

2021.10.05

6 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet of the Minister for Health and Social Services regarding the medical rationale for ongoing restrictions on singing in schools (OQ.211/2021):

What is the medical rationale behind the ongoing restrictions on singing in schools and what assessment has been made of any negative impact of these restrictions on children and when does the Minister expect these restrictions to be lifted, please?

The Deputy of St. Ouen (The Minister for Health and Social Services):

Public health guidance on music for children and young people no longer recommends a cap on the number of children participating in singing activities. The current guidance advises to take into consideration general COVID-safe behaviours, such as physical distancing, hygiene, cleaning and ventilation, to ensure risks are kept to a minimum, while allowing the benefits of this important aspect of learning and education to continue. There is well-documented evidence that singing is a risk factor in the dispersal of both respiratory droplets and aerosols, which can put both the singers and audience at risk of COVID. In comparison to older adults, school-age children are an under-vaccinated cohort and there has been ongoing COVID-19 transmission among these age groups for some time. Despite often having a milder form of the disease, there is evidence of long COVID in children and we do not yet know of any longer-term effects childhood COVID could have in later life. For children who do catch COVID, it can also negatively impact their education, mental health and overall well-being. The rationale to have protective measures in place while singing is based on broader public health and well-being, rather than just the medical health of the individual. The Minister for Children and Education has made a commitment to keep all these protective measures under review, recognising the balance between reducing the risk of COVID transmission and supporting children and young people's learning. I understand that the Minister is giving active consideration to school performances, including singing, in order to ensure these activities can take place safely.

4.6.1 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

I thank the Minister for his answer. I want to know about the research that this advice has been based on because the current and most up-to-date research states that there is no increased risk from singing at the same volume as talking. Indeed, in terms of wind instruments and brass instruments, this is safer than talking in the same risk level as breathing. It seems to me that the advice is out of date. Would the Minister for Health and Social Services commit to reviewing the medical advice that has been given to the Education Department in this area to make sure that it is up to date and also to make sure that it is taking into account and fully weighing up the benefits of singing in a group, which include feeling of togetherness, regulating heart rate, reducing stress levels and depression and a feeling of social well-being, to make sure that this is fully weighed up against any potential negative impacts?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Yes, I give the commitment the Deputy seeks because I know that our public health teams are reviewing research as it comes through. I invite the Deputy to share that research with our team. But I would remind her that we have been here before, that there is conflicting research. I refer the Deputy to a written question of some time ago in which the research used by the team was listed with links to very well-researched papers. All that is out there; it is not necessarily all one way. But we, I suppose, take a protective view until the question is absolutely certain. But we will certainly work with the Deputy to understand the latest research.

4.6.2 Deputy I. Gardiner:

I would like the Minister to answer, if I am correct there is a 15-minute limit for the assemblies. If the 15-minute limit exists, where did the limit come from; on which medical advice is it based?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

I have the Public Health guidance on music in front of me. I do not see any specific limits to 15 minutes but this may be something that schools have introduced of their own volition. There is reference to sort of ensuring that there is time for cleaning and there are spaces left between the use of rooms where there has been singing, but I have not read a specific reference to 15 minutes.

4.6.3 Deputy I. Gardiner:

From what I am aware, there are schools who are not doing assemblies because the time is too short, for whatever reason. Could the Minister's team work with the Education team to make sure that assemblies, which are very important in children's development and children's consolidation, will be able to take place within the guidelines that exist now?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Yes, both I and the Minister for Children and Education wish schooling to be returned to as near normal as possible, while being kept as safe as we can make it. We will certainly speak. I will ensure that our team ... I know they are in contact with schools and have worked very well together.

[11:15]

I will take up that point and ensure that if schools want to have assemblies but have felt unable to, that we do what we can to assist that to happen.

4.6.4 Deputy M. Tadier:

I am trying to understand from the Minister's answer just what has changed since these questions have been asked in the past. As far as I understand, and the Minister can clarify, most children have not been vaccinated. The vast majority and the advice previously was that airborne particles from singing would be very dangerous. Can the Minister clarify what has changed in terms of the risk?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

The risks will not have changed, if the scientific evidence is believed. The incidents of COVID might be different in that there are perhaps not the surges that we have seen in the past because of the effect of vaccination in the larger population. But what we have at the moment is there is no longer any regulation around this, there are no prohibitions. There is guidance that is available for all people who are singing or playing music, whether outside the schools or in. This is, as you would expect, very much around the usual rules that we follow about ventilation, cleaning, outdoor settings where weather permits - but that is unlikely as we go into the winter, I guess - staggered start and finish times, consider the size of each facility, good hygiene, use of shared equipment should be avoided, just cleaned and disinfected. It seems to me very much how we would want and have got used to keeping places and people safe.

4.6.5 Deputy M. Tadier:

My concern is about choice and that while adults who have been vaccinated or have had the choice to be vaccinated might want to partake in choirs, pupils at school do not have that choice. They may not have been offered a vaccine and they may have limited choice about whether to partake. Given the fact that masks are still being worn in communal areas in schools, presumably to limit the

transmission of coronavirus for those who have not been vaccinated, what is the logic in encouraging young children in close proximity to sing when he has told us in the past that there is a greater risk of transmission from that?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

There is no prohibition on children singing in choirs. The risks are recognised and, therefore, we need to mitigate against those risks, as we do in all our other activities during COVID. The guidance says: “If groups are participating, 1 metre distancing at the very least, ideally 2 metres, should be kept between anyone singing and anyone else present; 3 to 5 metres should be kept between any participants facing opposite others present. Adhering to safe physical distancing will determine the numbers able to safely participate in indoor settings when groups are not all from the same bubble.” Of course if those singing are within the same bubble you adjust accordingly because they are carrying out all sorts of other activities together. There is a good structure in place to guide this activity safely, I believe.

4.6.6 Deputy L.M.C. Doublet:

The Minister has answered one of my questions in that he has not said that whole school singing is prohibited, whereas there is a policy in place in schools at the moment where that is not allowed. But he mentioned taking a protective stance of children and I wanted just to reflect on the current increase in mental health problems, especially among children and the increased importance of community singing in terms of community-building and well-being, especially at this time coming up to Christmas and organising carol concerts and whole-school events. Will the Minister ensure his department considers and communicates the health and the well-being benefits of group-singing and these events to the Education Department, alongside any research that is discussing the negative impacts, please?

The Deputy of St. Ouen:

Yes, and I confirm we do. As I said in my answer to the question initially, we do recognise the therapeutic effects of singing together and the community effects that creates to learning and education. It is a question of balancing the risks. I hope that as we continue to learn to live with COVID and manage the pandemic, the situation will ease and children will be able to sing together in an easier and perhaps less restrictive way. We will continue to balance those risks.