

**Jersey Public Accounts Committee  
COVID-19 Response Review  
March 2022**

1. The NASUWT welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) review into Jersey's COVID-19 response.
2. The NASUWT – The Teachers' Union – represents teachers and headteachers in Jersey and across the United Kingdom.

**GENERAL COMMENTS**

3. The COVID-19 pandemic posed unprecedented challenges to governments around the entire globe.
4. The pandemic also had significant impacts on education systems, as schools were closed for extended periods, with in-person teaching being replaced by online learning.
5. The challenges were not just felt by the Government, but directly by teachers.
6. When the initial period of school closure was announced, teachers had to adapt at breakneck speed to ensure that education continued. This included devising and developing effective systems for online learning to take place, which no one had been trained to do, and no one had predicted could happen only a few days before.

7. Teachers were at the forefront of Jersey's response to the pandemic. They ensured that schools remained physically open to guarantee that key workers and vulnerable children were cared for and offered an education. Many gladly gave up their holiday periods to ensure the island continued to function.
8. Although it is clear that teachers went above and beyond what was required, many feel that the Government has not recognised this. Indeed, as the pandemic has progressed, rather than acknowledging the sacrifices that teachers made, the Government has continued to demand ever more from teachers, whilst ignoring their concerns and pursuing policies that have seen the virus spread through schools and teachers having higher infection rates than the general population.
9. Different governments reacted in different ways to the challenge the virus presented. For example, while most countries opted for policies that reduced the transmission of the virus, some went further and looked to completely suppress the virus.
10. Virus suppression and elimination was the approach favoured by Guernsey and the Isle of Man, which both achieved local elimination of the virus by adopting a strict closed-borders approach, and as a consequence only had limited periods of lockdown. This allowed relative normality to return to the education system quickly, with very few restrictions and therefore little disruption after the initial wave had passed.
11. On the other hand, Jersey, after an initial lockdown, did not adopt the same closed-borders approach. Subsequently, the island suffered further waves of infections, continuing restrictions on education and schools, and the subsequent disruption that was avoided in Guernsey and the Isle of Man.

12. This divergence in approach can also be seen in the official infection and death statistics. Taking into account that Guernsey has a population roughly two thirds the size of Jersey, both Guernsey's infection levels (13k vs 35k) and death levels (31 vs 109 at the time of writing) are substantially lower than Jersey's.
13. The increased levels of infection in Jersey will have had a detrimental impact on education because, at the very least, more pupils and teachers would have become infected and missed time from school.

### **SPECIFIC COMMENTS**

#### **Q1) How did you work with the Government of Jersey to respond to the needs and concerns of your members during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

14. The engagement with the Government of Jersey during the pandemic is best described as variable.
15. On the positive side, weekly meetings were established between the Human Resources (HR) department and the trade unions, which allowed for regular updates to be given and concerns to be raised.
16. However, this positive engagement was punctuated by decisions being made by the Government with little or no consultation or prior warning. A prime example of this was the decision to replace self-isolation of close contacts with PCR testing. This was announced via a press release to the NASUWT 20 minutes before its publication, despite the change having a potentially huge impact on schools.
17. This had the unfortunate effect that the NASUWT had to respond publicly with our concerns, rather than through a process of constructive dialogue.

18. In addition, the NASUWT was concerned that meetings were often focused on information-giving rather than genuine consultation. As a result, it was often felt that the Government was merely playing lip-service to the legitimate concerns of teachers through their Trade Unions, including the NASUWT.
19. When decisions were made, there was often little in the way of scientific evidence provided to support the decision. Again, requests for the evidence to be disclosed went unanswered, or were provided via general updates that failed to adequately address the concerns that were being raised.
20. It appeared that over the course of the pandemic the Government became less inclined to listen and consult with the representatives of the workforce in good time, and more likely to make announcements directly to the media.
21. Although contact with HR was regular, it was regrettable that there were few, if any, opportunities to discuss issues with the employer in the guise of the States Employment Board.
22. With regard to education, there was a critical three-month period between March and June 2021 where there was effectively no Education Minister in place.
23. The Chief Minister relieved Deputy Macon of his duties on 25 March, taking over the role himself. Deputy Wickenden was then appointed on 29 June.
24. This was a critical time in the pandemic, and having, effectively, a vacuum was deeply regrettable, as it meant that issues could not be raised with Ministers.

