

Updated PHA/EA Support Arrangements – January 2022

## **PRIMARY AND POST-PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

Dear Colleagues,

The emergence of the Omicron variant has led to a steep increase in Covid-19 case numbers in Northern Ireland and this is now impacting on all of society including schools.

We are mindful of the added difficulties that this will generate for school leaders at what has already been an extremely difficult and challenging time for those operating on the front line in education. Throughout the pandemic school leaders have responded to cases of Covid-19 in their school community and will have the risk assessment processes refined for their setting. The work undertaken in this regard, on top of normal duties, exemplifies the care and dedication prevalent at all levels of the school leadership, teaching and ancillary professions.

### **1. Current Levels of Transmission**

Given the high numbers of cases and dramatic increase in community transmission, schools are now seeing increased numbers of staff and pupils who test positive for the virus as school infection levels reflect those in the local community.

Evidence shows, however, that Omicron, whilst more transmissible than previous variants, is also generally less severe in its effects with a reduced risk of serious illness and hospitalisation. Covid-19 vaccines (and in particular the booster dose) are effective in mitigating the worst effects of the Omicron variant. Although Omicron has resulted in many more cases overall, we are not seeing greatly increased numbers of people in hospital. This is a key difference from the Delta wave.

As with Delta, the Omicron variant also presents in the vast majority of children as a mild, self-limiting illness. All adults have had the opportunity to be fully vaccinated and to receive a booster dose, and clinics remain open for those people who have not yet taken up the offer of vaccination.

In line with current policy only those children and young people who have tested positive for coronavirus and those who are symptomatic awaiting test results should be isolated from the school environment.

The purpose of this letter is to outline changes to the operational support arrangements for schools provided by the PHA and EA. The changes will help both organisations to utilise available resources in order to support schools most effectively. PHA will continue to provide input and support in complex school situations following referral by EA.

Please review sections 2 and 3 of this letter along with **Annexe A** to understand how support arrangements are changing for your school setting in response to the extremely high case numbers seen since the emergence of the Omicron variant.

### **2. Actions for schools**

Schools should continue to apply the DE COVID Guidance and where possible, intensify efforts to implement the range of mitigations which are recommended in schools. <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-schools-and-educational-settings-northern-ireland>

These mitigations include:

- regular and frequent use of lateral flow testing to detect cases in order that they can isolate. This includes primary school children when identified as close contacts;
- ventilation of rooms;
- carbon dioxide monitoring;

- reducing unnecessary contact;
- using masks;
- cleaning and regular sanitising remain important at this time.

Almost all schools will now have had significant experience in managing the response to Covid-19 in their school community. As was the case last term, school leaders in mainstream schools are not routinely being asked to identify close contacts of cases in the school setting. Parents and staff are encouraged to let schools know if they contract Covid-19 and school leaders should issue “Warn and Inform” communications so that staff and parents are aware that there are cases in the class or group.

The guidance for cases and close contacts is being updated regularly to respond to the changing epidemiological situation and has changed significantly since last term.

The most up to date advice is available at the links below:

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) | nidirect](#)  
[Information for schools, colleges, universities and parents | HSC Public Health Agency \(hscni.net\)](#)

One of the key changes since last term that school leaders should be aware of is that **daily lateral flow testing of school age close contacts identified by PHA is now advised for all school aged children including those of primary school age**. Post-Primary pupils and all staff without symptoms should continue to test twice a week and test daily if identified as a close contact. Anyone with symptoms of COVID should isolate and book a PCR test.

As mentioned above, the prevalence of Covid-19 in schools reflects that in the community and given high community prevalence at the minute, we expect schools to see larger numbers of cases than in previous waves.

The PHA has developed a short guide for schools to refer to when there is an increase in the number of cases in the school community and this is included as **Annexe A** of this document.

**During this period of high community prevalence, it is no longer necessary to discuss the option of extended testing with PHA before making a decision on offering extended testing.** School leaders should ask asymptomatic members of a class or recognised group with multiple cases to take a one-off Lateral Flow Test when they return home. Please note that LFTs can be used in primary and secondary school aged children for this purpose. PCRs are no longer to be used in asymptomatic people, and schools should not recommend PCR testing of groups.

### 3. Support for schools

The Education Authority helpline will continue to be the first point of contact should schools require support and where necessary issues will be referred to PHA by the EA team.

Due to the high volume of calls regarding confirmed cases in school communities the EA is updating the contact mechanism for schools to improve the prioritisation of calls. Schools will now complete an online form which will be triaged for support:

Complex cases will be responded to quickly and in person by helpline staff through a return phone call. Where specific public health advice is required to resolve the situation the call will be referred by EA to the PHA.

Less urgent requests of a more general nature on small numbers of cases in a school, where to find guidance or to discuss broader management issues will be referred to the school’s Cross Organisational Link Officer. Simple cases of fact checking will be provided with a tailored response by email.

**This change will take place at 8am on Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> January.** The EA Confirmed Cases phone number will not operate after this time. Instead you should use the online form which is linked below.

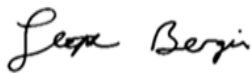
**To request support from EA with a complex case please use the following link:**

<https://forms.office.com/r/SmfZwYLZPh>

This link will also be made available on the C2K Exchange C19 Resources Page.

In the coming weeks it is expected that numbers of confirmed cases will remain high across our communities, but this wave will dissipate over time. Current pressures will then reduce and the support model to schools will then be reviewed again to ensure that support remains available where it is most needed.

Yours sincerely



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“To inspire, support and challenge all our Children and Young People to be the best that they can be.”

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