

2 November 2020

Dear Principal

As schools return after the mid-term break, I am writing to update you on some key supportive measures that will help sustain the safe operation of schools and specifically will help principals in circumstances where a positive case of Covid-19 is identified and connected with a school. All issues pertaining to public health are on the basis of direction provided by public health authorities.

As you are aware the public health approach to dealing with a positive case in a school is set out in the published *Schools Pathway* document which is available at this link:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a0bff-reopening-our-primary-and-special-schools/#public-health-guidance-for-schools>.

Dedicated Phone Number 'HSE live Covid-19 Principal school line' for school principals with specific queries related to a confirmed case of Covid-19:

Public Health are legally notified of all cases of Covid-19, and when they are notified of a case that was within an educational facility whilst the case was infectious, a member of a Public Health department will ring the school and undertake a Public Health Risk Assessment. This is usually undertaken the same day they are notified, but it may be the following day.

A dedicated phone number 'HSE live Covid-19 Principal school line' **(01) 240 8785** is being provided by the HSE for principals to ring in circumstances where they need assistance from Public Health in relation to a confirmed case of Covid-19 within their school community and have not yet heard from Public Health. You do not need to routinely ring through to the line to inform of every confirmed case.

The phone number will operate 7 days a week, from 8am to 4.30pm Monday to Friday and from 10am to 4.30pm Saturday and Sunday. This number is specifically for school principals for specific Covid-19 related queries pertaining to a positive case in the school community. Please do not provide this number to other members of the school community. It is very important that to be effective, this dedicated resource for principals does not get overloaded with more general queries.

The operator will take basic details and provide the details directly to the relevant public health department. The public health team will respond within three hours in most circumstances. Every effort will be made for a same day response, unless it is later in the afternoon when the response may come the following morning.

This unique arrangement has been developed to meet the particular needs of schools. The Department, along with the HSE, will engage closely with stakeholders to keep its effectiveness under review

Dedicated School Teams to supports school principals when there is a positive case:

The Public Health response to schools in the coming term will be further enhanced by the HSE through the increased resourcing of existing School Teams in each HSE area.

These teams are being enhanced in time for the new half-term. These multi-disciplinary teams are being led by public health professionals and will be supplemented by inspectors assigned for this work to the HSE from the Department of Education as well as other staff reassigned from within the health services.

Inspectors will bring their expertise and knowledge of the working of schools to support these teams to communicate with schools. Inspectors will not be performing their inspectorate role while carrying out this work and will be operating at all times under the management and direction of the HSE.

Public Health team members will take calls and phone schools following identification of a positive Covid-19 case, and having been trained in Public Health protocols undertake the schools' component of the initial risk assessment. They may inform schools of any further actions as required under the direction of Public Health. Assigned inspectors and other team members will respond to queries from the HSElive Principals line and take schools' queries that come directly to the Department of Public Health.

It should be noted that under no circumstances will Department of Education staff be making clinical decisions. All clinical guidance will remain under the governance of Public Health. However, as part of this work, the school teams will assist with gathering the required information from principals to help the public health teams identify the school based close contacts. Close contacts will then be notified by school management, who will forward a letter or text from Public Health. HSE will then contact close contacts to notify them of their test appointment.

Dedicated testing of close contacts from a school when there is a positive case

Public Health has in place prioritised testing for those close contacts of a confirmed case within the school community.

Covid-19 test appointments are issued as a priority for school based close contacts through a specific schools referral process within the HSE. Public Health will determine when they wish the swabs to be undertaken. This may be 'as soon as possible' but it may also be determined for clinical reasons that the swabs should be undertaken in a day or so time. At the point of testing, swabs for the school group are sent to the laboratory as a 'red flagged' batch to be processed as a priority on delivery to the laboratory. The swabs have a specific school reference number to allow batch reporting of results for the particular school setting. This ensures fast turnaround times for testing and enables swift onward further public health actions if required.

Definition of a close contact in an educational setting

The Department is aware that the schools have sought clarity regarding the definition of a close contact in an educational setting. The Department has asked for clarity, and the HPSC, the agency with responsibility for this matter, has published the following definition of a close contact in an educational setting, as set out below. This has been published on their website. The Department of Education does not have a role in this process.

As per current HPSC close contacts guidelines a clinical Public Health Risk Assessment (PHRA) will be undertaken for all educational settings where a confirmed case has attended whilst infectious. This PHRA will determine the close contacts.

Close contacts definition:

- Any person who has had face to face contact within less than 1 metre with a confirmed case of COVID-19 for >15 minutes in a school day.
- Any person who has been between 1 and 2 metres from a confirmed case of Covid-19 for >15 minutes in a school day with consideration of other mitigation measures e.g. face-coverings, pods, ventilation, IPC measures or uncertain compliance with mitigation measures in place (assessed through clinical PHRA)

Contacts are assessed from contact with a confirmed case of Covid-19 during their infectious period - 48 hours before the onset of symptoms if symptomatic, or 24 hours before the test for Covid-19 was taken in those who are asymptomatic.

It is important to note that the response to confirmed cases or outbreaks of Covid-19 in the community or in a school is the responsibility of, and will be led and managed by, Public Health HSE. All decisions as to appropriate actions following a confirmed case or outbreak will be made by their teams in the context of a full Public Health Risk Assessment procedure.

It is the view of Public Health that the evidence available to date shows that schools are proving to be safe spaces for children and for the staff.

Schools are working hard to implement the public health advice which is proving to be effective in keeping transmission levels in schools so low. It is really important this advice, and adherence to the recommended public health measures e.g. use of face-coverings, hand hygiene, physical distancing are re-enforced at the start of the new half-term. This is especially required for break times and the staff room as well as for classes. All recommendations are being kept under review by consultants / specialists in Public Health Medicine as we continue to deal with the ongoing pandemic.

The Department will continue to work closely with all of the education partners and the public health system so that schools can continue to be supported in this very challenging time.

Yours sincerely

Deirdre Shanley
Assistant Secretary