

Briefing Paper



Reopening of schools in Denmark

Context

Education Scotland has identified three phases as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The first '*emergency phase*' has focused on local authorities prioritising support for:

- vulnerable children: to maintain protections and support for vulnerable children, particularly in respect of free school meals, children with additional support needs and at-risk children
- educational continuity as far as possible, and
- care for the children of keyworkers.

The second phase - the '*new normal (term 4)*' - will involve support for home learning and some continued provision through hubs and other arrangements. On 20 April 2020 Scottish Government and Education Scotland published guidance on home learning outlining some key principles and the available support for this from Education Scotland. The third phase - the '*Recovery*' - will involve children and young people returning to school. On 23 April the First Minister outlined a framework for decision-making which will ultimately lead to 'renewal'. As part of this process we will see a whole-scale reopening of our schools and educational establishments. Scotland will follow others who will have reopened schools earlier in the year and has an opportunity to draw out the lessons from the decisions and experiences from other systems.

The purpose of this briefing paper is to summarise some of the key practices developed in Denmark which reopened some provision on 15 April 2020.

Introduction

Denmark was one of first countries in Europe to announce lockdown measures from 11 March 2020 as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. It had a relatively low infection rate at that time and was widely praised for its actions on restricting movement to stop the spread of the virus across the population.

Schools were closed on 12 March. However, on 6 April the Danish Government announced it was taking 'small, cautious, controlled' and gradual steps to open the community, making it one of the first countries to lift lockdown restrictions. Denmark reopened kindergartens, creches and primary schools from 15 April. This was to be Phase 1 of those 'gradual steps' and was to be followed by considering the reopening of e.g. hairdressers and restaurants. However, the closure of secondary schools, libraries and churches, in addition to gatherings of more than 10 people, will remain until at least 10 May 2020.

Other European countries are moving to lift restrictions as well, such as Germany, Austria, Spain and Czechia. Norway has also opened kindergartens from 20 April and will open parts of primary schools from 27 April 2020.

The Danish Health Authorities have issued specific guidance for management and education staff on the reopening of early years centres and primary schools, much of which is detailed on **hygiene behaviour** including accessibility of wash basins and hand sanitation, cleaning and dealing with

symptomatic children and staff. This also includes employee and parental awareness re handling sickness judgement and managing staff at special risk e.g. pregnant women, people over 65 and those with compromised immune systems.

Therefore, the information below **represents a distillation of the current available school guidance and a concentration on those areas** which might be the most appropriate now and have implications for the Scottish education system.

EDUCATION:

- **School Day** – this should be organised as far as possible to take place outside, both for teaching and play. Teaching can take place inside, where weather does not permit it outside or where there is a lack of outdoor facilities at the school. The advice/guidance includes a request that children wear appropriate/suitable clothing for outdoor activity.
- **Lesson Planning** – this should be for smaller and regular groups of children. The aim is to keep children in the same small groups as possible to minimise contact with several other children.
- **Specific Subjects**
 - These will be completed substantially different than before e.g. food science to focus on nutrition, rather than full-scale cooking.
 - Sports Lessons must be done outdoors and without contact sports.
 - If these precautions cannot be taken, then subjects might need to be cancelled and other subjects taught instead.

ADDITIONAL SPECIAL NEEDS (ASN) PUPILS:

- The centres/schools should make arrangements, as far as possible, that those pupils spend the school day with the same pupils and educators should be distributed among individual classes/groups of pupils so that they are well cared for.
- Activities should be carried out outside as far as possible.

LOGISTICS and DISTANCING:

- When teaching indoors there should be more space than usual per pupil.
- When pupils are at tables there should be at least 2 metres in between the pupils. This may require pupils divided into groups and divided into multiple classrooms to ensure necessary distance. The children should be in smaller groups that they will remain in inside and out.
- Outdoor activities – if these are organised in teams, then pupils should be kept in the same teams.
- Play should be in smaller groups; 5 pupils outside and 2 to 3 inside and only with the same class. It might be necessary to mark the playground into smaller play areas.
- This will necessitate more adults being present to keep pupils apart and avoiding physical contact.
- Transport/Movement:
 - Public transport should be avoided
 - School bus should run at half occupancy; individual children to have a double seat each.
- Arrival/Pick-up:
 - Pupils and parents should not gather at entry points
 - Pupils to be `handed in` at entry points
 - Arrival times should be staggered – deliver pupils at intervals
 - Any close and long-term physical contact must be avoided.

- Food and Canteen – this guidance is mainly targeted at hygiene and distancing e.g. there should be no sharing of food, food should be portioned and there should not be any buffet.

INTERIOR DESIGN:

- Large gatherings of pupils/staff are to be avoided e.g. morning assembly or classes held together.
- Time division between classes, in relation to arrival, learning and free time, so that many are not gathered at the same time.
- Teachers must come to classes – pupils should not change classrooms.
- Meetings between staff should be conducted outside at a good distance from each other, if this is not possible, then through video/telecommunications.

IN SUMMARY:

- There must be a planning and logistics framework in place before a school can open.
- Physical contact such as handshakes and hugs should be avoided.
- Stricter cleaning regimes must be adhered to.
- Large gatherings must be avoided.
- Teaching in smaller groups and only within the same class.
- Activities must be planned so that they take place in smaller groups of the same pupils.
- Activities must be planned so that they take place outside, unless this is not possible, e.g. due to the weather.
- For meetings between employees, this must be done outdoors or by video/phone.
- It is up to individual centres and schools to organise the school day and with guidelines/instructions to suit the institution's circumstances. Schools themselves should decide whether staff in an at-risk category should be at work or return home.

Communications and Information – Internal and External

The Danish authorities have stressed that the reopening of early years learning centres and primary schools will not be the same for every centre or school and it will not be a normal school day from day one. It is also recognised that some schools will not be ready to open and that some parents may prefer to keep their children at home. There needs to be very clear communication channels with parents. In addition, there needs to be internal visible information through posters etc.

They have issued a lot of guidelines on specific aspects of the reopening, but some parents and trade unions have concerns about how the reopening can be done in a safe way and suggest a lack of clarity about who should go back to school. The trade unions in Denmark are key political stakeholders in decision-making processes, with 70% of the working population belonging to a trade union, therefore it seems unlikely that the Danish Union of Early Childhood and Youth Educators and the Danish Teachers Union have not been involved in this discussion and decision.

Commentary – brief intelligence after schools reopened on 15 April 2020:

- Some schools reported over 90% attendance rate.
- Some parents preferred to keep children home; some reports of parents feeling situation was unsafe.
- Distancing measures appeared to be working.
- Schools averaging 10/11 students to 1 teacher.
- Some schools operating shorter school days to allow access to/sharing of resources.

- Many of the schools which reopened reported relatively few problems.
- A new 'life course' has been developed for teaching in schools to take students through the different aspects and consequences of the pandemic.
- Requirement for more staff due to small classrooms and dividing the classes into several groups or teams.
- Potential implications for local authorities of reopening secondary schools as classes and teachers being used by younger children.
- The government is considering the implications for summer camps for vulnerable children and families and how those might need to be organised considering the pandemic.

NB: The 'Guidance on the controlled reopening of schools' were in Danish, therefore the text is a 'best interpretation' of the translation.

Sources

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