**Q2. How do you believe your communications with the Government of Jersey have influenced decisions made on resourcing, staffing, and policies including the Co-Funded Payroll Scheme? Were you satisfied with the level of transparency of Government decisions on issues related to Covid-19 which had a direct impact on your members?**

25. The NASUWT is not in a position to comment on the first part of this question, as it does not make decisions with regard to resourcing and staffing.
26. That said, the NASUWT was concerned, particularly in the Autumn Term of 2021 and Spring Term of 2022, that the Government of Jersey failed to adequately prepare for the predictable wave of infections that followed the relaxation of restrictions.
27. There are long-standing issues around the low numbers of available supply teachers. This severely compounded the issues created by decisions that effectively let the virus spread rapidly through schools.
28. The resulting severe shortage of teachers led to significant increases in workload, potentially allowed the virus to spread even faster, and ultimately led to schools being partially closed to some pupils in January 2022.
29. With regard to the transparency of decisions, far too often, and particularly towards the end of 2021, more and more decisions were announced via press releases, normally without any evidence to support them.
30. This resulted in the basis for decisions being completely opaque. Often, decisions such as the removal of self-isolation for close contacts seemed to be directly contrary to published scientific evidence.

Briefings from the Scientific and Technical Advisory Cell (STAC) often did not address the underlying concerns being raised.

31. It was inevitable that throughout the pandemic, comparisons were made between Jersey and Guernsey, as the latter adopted very different approaches. The opaqueness of the decision making in Jersey was often amplified as it appeared to ignore steps that were seen as being highly effective in Guernsey.

**Q3. Overall, are you satisfied with the clarity of the communications from the Government of Jersey over the course of the Pandemic? How (if at all) did communication with and from Government change over the course of the COVID-19 Pandemic?**

32. In addition to the opaqueness of decision making stated above, there were issues with the clarity of communications to schools and teachers.
33. Instructions and guidance were not always clear and were sometimes given without sufficient time for schools to prepare. It was often the case that where a general communication was issued by the Government, it was then left to schools to try to determine how to apply the changes in schools.
34. An example of this was in January 2021, when schools were fully reopened after the Christmas break. Insufficient guidance and poor communications led to pupils and teachers being told to wear hats and coats in class, and in some cases even to bring blankets to keep warm in order for ventilation to be increased to prevent virus transmission. This was not conducive to effective education, yet it was virtually the only mitigation in schools.

35. There were also several instances of contradictory messaging, particularly around the use of face coverings.
36. At a number of points in the pandemic, general instructions were issued that face coverings should be worn where social distancing was not possible. In schools, however, face coverings were not reintroduced. This led to increasing concern for members that their health, safety and welfare were not priority issues for the Government. This was particularly true in the run-up to Christmas 2021 when infection rates were increasing rapidly yet little was done to prevent the spread.
37. A similar situation existed with the rollout of the vaccine. In January 2021, the NASUWT called for teachers to be prioritised for the vaccine for a variety of reasons. In February, it was announced that teachers could apply for priority vaccination; however, the NASUWT discovered this via the *Jersey Evening Post*, rather than from the Government. The application process was extremely unclear and ultimately teachers were not prioritised for vaccination.
38. A further issue with the communications was that they changed over time to being the main route of announcing changes to the Government's response to the pandemic, often given at short notice with little time for schools to adapt and prepare, rather than through a process of consultation.

**Q4. How do you think that the Government of Jersey could have improved the support that your members received?**

39. One of the major issues throughout the pandemic was a feeling that schools must remain fully open regardless of the impact on pupils and staff.

40. Much of the time schools were the only workplaces where large numbers of unvaccinated people mixed in close proximity with little or no mitigations in place.
41. Teachers and education staff therefore felt like collateral damage in the pursuit of schools remaining open. This led to teachers feeling undervalued, and put at risk, particularly when guidance to the public was specifically not applied to schools.
42. In addition, as described above, there was a perception that the Government was not listening to the concerns of teachers, as few changes were made when issues were raised.
43. This approach, no doubt, led directly to teachers being infected in the workplace. The numbers who suffered serious illness or Long COVID due to exposure and infection in the workplace are difficult to quantify, but it is likely to be a large number.
44. To improve the support that was received, the Government should have been more open in its decision making and listened to the concerns of teachers. It should also have pre-empted the foreseeable consequences of its decisions, such as the high absence rates seen in schools in the autumn of 2021 and spring of 2022, and put measures in place to mitigate these.

