-guide-schools

Schools and education settings can contact the EA Child Protection Support Service and follow normal child protection protocols including referrals to the Health and Social Care Gateway team as necessary. Contact details are included at Annex A.

The contingency framework is designed to support collaborative working across the education and HSC sectors in line with the Children's Services Co-operation Act NI (2015). Schools and education settings will be supported by staff from the EA, and relevant local Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCTs) as required to help identify VCYP and to determine any supports required to meet VCYP needs.

This contingency plan should <u>not be</u> used to address operational challenges, including staff shortages. If individual school or education settings are facing operational challenges, they should work with the
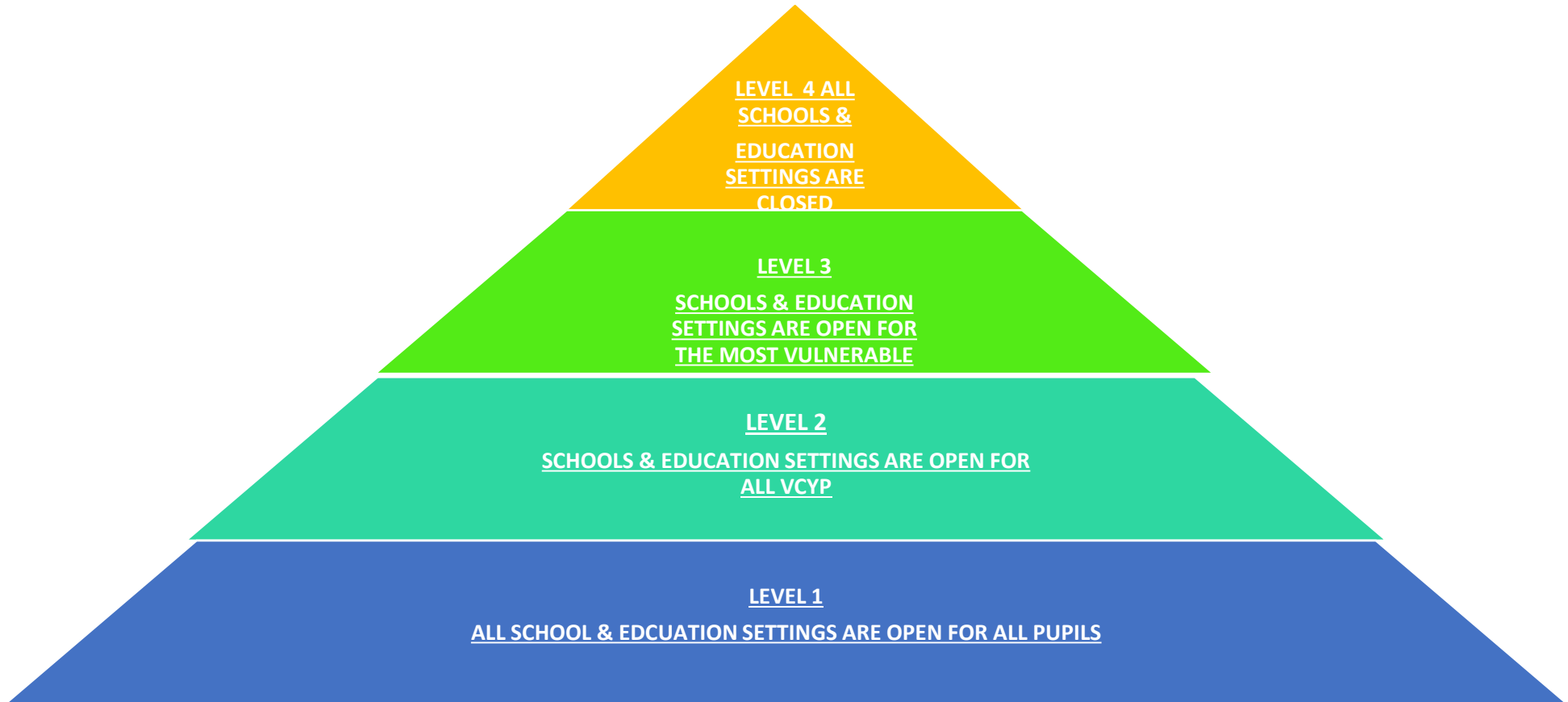
Education Authority (EA) through the Cross Organisational Link Officer to discuss their individual circumstances and seek support.

