



Thank you

What did I say about not sending a newsletter out 'every other day'?☺. I do apologise and I am hoping that after this one, I will move towards monthly newsletters.

I would like to take this opportunity to say an absolutely massive and heartfelt thanks, to all of you, for your incredible support, patience and understanding. Little messages of understanding and supportive conversations at the school gate and in the playground have kept me going!!

I'm sure that you are aware through the media that I am no longer responsible for contact tracing. PHA have taken over this role. In the event that your child tests positive PHA will be in touch in order to ascertain who the close contacts are, for your child.

I have included a letter below from the Chief Medical Officer and a letter from the PHA that will be sent out if we have a

Our Keeping School Safe Charter

Going forward we will all (pupils, staff & parents) play a vital role in keeping school a safe place to be!! I am currently working on a Keeping School Safe Charter. I hope to have the charter ready for early next week, however in the meantime, I would ask for your support in letting me know if your child tests positive.

PLEASE TEXT THE COVID NUMBER - 07359 015420 WITH YOUR CHILD'S NAME & CLASS.

This will allow me to arrange for the classroom to be deep cleaned and to inform the staff and parents that there has been a positive case in school. Staff will be informed specifically of which child has tested positive, however parents will only be informed that there has been a positive case in a particular class.

Your child should attend school as normal, unless:

- Your child is unwell. Please continue to err on the side of caution. If you feel that your child might not be well enough to attend school, please don't send them in.
- Your child is showing symptoms of Covid. Arrange a PCR test for them and isolate until you receive the results.
- PHA have informed you that your child is a close contact. Arrange a PCR test for them and isolate until you receive the results.

Homework

The poor Y7s have already started homework and all other children will start next week. Just prior to Covid-19 we were engaging in a review of the Homework Policy within school. Unfortunately, this review was 'put very much on the back burner'. Teachers will use Seesaw on Monday to send a copy of the proposed Homework Policy which will be discussed at Board of Governors on Thursday 27 September. If you wish to speak to me about any aspect of it, please don't hesitate to contact me on 02893353280.

From the Chief Medical Officer
Prof Sir Michael McBride



Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

Mánnystrie O Poustie

www.health-ni.gov.uk

BY EMAIL

To: Parents, Pupils and the school community

Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
BELFAST
BT4 3SQ

Email: michael.mcbride@health-ni.gov.uk

Tel: 028 9052 0563

Date: 9 September 2021

Dear Parents, Pupils and the school community

As Chief Medical Officer I have been clear throughout this pandemic my view that keeping children in school must be a key priority for us all.

We all know that the COVID pandemic has been very damaging to the wellbeing of children, including their mental health, as well as to their education. Children from more disadvantaged backgrounds have been particularly negatively impacted.

As we progress through the pandemic response, we must continue to strike a balance between safeguarding children's education and wellbeing and measures to contain COVID.

Having examined the evidence, I am confident that now is the right time to introduce a more targeted approach to the identification of close contacts of COVID cases in schools. I understand that some children, parents and staff may be worried about the change in approach. I would like to take this opportunity to explain why this is in the best interests of our children and young people.

Schools are the best place for children and young people

School attendance is vitally important for children and young people. Multiple sources of evidence show that a lack of schooling increases inequalities, reduces the life chances of children and can exacerbate physical and mental health issues. School improves health, learning, socialisation and opportunities throughout childhood, adolescence and into adulthood.

A combination of school closures and COVID related absences have resulted in our children missing out on a significant amount of school during the last two academic years. While this was not something any of us would have wished for, at earlier stages of the pandemic the benefits to society of reducing the growth in the epidemic made this necessary. This is no longer the case.

Schools are safe places for children and staff

The public health grounds for keeping and supporting children at school are extremely strong. We have evidence from recently published reports from Scotland and England that the vast majority of those identified as school close contacts and sent home to isolate during the last academic year did not go on to develop COVID.

The English study found that over 98% of school close contacts did not develop COVID during the isolation period. Similarly the Scottish study found that 95% did not go on to develop COVID during the isolation period. Both included a period when Delta was emerging.

Public Health Agency (PHA) has analysed data on over 18,000 students from our own schools who were asked to isolate because they were close contacts in school and the findings are very similar to those from those in Scotland. These findings from across the UK are consistent and support the move to a more targeted approach to the identification of close contacts as the correct and proportionate approach at this stage in the pandemic.

Our schools have worked hard to introduce a range of measures designed to reduce the spread of COVID. These include increased cleaning, hand hygiene, face coverings in post primary schools and regular asymptomatic testing. All these measures contribute to further reducing the risk of COVID transmission.

Studies from the UK Office for National Statistics have consistently found that teachers are not at increased risk of dying from COVID compared to the general working-age population. More recently a Scottish study published in the British Medical Journal on 2 September 2021 found that compared with adults of working age who are otherwise similar, teachers and their household members were not at increased risk of hospital admission with COVID.