**Q5. How did you identify and communicate concerns regarding the wellbeing of your members to the Government of Jersey during the COVID-19 Pandemic? Do you believe that these were adequately addressed?**

45. The NASUWT has an effective local structure which enables members to raise issues of concern with Workplace Representatives and the



local Negotiating Secretary. This system worked extremely well in identifying the concerns of members during the pandemic.

46. The NASUWT endeavoured to raise these concerns through the weekly meetings with HR, and this was useful in addressing the more minor issues that were being presented.
47. The more serious issues, however, tended to result from significant changes to policy that were not communicated with the NASUWT sufficiently in advance. This left little ability for the NASUWT to influence or even comment on changes before their announcement.
48. At several points through the pandemic, the NASUWT had to resort to writing directly to Ministers, including the Chief Minister, regarding the concerns that members were reporting.
49. Sadly, the responses from Ministers were often 'stock' responses, merely restating the Government's position. As such, it was rare for serious issues to be adequately addressed by the Government.
50. A prime example of this is the NASUWT writing to the Education Minister twice in the Autumn of 2021 to highlight concerns around the transmission of the virus in schools and requesting additional mitigations to be put in place. These requests were effectively ignored until January, when cases had risen so high that the Government's hand was forced and additional measures taken.

**Q6. Have you been offered the opportunity to play a role in developing "back to normal" plans with the Government of Jersey? If yes, were you satisfied with your ability to influence these plans?**

51. The NASUWT would assert that the Government has had a 'back to normal' approach for schools since the Autumn term. This is

exemplified by the removal of virtually all mitigations in schools in the Autumn of 2021, even when cases were rising sharply.

52. As a result, further mitigations had to be reintroduced in January 2022, three months after the NASUWT publicly called for their reintroduction.
53. This demonstrates the lack of engagement with the Union over 'back to normal' plans, or any other major planning. The NASUWT has merely been informed of changes once they have been decided, rather than as an active participant in the decision-making process.
54. This has again undermined trust and confidence in the Government's approach, as it has not actively sought to respond to concerns that have been raised.
55. The approach of information-giving as a replacement for genuine constructive consultation now appears to have permeated into other areas of the NASUWT's interaction with the Government. This includes the current Education Reform Programme where the NASUWT has repeatedly raised concerns that the process is falling substantially short of the engagement required and expected.

**Q7. What lessons do you think the Government of Jersey could learn from its response to the COVID-19 Pandemic and its work with unions during this period?**

56. The main lesson that needs to be learned is that the workforce must not be taken for granted.
57. The Government's response has been punctuated by public announcements, made at speed without proper consultation with the representatives of the workforce.

58. This has undermined trust and confidence in the Government's approach, especially when measures taken in neighbouring islands that were successful were not replicated in Jersey.
59. The reluctance of the Government to take proactive steps in the face of a rapidly deteriorating situation, such as in the Autumn of 2021, led to a significant impact on schools, both in terms of the human cost of unnecessary infections and the educational cost of disrupted schools, both of which could have been avoided if the Government had been more open to working with the NASUWT.
60. Engagement with the trade unions should not merely extend to information giving.
61. Whilst the NASUWT recognises that in the early days of the pandemic decisions needed to be taken quickly and consultation was not possible, this did not apply to later in the pandemic, and especially to decisions around the relaxation of measures.
62. In future, should a similar situation arise, the Government should work in partnership with the trade unions to ensure that the concerns of the workforce are listened to and taken into account prior to announcements being made. Giving 20 minutes' notice of a press release announcing major changes is simply unacceptable.
63. More widely, the Government needs to reflect on the inadequacies of its approach throughout the pandemic and how it can learn from these in its business-as-usual activities.
64. Deficiencies, such as treating meetings as information-giving sessions, are still continuing in a number of fora, including the education reform programme mentioned above. This indicates that lessons are not being learned, but instead are being compounded.

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