

Public Health Agency advice to schools regarding the revised arrangements for the Identification of Close Contacts of COVID-19 cases in Schools

Following the joint memo to the Executive from the Ministers of Education and Health dated 9th September 2021, from 8am Friday 10th September 2021, the 'Operational Guidance on managing positive COVID-19 notifications in the school setting' version 19/08/2021 has been withdrawn.

School leaders will no longer be required to respond to every COVID-19 case and identify contacts. Instead, the Public Health Agency (PHA) Contact Tracing Service will undertake a more targeted approach and will only contact the school Principal for assistance in certain circumstances, for example, to obtain parent or staff contact information. This will help reduce the potential for large numbers of pupils being required to self-isolate and also reduce the amount of time spent by schools contact tracing.

From Friday 10th September 2021, when the PHA Contact Tracing Service (CTS) contacts a confirmed COVID-19 case associated with a school (either a pupil or staff member), they will ask for their support (or that of their parent or guardian) in identifying their close contacts.

Those identified as close contacts by this process will be contacted by the PHA CTS by phone or text, advised they have been identified as a close contact and directed to advice on self-isolation and testing (<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-self-isolating>). Parents will be encouraged to inform the school of their child's positive test or identification as a close contact as part of routine absence reporting.

PHA management of positive cases will all be coordinated by PHA CTS so schools will no longer need to contact the PHA COVID-19 Schools Team or complete the online form if they are made aware of a positive case. The online form will no longer be available from 8am Friday 10th September 2021.

If you require advice about a case, or other measures required in the school setting, you can contact the Education Authority (EA) emergency helpline for COVID-19 suspected or confirmed cases on 028 9041 8056 or at confirmed.covid19@eani.org.uk. This helpline is open term-time Monday to Friday 8am to 8pm and 10am to 2pm at weekends and Bank Holidays. Should public health advice and assistance be required, the EA will pass the details to PHA and request they contact the school principal.

The PHA Contact Tracing Service will still need to contact schools in certain circumstances and we would appreciate your continued help and support. These circumstances may include:

- 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;
- Complex settings with particular risk or vulnerabilities where joint assessment is needed;
- Large clusters and outbreaks identified through on-going PHA surveillance.

A 'warn and inform' letter is available on C2K, which schools may wish to use to inform parents of cases in the school and to remind everyone of the steps we should all be taking to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission in school and outside it.

It is anticipated that schools will continue to implement mitigations to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission including cleaning, ventilation, face coverings, consistent grouping and regular asymptomatic testing using lateral flow devices for all staff and post-primary pupils.

Version 09/09/2021