

Management of COVID-19 in Schools

Guidance for Principals and School Leaders

This document has been produced by the Public Health Agency (PHA) and aims to support schools and pre-schools in preparing and managing their response to cases and clusters of COVID-19 within the school setting. There are several important changes included in this version. The changes include the introduction of PCR testing of all close contacts and responding to positive lateral flow tests in schools.

Related documents for carrying out the risk assessment with the PHA COVID19 School Team can be found on the COVID-19 page of C2K Exchange.

For ease of use, this document is split into

Section 1- Managing a positive case following a **PCR** test,

Section 2- Managing more than one positive case following **PCR** tests and

Section 3 – Managing reported positive results for self-administered **lateral flow tests (LFTs)**.

Contact Details

When a school receives notification of a confirmed case of COVID-19 (that is, confirmed with a positive PCR test) in a pupil or member of staff, in the first instance, you should contact the Education Authority emergency helpline for COVID-19 suspected or confirmed cases on **028 9041 8056** or at confirmed.covid19@eani.org.uk. They will provide initial advice and prepare you for phoning the PHA COVID19 School Team. This helpline is open 7 days a week 8am to 8pm.

You should then contact the PHA COVID19 School Team by either completing the following online form <https://hscforms.hscni.net/education-cell-online-form/> or by calling **028 9536 0484**. Someone from the team will call you back to discuss the risk assessment and answer any questions that arise in relation to this. The PHA team is open Monday to Friday 8am to 4pm and Saturday to Sunday 10am to 2pm.

Section 1 Managing a positive case following a PCR test

The School response to confirmed COVID-19 in a school community will be tailored to the situation and will vary, for example, a small number of pupils and/or staff may need to self-isolate for a period of time. Sometimes whole classes or year groups may be asked to self-isolate. In rare circumstances the school may have to close.

You will normally be told about a confirmed case by the parent of the child or by the member of staff concerned. Individuals who test positive for COVID-19 usually receive this result by text and/or email and receive this as soon as the result is available. Sometimes the PHA schools team are notified about a case by contact tracing before the school has been advised. With the individual's permission, the PHA school team will contact the school to make them aware of the case.

When you are informed of the confirmed COVID case, it is helpful if you could gather the following information:

- Name and date of birth
- What date did they first develop symptoms?
- What symptoms did they have?
- What date did they have a test?
- When were they last in school?
- Which class/es are they in?
- How do they travel to school?
- Are there other household or community contacts who are positive?
- Does the parent or child have any idea where they may have become infected?

If you are unsure about accuracy of reported test result you may wish to ask if the parent/staff member would be willing to share a screen shot of the result. (If you do this, do not share this information with anyone outside public health.)

Having gathered the initial information above, identification of close contacts in the school can begin. You need to consider the **2 days** prior to the child/member of staff feeling unwell (becoming symptomatic) until the last time they were in school– this is

considered to be the infectious period. If the child/member of staff did not have any symptoms when they took the test then you should consider the 2 days prior to the test being taken.

Definitions of Close Contacts

In the context of a case in a school, a close contact is anyone who has been close to a confirmed case of COVID-19 from 2 days before the person was symptomatic* to 10 days after the onset of symptoms (i.e. the infectious period) and fulfils any of the following:

- lives in the same household
- has been within one metre and had face-to-face contact (including being coughed on or having a face-to-face conversation) or skin-to-skin contact
- been within 2 metres of someone for more than 15 minutes (**either as a one-off contact, or added up together over one day**)
- has travelled in a small vehicle with the case
- travelled in a large vehicle / plane near the case

An interaction through a Perspex (or equivalent) screen with someone with the person who has COVID-19 is not usually considered to be a contact, as long as there has been no other contact such as those in the list above.

*If the person who has tested positive for COVID-19 did not have symptoms, then their infectious period is counted from 2 days before their test was taken to 10 days after their test was taken.

The approach set out in the Department of Education New School Day Guidance are designed to limit close contacts within the school using measures such as “pupil bubbles”, fixed classroom floor plans with named forward facing seating and social distancing. Implementation of the guidance should make the identification of contacts easier and limit the number of close contacts identified.

Practical aspects of identifying contacts

Confirmed case in a pupil

Pupils

- Consider close contact definition above. For post primary pupils, this will include pupils who sat within 2 metres of the positive pupil/staff member in their class/each of their classes. Your floor plans should help you identify these children.
- Consider areas like study halls and libraries too.
- You should also consider any friendship groups out with classes, for example, lunchtime and breaks.
- How they travelled to school and traveling in a school vehicle for whatever reason.
- In primary and special schools in most situations the entire class bubble will be identified as close contacts.

