

COVID-19 Information for Primary, Post Primary and Special Schools

26 April 2022

The PHA recognises the significant burden the pandemic has imposed on school leaders and acknowledges your willingness to respond and adapt to each new set of challenges we have faced along the way. The purpose of this update is to highlight the recent changes to test and trace processes in Northern Ireland on 22nd April 2022 which are of most relevance to schools.

You will be aware that on 24 March 2022 the Health Minister issued a COVID-19 Test, Trace and Protect Transition Plan [COVID-19 Test, Trace and Protect Transition Plan | Department of Health \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](#). This recognised that we are now in a very different stage of the pandemic. In the context of an effective vaccination programme, high levels of population immunity and new treatments for those at highest risk, it is time to move to a more targeted approach, focusing test and trace activity on those who are most vulnerable and at highest risk of serious illness should they contract COVID-19.

The changes to testing, contact tracing and self-isolation which came into effect on 22 April are available at [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): contact tracing | nidirect](#) and [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): self-isolating and close contacts | nidirect](#) . Those of most interest to schools are as follows:

- Close contacts of a case, whether vaccinated or unvaccinated, will not be advised to isolate or take a test. Instead they will be asked to be alert for any symptoms of COVID-19 and, if they arise, to take a lateral flow test in line with NI Direct guidance on testing and isolation.
- There is no change to the guidance on isolation for people who test positive.

- PCR testing is no longer recommended for people with or without symptoms. The main public testing sites have closed.
- People with symptoms are instead being advised to self-isolate and take a rapid lateral flow device (LFD) test. If this is negative they can return to work or school.
- The NI Contact Tracing Service (CTS) will contact people who register a positive LFD test on gov.uk, but they will no longer seek information on their wider community contacts. Instead they will provide appropriate public advice and guidance to household members of positive cases.
- People who live in the same household as a positive case will not be advised to take a test. Instead they will be asked to be alert for any symptoms of COVID-19 and if they arise to take a lateral flow test in line with NI Direct guidance on testing and isolation.
- If a staff member or pupil is identified as a household close contact, the advice to them on testing and self-isolation will be the same whether they are vaccinated or unvaccinated. They can attend school and do not need to take a test unless symptomatic.
- While the routine identification and notification of close contacts in the community outside the household setting will cease, if someone is aware that they have been in close contact with someone who has tested positive, they should be alert for symptoms and follow the general guidance to test if they develop them.
- Regular asymptomatic lateral flow testing is no longer recommended for people in the wider population, including staff or pupils in mainstream schools. Twice weekly lateral flow tests will continue in special schools after Easter; this will be kept under review.

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

If a child aged 5 and over, or a staff member, develops new symptoms of COVID-19 they should isolate and take a lateral flow test. This applies even if they have had COVID-19 within the previous 90 days.

Nursery Schools and Pre-School Settings, Primary Schools, Post-Primary Schools and EOTAS settings are no longer expected to provide LFD test kits to pupils or staff. Parents and staff members can order Lateral Flow Tests for symptomatic testing via:

- <https://www.gov.uk/order-coronavirus-rapid-lateral-flow-tests> ,
- by telephoning 119,
- or asking someone who is not symptomatic to collect them from the pharmacy collect service.

Special Schools in Northern Ireland will continue to be able to order LFD kits at present and should continue to supply them to pupils and staff.

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).

People may not have all of the symptoms or their symptoms may be similar to the cold or 'flu. They may vary for different age groups or different variants of the virus. If the LFD test is negative, they feel well enough and do not have a temperature, they can return to work or school.

Parents of children under five are encouraged to follow the guidance above. If the child develops symptoms and it is not possible to carry out a lateral flow test because the child will not tolerate the swab, parents and carers should take a cautious approach and avoid contact with vulnerable and older adults. They should also stay at home until they do not have a temperature and are well enough to return to school or childcare.

Multiple Cases in a school setting

Given the ongoing high levels of community transmission (in the week ending 16th April approximately 1 in 30 people in NI had COVID-19¹), multiple COVID-19 cases

¹ [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Infection Survey, UK - Office for National Statistics](#)

may continue to be seen in school settings. While high community transmission continues, multiple cases may not necessarily reflect transmission within the class or school. Nevertheless, mitigations remain important to minimise transmission, as set out in NI Direct, including:

- vaccination;
- room ventilation;
- carbon dioxide monitoring;
- reducing unnecessary contact;
- cleaning, regular sanitising and handwashing.

Almost all schools have managed COVID-19 clusters and outbreaks in the last term. In many of these scenarios voluntary extended testing was offered to the remainder of the group. This approach should no longer be used routinely given the context of the wider changes to testing policy, including the fact that lateral flow device packs are no longer able to be ordered for asymptomatic testing from gov.uk or by ringing 119.

Additional Guidance and Support

If school leaders require additional advice or support, the Education Authority helpline will continue to be the first point of contact for mainstream schools (<https://forms.office.com/r/SmfZwYLZPh>). This link is also available on the C2K Exchange C19 Resources Page. The PHA will continue to provide input and support in complex mainstream school situations following referral by EA. Special schools can continue to use the dedicated PHA email inbox.

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 before the end of June. We recommend that you refer to NI Direct to ensure that you are accessing the most up to date information [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) | nidirect](#)

These arrangements will kept under review in light of further policy changes from the Department of Health.