

Annexe A

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Information for Primary and Post Primary school providers

You will be aware there has been a steep increase in Covid-19 case numbers in the community over recent weeks (in the week ending 7th January 2022 it was estimated that 1 in 15 and 1 in 20 people in NI had COVID-19¹). Given the high numbers of cases and dramatic increase in community transmission, we expect that schools will also see increased numbers of staff and pupils who test positive for the virus as schools reflect the levels of infection in the local community. Evidence shows that Omicron, whilst more transmissible than previous variants, is also often less severe in its effects². There is also emerging evidence that COVID-19 vaccines (and in particular the booster dose) are effective in mitigating the worst effects of the Omicron variant. Unvaccinated people are still at risk of severe illness, including the need for hospitalisation.

Contact Tracing

The aim of contact tracing is to identify people who may have been in contact with confirmed cases and advise them:

- If they meet the definition of a close contact
- If they need to take action (self-isolation and/or testing)
- To be aware of the symptoms and signs of infection
- What to do if they develop symptoms or have a positive LFT.

¹

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/coronaviruscovid19infectionsurveys/pilot/14january2022#percentage-of-people-who-had-covid-19-in-england-wales-northern-ireland-and-scotland>

² SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern and variants under investigation- Technical briefing 34 (publishing.service.gov.uk)

Early in a pandemic, or if a new variant emerges for which there is limited information on its severity, the aim of contact tracing is to interrupt chains of transmission of infection in the community. This is sometimes referred to as the 'containment' phase of the pandemic response when tight control may, in theory, suppress transmission completely.

Later in the pandemic response, if transmission continues, the aim of contact tracing changes and is focussed instead on delaying the onset of the greatest pressure from the pandemic to allow other control measures such as vaccination to be rolled out. However, once there is widespread community transmission, as is currently happening with the Omicron surge, contact tracing alone can mitigate, but is not able to stop the spread of disease. At that point, vaccination, ventilation, hand hygiene, masks (when appropriate) and social distancing become the main protective measures.

What to expect when managing COVID-19 in your school

Given the very high levels of community transmission we are seeing currently, we expect multiple COVID-19 cases within school settings. The key mitigation is the twice-weekly use of lateral flow testing by staff and pupils to detect cases early in order that they can isolate quickly. Other mitigations remain important to minimise transmission including:

- ventilation of rooms;
- carbon dioxide monitoring;
- reducing unnecessary contact;
- using face coverings;
- cleaning and regular sanitising.

The self-isolation and testing policy and guidance for both cases and close contacts is continually reviewed and updated to reflect current scientific advice, and there are likely to be more changes during this current wave. Consequently we would recommend that you refer to NI Direct to ensure that you are accessing the most up to date information:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-self-isolating-and-close-contacts>

The definition of a close contact in a school setting can be accessed here:

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/information-schools-colleges-universities-and-parents/contact-tracing-0>

Multiple Cases in a school setting

Assessing multiple cases associated with a particular setting, such as a class in a school, needs to take into account the community transmission rate and cases. For example if there is very low community transmission but multiple cases associated with a particular class in a school, this may reflect transmission within that class. However, with the very high community transmission we are experiencing, we expect to see more cases associated with a school or community setting and this does not necessarily reflect transmission in the class or school.

Almost all schools have managed COVID-19 clusters and outbreaks in the last term. In discussion with school leaders, in many of these scenarios voluntary extended testing was offered to the remainder of the group, with a one-off lateral flow test (LFT) offered to post-primary and PCR to primary school pupils. It is highly likely that with current levels of community transmission the threshold of having 20% within a group test positive within 10 days of the first case could be reached more frequently. During this period if the threshold is reached it is no longer necessary to discuss extended testing with PHA before making a decision on offering this option. To facilitate prompt action the PHA will provide a template letter (available on the C19 Resources Page on C2k Exchange) for school leaders to use to ask asymptomatic members of a class or recognised group to take a one-off LFT. Please note that LFTs are now to be used in primary school aged children for this purpose and **PCRs are no longer to be used in asymptomatic people**. If the children are already at school, they do not need to leave school immediately but the letter can be sent home with the child asking for them to complete the test before returning to school.

Additional Guidance and Support

During this period, if School Leaders require additional advice or support, the Education Authority helpline will be the first point of contact (<https://forms.office.com/r/SmfZwYLZPh>). This link is also available on the C2K Exchange C19 Resources Page. EA can escalate issues to PHA if necessary.

What to do if a pupil or staff member develops new symptoms

The current advice remains that if a child aged 5 and over, or a staff member, develops **new symptoms of COVID-19 they should isolate and arrange a PCR**. A PCR test should then be booked via gov.uk or by telephoning 119. This applies even if they have had COVID-19 within the previous 90 days or have had a negative lateral flow result on the same day as developing symptoms or a negative PCR test prior to developing symptoms.

The most common symptoms of COVID-19 are recent onset of:

- A new continuous cough and/or
- A high temperature and/or
- A loss of, or change in, normal sense of taste or smell (anosmia).

Close contacts identified in non-school settings

Close contacts in all other settings eg a household or the community will be identified by the PHA Contact Tracing Service (CTS). The CTS will directly contact the case or their parents / guardians and identify close contacts.

The current wave of Omicron is expected to peak in coming weeks. These arrangements will be reviewed mid-February 2022.