Home to School Transport

- If the pupil shared a car or used home to school transport during the infectious period they are likely to have close contacts associated with that.
- It is helpful if the pupil is asked to name those sitting two rows in front and behind as best they can.
- Tell PHA as much as you know about the transport. If further investigation or risk assessment is required this will be arranged through the Education Authority's transport team.

Classroom staff

- It is recommended that teachers and classroom assistants maintain 2m social distance from children. However, it is acknowledged that this is not practical in many situations – particularly primary and special schools. In primary and special schools, classroom staff usually form part of the bubble which isolates.
- Consider whether staff would meet definition above. In post primary schools adult to pupil distancing is more reliable. However, some staff – for example special educational needs assistants are more likely to have close contact with a positive case.

- Remember to think about staff who have been in the class who are not based there all the time. For example, substitute teachers and visiting health professionals.

Wider school

- If the school has implemented the bubble approach, this should reduce contacts outside of the class bubble.
- Consider contacts in other areas – implementation of new school day guidance should mean that office, catering and other staff are not usually close contacts but sometimes for genuine reasons they will have had contact with the child which meets the definition.

Confirmed case in a member of staff

- The same definition should be used to identify staff and students who meet the close contact criteria should the confirmed case be a member of staff.
- **As well as the classroom and pupil facing environment contact between staff in staff rooms, corridors and on breaks should be explored.**

At this stage you should contact the Education Authority emergency helpline for COVID-19 suspected or confirmed cases on **028 9041 8056** or at confirmed.covid19@eani.org.uk

You should then contact the PHA COVID19 School Team by either completing the following online form <https://hscforms.hscni.net/education-cell-online-form/> (the online form is preferred as it quickly and accurately captures spelling of name and date of birth) or by calling **028 9536 0484**. Someone from the team will call you back as soon as possible to discuss the risk assessment and answer any questions that arise in relation to this.

When the close contacts have been identified between yourself and the PHA you should generate a close contact report using SIMS and upload to the PHA using the **AnyComms+** website. If your school does not have access to the SIMS system you

should enter the close contact information on the **Close Contacts Template for Schools** - please use the most up to date version which is available on PHA website and email it to the dedicated PHA COVID19 School Team email address at: EducationalSupport@hscni.net.

As contact tracing is vitally important to slow the spread of COVID-19 and data sharing for this purpose is in the public interest for public health reasons, schools do not require the consent of parents or pupils to share a pupil's personal data with the PHA COVID19 School Team for this purpose. You should however still make parents and pupils aware that you are required to share pupil's personal information with the PHA COVID19 School Team for this purpose.

All those on the contact list should be contacted by the school to advise them isolate and not to come to school/nursery for **10 days** from their last contact with the case, and that a letter will follow. PHA will issue a letter to the school for dissemination to close contacts. This advises that they have been identified as a close contact, the date of the contact and the date they are required to isolate to.

Since 12th April 2021 the close contacts are advised to book a PCR test. Most importantly, even if that PCR test is negative it will not change their isolation period and they should not return to school until that is complete.

The letter includes details about how to book a test. Close contacts will be asked to enter a code which will be provided in the letter to the online booking page. This code will help link the result back to the school and help with assessment and management of the school cases. If the individual does not wish to enter the code they will still be able to book at test. Individuals should book the PCR test even if they have access to lateral flow tests.

The letter is available in several commonly used languages and can be translated into additional languages on request.

While not a requirement, you may also wish to send a separate letter to all other parents/carers **whose children have not been** identified as close contacts and a

letter to staff members who have **not** been identified as close contacts. PHA schools team can provide you with the letters which provide general advice to staff and families and advise that there has been a positive case, that close contacts have been identified and advised to self-isolate, and that everyone else does not need to take action but should be vigilant for any symptoms.

Section 2: Managing more than one positive case of COVID19 - cluster and outbreak investigation and management

If you are informed of an additional new confirmed case in your school you should follow the same steps as outlined in section 1. There may be a circumstance where the new case is already self-isolating due to being identified as a close contact of a previous case in the school and there **may** be no further close contacts identified but **you should still inform PHA about the new case.**

A **cluster** is defined as two or more confirmed cases occurring within a 14-day period within the school setting. An **outbreak** is defined as two or more cases occurring within a 14 day period where transmission between the cases is highly likely e.g. they are close contacts of one another.

