



CORONAVIRUS GUIDANCE NOTE TO ALL EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

Schools have been playing an essential role throughout the pandemic, helping keep children safe while providing a quality education, and we want to thank school leaders, staff and parents for all of the work that they have been doing in the face of the challenges that this has created.

In his letter of 9th September the Chief Medical Officer outlined that we must continue to strike a balance between safeguarding children's education and wellbeing and measures to contain COVID. Having examined the evidence, he is confident that now is the right time to introduce this more targeted approach to the identification of close contacts in schools. He stated that he understands that some children, parents and staff may be worried about the change in approach.

From 10 September, the Public Health Agency's (PHA) Contact Tracing Service (CTS) is the lead body responsible for contact tracing within schools. This approach replaces the previous school-led process to identify contacts of COVID cases with a more targeted PHA-led approach, with support from school leaders in certain circumstances. The aim of this change is to reduce the potential for large numbers of pupils being required to self-isolate and reduce the amount of time spent by schools on contact tracing, while still helping to protect pupils and staff.

While there is always a need to balance the risks and the benefits, it is important that children remain in school as much as possible. We also need to ensure that we do what we can to stop the spread of the virus by identifying individuals who have had the closest contact with a case and are at highest risk of getting COVID. Parents and young people should be reminded of the symptoms of COVID and encouraged to isolate and seek a PCR test as soon as any symptoms develop.

As there continues to be relatively large numbers of positive cases in the community, it is inevitable that the number of cases in schools will reflect case numbers.

The New, More Focused Approach

The new, more focused approach to contact tracing in schools means that fewer, and in many cases no, close contacts will be identified in the case's class. This is in line with the agreed approach being taken forward by the PHA based upon the prevailing public health position. This is a very different approach to that we have been taking until now and it is recognised that this may cause anxiety among the school community. The studies referenced in the CMO's letter show that the previous approach resulted in many pupil close contacts self-isolating unnecessarily and is therefore no longer justifiable.

Schools may receive notification of a positive case directly from a parent before the PHA has contacted the family. This is expected in the new approach and should not cause concern. Schools are reminded that they are not expected to undertake contact tracing, and should not take any further action, beyond sending the "warn and inform" note to parents.



Cases receive a text to inform them of the PCR result – it can take until the next day for these positive results to be transmitted to the CTS. The CTS already contacts each positive case in Northern Ireland – contact tracers phone them and ask for details of people they have been in close contact with. This call will most likely be after the school has been alerted by the parent about the child’s positive result (through normal absence reporting), therefore the school will often already know about a case before the CTS has undertaken the tracing process and established what school the child attends.

As the PHA is now leading on all contact tracing, schools should not seek to identify close contacts or take any follow up action unless requested to do so by the PHA. **Schools should therefore not send pupils home or ask them to self-isolate as close contacts.** PHA will take forward contact tracing and identification. This mirrors the approach in other settings, such as workplaces. This model is in line with the approach being taken to schools in England, Scotland and Wales and should see fewer pupils being asked to self-isolate, keeping more children in school. If the PHA needs to contact the school, this will be done proactively.

Circumstances When the CTS Will Contact Schools

The update to guidance last week outlined that the CTS may still need to contact schools in certain circumstances including:

- Difficulties identifying close contacts directly with parents or children due to age or issues with communication;
- Difficulty obtaining contact information for cases and/ or contacts;
- Complexities with particular risk or vulnerabilities needing joint assessment;
- Large clusters and outbreaks identified through on-going PHA surveillance.

In recent months the CTS has expanded its workforce in anticipation of case numbers growing.

What Schools Should Continue To Do

We still ask that schools continue to focus on the range of mitigations they have in place to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission including:

- cleaning, ventilation, face coverings, consistent groups and regular lateral flow devices testing for all staff and post-primary pupils in mainstream schools;
- vaccination is available to all staff and some pupils.

PHA has developed ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ to help explain what these changes mean for both schools and parents, they are available at [Contact tracing in schools – Questions and Answers | HSC Public Health Agency \(hscni.net\)](#).

The Department and EA will continue to liaise with PHA to ensure that the new system operates effectively, and we can keep as many pupils in school, safely, as possible.

DE Restart and COVID Response Team