The nature of school access for VCYP within the framework is based on a tiered system of support that is dependent on restrictions in place.

5. Contingency Framework Delivery Model

The contingency framework includes 4 levels of provision for VCYP, directly linked to levels of restrictions along a continuum. At each of the 4 levels, the process of identification is outlined alongside the collaborative support required to best meet the needs of the VCYP and their family. This is set out in more detail below and in the accompanying table at **Annex A.**

Contingency Planning Framework

LEVEL 4 ALL SCHOOLS & EDUCATION SETTINGS ARE CLOSED

LEVEL 3 SCHOOLS & EDUCATION SETTINGS ARE OPEN FOR THE MOST VULNERABLE

LEVEL 2 SCHOOLS & EDUCATION SETTINGS ARE OPEN FOR ALL VCYP

LEVEL 1 ALL SCHOOL & EDCUATION SETTINGS ARE OPEN FOR ALL PUPILS

To note: A determination about levels of vulnerability is a matter of professional judgment and should be a consideration only if the COVID conditions are such that access to school, in terms of numbers of children, is severely restricted

It is important that whilst implementing the framework schools, education settings, the EA, and HSC services where necessary, engage with parents/carers to agree individual support plans, and to regularly review this to ensure it continues to meet the VCYP's and family's needs in line with other supports already in place. In addition, the provision of Free School Meals, Transport etc. that is necessary to support any onsite attendance should be considered and put in place by the relevant Service or organisation.

LEVEL 1 – SCHOOL AND EDUCATION SETTINGS ARE OPEN FOR ALL PUPILS:

At this level there will be the delivery of onsite provision for all children in line with educational and health supports that is necessary to meet the CYP needs.

It is important at this level that school and educational staff proactively identify CYP who meet the cross-departmental definition for VCYP as detailed in Section 2 above, to ensure the timely provision of supports for VCYP in the event that COVID restrictions escalate to levels 2-4.

Where a decision is taken that a VCYP cannot attend school because of underlying risk factors such as complex healthcare needs, a multi-disciplinary/multi-agency decision-making forum may be established by school with EA, and, where necessary, relevant HSC staff to determine how to best meet the VCYP's needs. This should be done in consultation with the parent(s)/carer(s) and should take account of the CYP views, wishes and feelings.

LEVEL 2 – SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION SETTINGS ARE OPEN FOR ALL VCYP: Restrictions at this level will be determined and communicated by the Executive/Minister.

Schools and education settings should work closely with designated EA staff and, where necessary, staff from the local HSCTs to identify VCYP within the meaning of the cross-departmental plan (Section 2 above) and ensure the delivery of an appropriate child-centred support plan.

Where a decision is taken that a VCYP cannot attend school because of underlying risk factors such as complex healthcare needs, a multi-disciplinary/multi-agency decision-making forum may be established by school with EA, and, where necessary, relevant HSC staff to determine how to best meet the VCYP's needs. This should be done in consultation with the parent(s)/carer(s) and should take account of the CYP views, wishes and feelings.

Parent/carers should be encouraged to send their children to school if it is agreed by education and health professionals that it is in their best interests

Schools should consider whether they are able to provide digital devices to VCYP, when they are not in school/education setting at this level.

LEVEL 3 – SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION SETTINGS ARE OPEN FOR THE MOST VULNERABLE: Restrictions at this level will be determined and communicated by the Executive/Minister.

If schools and education settings are required to move to this level education and health professionals will work together to identify the most vulnerable.

Schools and education settings need to engage with parents/carers, EA, HSCT professionals and take the views of CYP to identify and determine the support required for the most vulnerable which may include prioritised access to school. This will require a collaborative approach to not only identify VCYP but to determine the support required to meet the VCYP needs in school and at home as necessary.

Where a parent/carer considers that they need support and believes that they should be considered in line with this level, the **first point of contact** is the Principal of the child's school.

Where a placement is unable to be facilitated, the parent(s)/carer(s) can contact the EA www.eani.org.uk for further review and resolution, as appropriate.

Where schools and education settings, in the context of COVID-19, require further assistance to meet the needs of the most vulnerable, they should liaise with their EA, who will establish a multi-disciplinary/multi-agency decision-making forum with relevant colleagues from EA and the local HSCT to fully consider the child's needs, assess risk and identify the supports necessary to meet the needs of the most vulnerable and/or address assessed risks.

