

Mr Robin Swann MLA

Minister of Health
Castle Buildings
Stormont BT4 3SQ



15 February 2021

From Maxine Murphy-Higgins, chair NIC-ICTU Education Trade Union Group.

Dear Minister Swann

I write to you again on behalf of Education Trade Union Group of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions to request that you give priority for vaccination to the entire school workforce but particularly those who work in special schools.

On the 1 February, when you and the Minister of Health announced a decision to vaccinate some special school staff it was received by the media and the public as well as some MLAs as a move which in the words of the Minister of Education would “ease the anxiety of parents and carers as well as staff working in special schools”. Unfortunately, after expectations being raised, staff in special schools now find that most will not receive the vaccine while no extra mitigation measures have been put in place to protect them.

Staff within special school settings have difficulty implementing social distancing from their pupils and while some are provided with essential PPE as part of their day-to-day roles this is often compromised when supporting pupils with learning difficulties.

The Education Trade Union Group are disappointed that special school principals have been placed in the difficult position of having to choose which staff within their schools received the vaccine. At the Education Committee last week, the Minister of Education stated that he supported providing the vaccine for all special school staff and that he had put a paper to the executive supporting this position.

Since then, it is reported that throughout England 65 councils have now prioritised vaccination for special schools. This is in line with the JCVI guidance which advises flexibility and recognises that those “at risk of transmitting infection to multiple vulnerable persons or other staff in a healthcare environment, were of higher priority for vaccination than those health and social care workers at lower risk” (<https://app.box.com/s/iddfb4ppwkmjtusir2tc/file/763385137691>) We are also aware that the community and voluntary sector in Belfast were prioritised for vaccination we therefore believe that you do have the power to prioritise the education workforce.

The simple fact is that special school staff do not feel safe and have not been reassured by your department that they are safe. The Education Group of Trade unions repeat our request for an urgent meeting to discuss the situation in our schools and the measures that will be taken by your department to protect them.

Faternally

Maxine Murphy-Higgins

Chair, NIC-ICTU Education Trade Union Group