**NASS Update (15th May 2020)**

Dear colleagues,

Last night DfE put out several bits of new guidance for schools. Spoiler alert - it’s not as good as their previous works! Put the kettle on, take 30 seconds to go to your happy place in your head and then read on …

To set the scene - what we were hoping for was further guidance that helped schools get to grip of what was meant in practice when it was announced on Sunday that schools should be moving towards wider opening. What we have is guidance that was not consulted on before circulating, as much of the past guidance was, and which has the feel of being drafted piecemeal by lots of different people. Consequently, that sense of coherent, cohesive overall vision is sadly lacking.

The key document from last night is ’Safe working in in education, childcare and children’s social care settings …’:  <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safe-working-in-education-childcare-and-childrens-social-care/safe-working-in-education-childcare-and-childrens-social-care-settings-including-the-use-of-personal-protective-equipment-ppe>  The Government message of infection control in schools via hygiene and distancing remains. The view that schools do not routinely need PPE remains. This is now qualified slightly - PPE may be needed if it was previously needed for medical or intimate care for that child or if a child is displaying symptoms. For the first time, we get mention of children spitting in guidance. The basic message is that if children don’t have symptoms and you didn’t use PPE to work with them before the virus then you don’t need to start using it now. We have advice on transport for the first time - suggestion that neither PPE or social distancing are needed if children are not symptomatic. Perhaps the only useful new element is noting that where children with SEND cannot socially distance, schools will have to reduce class sizes.

Whilst it is not aimed at special schools, guidance was issued yesterday on helping primary schools prepare for wider re-opening. DfE suggests this may be useful to special schools too - possibly a triumph of optimism over realism! You can read for yourself at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preparing-for-the-wider-opening-of-schools-from-1-june?utm_source=91737d92-b868-4b52-a314-d1bd0fa76ba5&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=immediate>  It’s largely a reiteration of things you will already know and be doing but if you are having a wobble about whether you are doing the right things, it may offer some reassurance. What it won’t do is get deeper into the thorny issues that you will be grappling with around staff availability, testing of people without symptoms and availability of PPE.

Finally, for those of you with FE Provision, there is a small section for Independent Specialist Institutions in the latest guidance: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-further-education-provision?utm_source=89af4900-f169-4913-8bae-26e9678ed9a5&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=immediate>

Unsurprisingly, the guidance has not been well-received! I am typing this whilst keeping an ear on the news, where unions are complaining about the lack of scientific rigour in both the guidance and plans to open schools more widely. There is a meeting of the teaching unions and DfE today and it will be interesting to see if anything changes as a result of this. It was useful to hear Kevin Courtney from the NEU make the point that their issues are with government and not head teachers but this was rather weakened by a follow-up comment validating NASUWT’s suggestion that they might sue Head teachers who put their staff ‘at risk!. This puts leaders in a deeply uncomfortable place. The unions are also putting great weight onto neither Wales nor Scotland asking schools to return at this point.

In the face of all this new guidance, does anything on the ground for you really change? Not really! Looking for, assessing and managing risks on all fronts remains a key task. A subtle change is that there is now a tangible risk of staff following union advice and refusing to return to work and/or suggesting that schools are operating unsafe working practices. Following Government guidance meets the requirements placed on schools but the gaps between advice for those providing services to children and those providing services to adults is wide and not clearly explained through solid use of scientific evidence and principle. The issue is also becoming more politicised day by day with Government portraying unions as denying children their rightful education and blocking re-opening and unions portraying government as incompetent and putting school staff’s lives at risk. In the midst of the storm, it’s hard to give practical advice that will work for everyone but here’s my opinion:

1. Keep returning to what you know about risk - not just the usual things about individual children, social distancing and sites but the psychological state of your staff and the possible impact of any industrial action on your school. Do you have a sense of what ’safe’ looks like in the face of different variables being in play?

2. Take a position on use of PPE in your setting and communicate it clearly. Many schools will feel that more routine use of PPE is the only way they can get sufficient staff back at work or enable staff to work with specific children. If that’s the case for your school, will you supply PPE to staff or just them allow to bring in their own? Do you have confidence that you can source sufficient PPE for a sustained period of time? How will you support young people to manage working with staff who are wearing PPE? If you have decided you do not want routine use of PPE, are you able to make a clear and persuasive case for this position to staff and parents, e.g. we haven’t used this in the past and it is not recommended for children not displaying symptoms.

3. Make sure you are clear about your expectations for staff. Are you clear which staff should be shielding and how you will manage them? For those that are in ‘grey’ areas where they may have some physical or psychological vulnerabilities that are making them unwilling to work are you clear and consistent about the principles you are applying to manage them? From our regular discussions, it’s clear that there is a range of approaches being used across schools and rather than there being one ‘right way’ it’s more a case of having clear principles that you stick to and apply consistently.

4. Treat Government guidance as an underpinning to your practice but be prepared to go beyond it, if your specific circumstances dictate it. If you can only staff your school if you provide PPE to your staff, this might be a reasonable short-term compromise to keep running a service.

5. Build flexibility into your plans - we are still over a week away from 1st June and a lot may happen between now and then! Anything from Government climb-down to full-on industrial action is a possibility!

The next SEND reference group meeting with DfE takes place next Wednesday and may be a more tense affair than the first two. I have asked for both PPE and working with unions to be on the agenda.

As ever, if you are managing specific issues in your school, please make use of us - through the Zoom meetings, emails and phone calls. More than ever, it’s important that we do anything we can to lessen the sense of isolation that many heads and school leaders are feeling. We don’t always have the answers but we’ll always do our best to help, think alongside you and, if nothing else, provide a kind listening ear.

I will expect to update you on Monday but if anything major happens at the weekend we will let you know. We wish you all a good weekend and look forward to being in touch again next week.

With all good thoughts and wishes from Claire, Jenny, Karen and Kate