For second or subsequent cases in a school it is important to explore potential links between the cases. This is both to make sure that all relevant contacts are isolated and to **consider potential sources of the infection** associated with the school.

If you have been informed about a second or subsequent case, in addition to identifying the close contacts for the two days prior to symptom onset or positive test result, you should go back seven days from the new case and look for any links with other cases in the school – even if they do not meet the close contact definition – between cases.

Questions to think about:

- Was the new case already identified as a close contact of a recent case?
- Are there additional contacts?
- Going back the seven days before the new case was notified are there other cases in the school with which the new case has had a link – even if it was not a close contact link? For example;
 - Was the case taught by a positive member of staff but not identified as a close contact?
 - Are they in the same year group with a common subject as a previous case but not a close contact of that case?
 - Are they linked by an extra-curricular activity?
- Are there any other links between cases in the school which are emerging between any cases which were not initially apparent?

The PHA will discuss this and whether wider measures need to take place with you on the phone. If the number of cases of COVID19 in the school continues to increase, the PHA will work closely with the school to risk assess the situation, determine whether there is evidence of transmission within the school setting and consider whether further mitigation or infection control measures are required.

If the PHA determines that further assessment of a cluster is required we will discuss this with the principal. An initial video conference or phone call will be arranged to review cases, undertake a more detailed assessment and consider school cases in the context of wider community transmission.

Depending on the outcome of this more detailed review a decision may be taken to establish a wider Incident Management Team (IMT) to assess the need for further management. IMT membership will generally include individuals from the school, PHA, the Education Authority, CCMS and others, as appropriate. Further measures

may include consideration of wider testing of school pupils, school closure, further communication with parents and carers and the media.

Section 3: Managing reports of positive results from lateral flow tests (LFTs)

Lateral flow tests are now being used by staff and some students. They are intended to be used twice weekly by people who do not have symptoms of Covid-19 and are self-administered by the individuals being tested. Although they are useful to identify people who would otherwise not have known they had Covid-19, thereby avoiding onwards transmission, they can occasionally give false positive results, so any positive LFT cases will be retested using a PCR test.

LFTs should only be used for staff and students who do not have symptoms of COVID-19. Anyone with symptoms of COVID-19 should not use an LFT and instead should self-isolate and book a PCR test

Staff and pupils using LFTs should enter **every** result onto the reporting website [Report a COVID-19 rapid lateral flow test result - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/report-a-covid-19-rapid-lateral-flow-test-result). Any pupil or staff member who has a positive LFT **should not come into school**, should **organise a PCR test as soon as possible** and they and their household members should **self-isolate until the PCR result is obtained**.

Individuals are also asked to **notify their school** of the positive result as soon as possible and the **school should advise PHA** of the positive lateral flow result by using the online form and selecting LFD. Schools should report any positive lateral flow to the PHA school team using the dedicated lateral flow result reporting or by telephoning during opening hours if that is more convenient. This ensures that the school team are aware of all positives and can check PCR results when available. We are aware that people do not always input their lateral flow result which is why we are asking schools to report positives to the PHA as well.

If the individual inputs their details and result as detailed above, the PHA Contact Tracing Service will contact those who report a positive lateral flow test to discuss their household and community contacts and provide further information.

In the majority of cases, school contact tracing and isolation will not take place until the result is confirmed by PCR. The individual should be encouraged to have a PCR test as quickly as possible. PCR tests are widely available and turnaround times are currently short so waiting for PCR should not cause a long delay.

There may be occasions when PHA school team **will** advise you to initiate contact tracing following the lateral flow result - this depends on the wider context and risk assessment. Usually it is because there is information about the individual taking the test which suggests it is highly likely the PCR will be positive – for example they are connected to a confirmed case.

If the PCR result is positive, then the identification of contacts will start as described in Section 1. **If the PCR is negative the pupil or staff member can return to school and they and their family no longer need to self-isolate.**

PCR tests should be taken as quickly as possible ideally within 24 hours and always within 48 hours. **If an individual has difficulty accessing a PCR the school can give them one of the postal kits that were issued to schools.** These can be taken and posted. For a quicker turn around the kits will be accepted at a local testing site – to arrange this please ring PHA schools team so we can ensure the team at the local testing site know to accept the test.

If there is more than one positive LFT in a staff or pupil group this should be discussed with the schools team who will discuss the risk assessment with you.

The following documents can be accessed on PHA website:

- Copy of this guidance
- SIMS report instructions
- Close Contacts template list for Schools – please use the up to date version on the website