Where onsite access cannot and/or is not suitable to meet the needs of the most vulnerable, e.g. as a result of the child's complex healthcare

needs, a multi-disciplinary/multi-agency decision-making forum will be established to consider the needs of the VCYP and the level of support required. This should be done in consultation with the parent(s)/carer(s) and should take account of the CYP's views, wishes and feelings.

Where a VCYP is deemed most vulnerable and is not provided with onsite school provision, schools and education settings, the EA and, where necessary, the local HSCT should determine and deliver supports that meets the VCYP needs that can include high-quality remote learning.

Parent/carer should be encouraged to send their children to school if it is agreed by education and health professionals that it is in their best interests.

Schools should consider whether they are able to provide digital devices to VCYP, when they are not in school/education setting at this level.

<u>LEVEL 4 – ALL SCHOOLS AND EDUCATION SETTINGS ARE CLOSED FOR ALL PUPILS:</u> Restrictions at this level will be determined and communicated by the Executive/Minister.

At this level, learning will be delivered remotely for **<u>all pupils</u>** including VCYP.

EA and HSC services will work with schools to help support the needs of VCYP and their families remotely in line with COVID management restrictions. This will be managed through a range of appropriate responsive methods that will include the effective use of technology.

Critical and urgent HSC services will be delivered on a face to face basis in line with assessed clinical needs and risk and in keeping with extant public health guidance in place.

Schools should consider whether they are able to provide digital devices to VCYP, when they are not in school/education setting at this level.

6. Other Circumstances Where Remote Learning is Necessary

There may be other circumstances where VCYP needs are met via remote learning methods e.g. when the VCYP is required to self-isolate as a result of a positive COVID test or as a Close Contact. In these circumstances, it is important that schools and educational settings put active systems in place to keep in contact with VCYP during these times, including personal contact (phone or video conferencing) as the wellbeing of these children is a key concern as is their participation and engagement in remote learning.

Guidance in relation to curriculum planning for primary schools in 2021/22 is available at [Curriculum Planning Primary Schools](#) and for post primary schools at [Curriculum Planning Post Primary Schools](#).

The Department's Circular 2021/01 [Guidance on Remote Learning](#) provides advice and guidance to schools on supporting remote learning. It outlines a range of key principles which should underpin schools' remote learning programmes. The Department has also simplified its remote learning guidance into a one-page, quick glance document for schools entitled [Effective Practice in Remote Learning.](#)

It is recognised that some pupils with SEN may not be able to access remote education as a result of COVID related restrictions or when required to self-isolate without appropriate adult intervention. Schools should consider whether they are able to provide digital devices to VCYP, when they are not in school/education setting at this level.

Teachers are best placed to provide advice to parents/carers on how the pupil's needs can be most effectively met to ensure they continue to make progress. Schools and education settings should put strategies in place to support parents/carers to deliver remote learning and make reasonable adjustments as necessary.

Where a pupil has provision specified within their statement of SEN, it remains the duty of the Board of Governors, the EA to secure or arrange the delivery of provision as set out in: the Education (NI) Order 1996, as amended; the 1998 SEN Code of Practice; and 2005 Supplement to the Code.

Local Health Trusts should work with schools and the child's parents/carers to ensure that any provision as outlined within the child's/ young person's statement of SEN is met.

It is recognised that there may be times when it becomes difficult to do so, for example, if they are self-isolating or medically unwell. Decisions on how services can be delivered remotely to individual children in these circumstance should be considered by relevant education, and HSC professionals. This includes online teaching and remote therapeutic support sessions deemed necessary to meet their needs. Schools/education settings should keep the parent(s)/carer(s) informed about the support that their child will be receiving and any additional help they might need.

7. Contingency Planning Enablers and Dependencies

The successful implementation of this contingency framework will depend on a number of supporting measures, both enablers and dependencies. These are outlined below and are likely to determine either the numbers of children, who can be supported under this plan/framework and the range of supports available to individual VCYP.

They are:

- Assistance and support from relevant education, HSC staff where necessary to help identify VCYP as per the agreed definition and to help support their needs;
- Appropriate staffing within school to safely support the number of children in a setting;

- Close working and shared responsibility for supporting VCYP between education and HSC.
- Partnership working with parents/carers and children.
- The public health requirements and level of restriction