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Robin Fletcher
Chief Executive
Boarding Schools Association

Copy: Scottish Council of Independent Schools

9 March 2021

Dear Mr Fletcher

Thank you for your letter of 17 February 2021 to the First Minister and Chief Medical Officer, in which you raised concerns over the isolation arrangements for international pupils returning to boarding schools. I recognise the significant challenges faced by boarders, their families and schools as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and in particular the lead-in time that is involved in planning for any return of pupils.

You will be aware of the announcements last week by the First Minister, regarding the phased return for all pupils in Scotland. I am happy to confirm that this can include some boarding pupils, as set out in the [Guidance on arrangements for the phased reopening of schools in March 2021](#), published on 8 March.

However, there are specific considerations to take into account in planning for the return of boarding pupils. For this term, we would encourage that alternative options continue to be explored and utilised for those pupils who would need to travel from outside Scotland, to continue to minimise risk of virus transmission. Given the short period before the Easter break and the benefits of avoiding travel and reducing virus transmission, it may be appropriate for many pupils to continue to follow an appropriate timetable of remote learning from home for the remainder of this term. Schools will want to consider balancing the risks of travel and transmission against educational benefit, and consider making different provision for different pupils or different groups of pupils. However, a return broadly in line with wider re-opening is permitted, and no specific isolation requirements apply to pupils travelling within the Common Travel Area. Instead arrangements similar to those that schools were asked to use in August 2020 would be appropriate, for example, regarding residential bubbles.

We would recommend that pupils currently outside the Common Travel Area continue to follow an appropriate timetable of remote learning from home for the remainder of this term, unless it is necessary for them to attend school in person during March, for example, for the purpose of practical assessment for the alternative certification model for national qualifications.

At this point, the Scottish Government does not advise that any pupils travel to Scotland from countries on the acute risk list (often called the 'red list'), but will keep this under review ahead of next term. Any travel in this respect would currently be in line with Scottish Government regulations regarding managed isolation.

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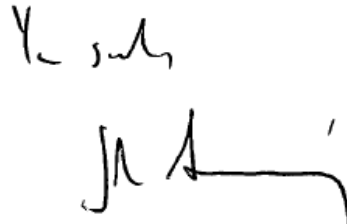


I agree that managed isolation raises significant child protection and wellbeing concerns for children. Where pupils are travelling to schools from countries not on the red list and given the regulated environment that can be provided in a boarding school setting, we agree that these pupils should be able to observe their isolation period at their boarding school. The Scottish Government will look to amend regulations to support this position and provide an exemption for this group and we will ensure you are kept up to date on the progress of this.

To support this approach, it will be necessary for schools to continue to carefully prepare, as I know you have been doing, for the return of international pupils and ensure their approach is Covid-safe. There are a number of specific mitigations that will need to be put in place and we will set these out in guidance to the sector. These mitigations will include, for example, arrangement of Covid-secure transfers from the airport, including via taxi or private/school buses with appropriate spacing and masks; supervised single room isolation, or small bubbles of up to 5 individuals (where pupils have travelled from the same area, and in the same age-range where possible); appropriate testing arrangements in school in line with testing currently advised for isolation periods and wider school return; and full compliance with current FACTS guidance.

I fully appreciate the co-operation from the independent sector throughout the pandemic to date, and encourage you to continue to work closely with Scottish Government officials as they develop more detailed guidance for the residential sector over the wider return to school in April.

I am copying this letter to the Scottish Council of Independent Schools who are also actively involved in discussion on this issue.



JOHN SWINNEY

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