In addition, we now have a highly effective vaccine available and all school staff will have had the opportunity to be fully vaccinated.

Very low risk of severe disease in children

There is clear evidence of a very low rate of severe disease in children of primary and secondary school ages even if they do catch the disease.

COVID is a mild self-limiting illness for the vast majority of children. Risk of serious illness or death are extremely low for children. Concerns have been raised about long-COVID in children. While work is ongoing to explore long COVID in children, emerging large scale studies indicate that this risk is very low in children and similar to that associated with other respiratory viruses in children.

It is my professional opinion which is shared by my Chief Medical Officer colleagues across the UK that very few, if any, children or teenagers will come to long term harm from COVID due solely to attending school. This has to be set against a certainty of long term harm to many children and young people from not attending school.

Return of schools in NI

Since schools returned for the 2020/21 school year the high community prevalence of COVID has led to large numbers of COVID cases being reported to schools, with very large numbers of children being identified as school close contacts. This has caused disruption in schools and large numbers of children missing school.

We know how important school is for children and want to ensure children only miss out when necessary. As highlighted above, at earlier stages in the pandemic many children were missing school. However, this is no longer a proportionate approach.

The more targeted approach to identification of close contacts in school will identify the children who have had the closest contact and therefore the highest risk of being positive. It will also free up teachers and principals so that they can spend more of their time and efforts getting back to doing what they do best – teaching and inspiring our children and young people. This is where they are needed most.

School leaders and staff have worked extremely hard, supported by the PHA, over the course of the pandemic to assist with contact tracing. The new approach allows dedicated, experienced PHA staff to undertake contact tracing.

The time is now right, in line with the easing of restrictions in society more widely and with the high vaccination rates, to adopt this new approach and to

apply contact tracing measures in schools as they are applied in workplaces and other settings.

Conclusion

It is inevitable that there will continue to be cases of COVID in schools - this reflects transmission in the wider community. We know that there will be spikes in infection in some school communities. The PHA will continue to monitor cases in schools and will continue to have arrangements to respond to and support schools with large clusters and outbreaks. This new approach is in line with the approach being taken to schools in England, Scotland and Wales.

The risk of COVID infection in any setting cannot be entirely eradicated but it can be reduced. I would remind everyone of the need to continue to follow all of the existing measures in place which continue to keep schools a safe place for our children. These include additional cleaning and hand hygiene, ventilation, the use of face coverings and regular asymptomatic testing. All school staff have now had the opportunity to be fully vaccinated.

We all collectively, parents, the school community and health professionals have one key goal in common – to do the best for our children and young people. I welcome these new arrangements which will keep children in school as often as possible.

This is where they are best served and best able to obtain the education which they so deserve and which affords them the best life chances.

Yours sincerely



PROF SIR MICHAEL McBRIDE
Chief Medical Officer

CONFIRMED CASE OF COVID-19 IN SCHOOL SETTING – INFORMATION FOR PARENTS AND STAFF

Where a case of confirmed COVID-19 (Coronavirus) has been reported in a person with links to a school setting, all close contacts of the case who need to take specific actions with regard to testing and self-isolation will be identified, contacted and advised by the Public Health Agency (PHA) Contact Tracing Service.

If you are contacted by PHA Contact Tracing Service, please follow the guidance that they provide to you. Information on the latest self-isolation requirements can be found on NI Direct (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-self-isolating>). **The advice on what to do if a close contact changed on 16th August 2021.**

What to do if your child develops symptoms of COVID 19

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

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

Please book a free PCR test, **even if an earlier one was negative**. Your child should stay at home and self-isolate until you receive the result. Please see [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): self-isolating | nidirect](#) for guidance on whether other people in your household also need to self-isolate while you are waiting for your child's PCR result.

Tests can be arranged at your closest testing site or by requesting a postal kit which will be sent to your home address. You can choose whichever option is more convenient for you. Going for a COVID test is one of the reasons your child can leave home during the self-isolation period, however, they should not use public transport. Please order a postal test if you do not have private transport to a test site.

How to stop COVID-19 spreading

There are things you can do to help reduce the risk of you and anyone you live with getting ill with COVID-19:

- **Please get vaccinated if you are eligible and haven't already done so**
- wash your hands with soap and water often – do this for at least 20 seconds
- use hand sanitiser gel if soap and water are not available
- wash your hands as soon as you get home
- cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your sleeve (not your hands) when you cough or sneeze
- put used tissues in the bin immediately and wash your hands afterwards

Further information

For further information, please see the NI Direct website [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): self-isolating | nidirect](#) the Public Health Agency website <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus> or contact NHS 111. If your child feels unwell and you are worried about their symptoms or about anyone else in the home, please contact your GP.