

TO: All Principals

FROM: Dr Abigail Collins, Consultant in Public Health Medicine, HSE Schools lead
Dr Kevin Kelleher, Assistant National Director Public Health and Child Health

RE: Return to school guidance from the HSE Public Health

DATE: 30 August 2021

As schools reopen for the 2021/2022 school year, it is important that we renew our focus on the measures that will help your school communities to stay safe during this academic year.

The Covid-19 pandemic is ongoing, however vaccination is widely available for all eligible and we have seen very high uptakes across society. Vaccination uptake in Ireland is one of the highest globally, and this helps protect those most vulnerable and very significantly reduces the harm associated with Covid-19 infection for those who are fully vaccinated.

However, we still need to work together to ensure we continue with all measures to best keep Covid-19 out of schools and that we minimise opportunity for onward spread of Covid-19 within schools, and our communities at large.

The infection prevention and control measures in place in schools have worked very effectively to prevent and control Covid-19 in schools. This is down to the immense efforts made by school communities to implement and adhere to these measures. Thank you for your leadership and for the effort of all of your teams in this regard.

Infection prevention and Control Measures:

1) Before attending school:

Symptoms - Please make sure all staff and families are aware not to attend school if they have any symptoms of Covid-19 infection. Symptom profiles are available [here](#) and we do advise parents to take a precautionary approach, particularly for children less able to articulate their symptoms, that if they seem unwell, to observe them at home and contact their GP as appropriate. We know from our experience that where people had been symptomatic in educational facilities, that was where we identified more close contacts with Covid-19.

Close contacts - Please remind all staff and children that if they have been told by the HSE services that they are a close contact of a case of Covid-19, they need to restrict their movements at home and will be offered testing, as soon as possible after they have been identified and then at day 10. Once they are asymptomatic and have received their 'not detected' test result from day 10 test, they can stop restricting their movements and return to school. However, if they are fully vaccinated, they will be contacted by the HSE, their vaccination status will be determined and they will be informed that they no longer need to restrict their movements and will not be referred for testing. In this case, close contacts (staff or students) are able to attend school. It is important that anyone who would have been a close contact, are very aware of their symptoms, and isolate and undergo testing should they develop any symptoms. If anyone tests positive for Covid-19, then they are managed as a case of Covid-19. Note where a close contact of a positive case is identified, the siblings of these close contacts do not

require routine exclusion and therefore siblings can still attend school, unless they have also been determined by the HSE to be a close contact.

Re-enforcing general public health messages - Please ensure all staff and children are reminded of the importance of abiding by the national public health measures currently in place at all times e.g. social distancing, use of face masks and hand hygiene, minimising social contacts.

2) **Within your school –**

Mitigation measures – A range of essential control measures have been implemented to reduce the risk of the spread of Covid-19 virus and to protect the safety, health and welfare of staff, students, parents and visitors as far as possible within the school. The best ways to prevent the spread of Covid-19 is to practice physical distancing, adopt proper hand hygiene follow respiratory etiquette; for students at post primary and staff at primary and post primary to wear a mask and to ventilate facilities and classrooms. It is expected that the mitigation measures as recommended by Public Health are in place within your school. The control measures shall continue to be reviewed and updated as required on an ongoing basis.

In addition:

At primary:

Please keep pods small and try to limit interaction in the classroom between pods, as much as possible. To help facilitate this we would ask that close friends would be within the same pod, to minimise close contacts and onward spread of infection. Please also know the children who are in each pod, as this will be of core importance for contact tracing within the class.

It is ok for the class group to play together outside. Try not to mix class groups outside.

Ensure that face masks are worn indoors by staff and outdoors by staff where physical distancing is not being maintained.

At post primary:

Please implement the physical distancing arrangements in the classroom. We would also request that, where possible, close friends sit close by, again to minimise close contacts and onward spread of infection.

Ensure that face masks are worn indoors by staff and students and outdoors where physical distancing is not being maintained.

3) **What to do when a confirmed case of Covid-19 arises that is connected with the school:**

It is inevitable that cases of Covid-19 will arise in schools when they reopen just as they are currently arising in the community. It will be assumed that schools are implementing the infection prevention and control measure above.

There are some key messages that you need to remember when cases arise:

There is no need to panic – classes do not need to be sent home or told not to come in to school.

It is important to remember that the confirmed case is no longer within the school and therefore the risk of onward transmission from that person has been removed from the school setting.

If the case was not in the school setting whilst infectious, then the school will not need to take any action because there is no significant risk that the case has spread the infection in the school setting. As per last academic year, **Public health will not call the school in these circumstances.**

The 'infectious period' is the timeframe during which someone with an infectious disease can spread it to other people – the 'infectious period' for Covid-19 includes the 24 hours before testing for asymptomatic cases, or the 48 hours before symptom onset for symptomatic cases.

If the case of Covid-19 was in the school during the infectious period, the HSE will identify any close contacts and schools will be contacted. In post-primary the Principal will be informed through an email and a follow up call initially; in primary and SEN they will receive a telephone call initially.

HSE live Covid-19 Principal school line

For specific queries relating to confirmed cases of Covid-19 within your setting, please continue to use the '**HSE live Covid-19 Principal school line**' on **(01) 240 8785**. 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. The operator will take basic details and provide these directly to the relevant Schools team in the Public Health department.

For Covid-19 related education queries the Department of Education can be contacted by email Covid19_alert@education.gov.ie or on 057 9324461.

Further information can be found at:

<https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/educationguidance/>

<https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/covid19/>

For education specific guidance, please see:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/a128d-back-to-school/>

Other relevant guidance:

Singing/Choir/Music Performance

Choir practices/performances and music practices/performances involving wind instruments may pose a higher level of risk and special consideration should be given to how they are held ensuring that the room is well-ventilated and the distance between performers is maintained.

Sport Activities

Schools should refer to the HPSC guidance on Return to Sport. Link to return to sport protocols is found here. <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/07253-return-to-sport-protocols/>

Travel:

Details of current arrangements for travel overseas can be found at

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/77952-government-advice-on-international-travel/>

Conclusion

Many thanks for your co-operation. I am sure it will be a busy return school, as it usually is for yourselves, and it is also a very busy time for Public Health, so we appreciate your patience and courtesy with the teams contacting you.

All data relating to the close contact testing within educational facilities, and the total number of children who have tested positive for Covid-19 are presented in the weekly data reports available on the HSE website below.

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/covid-19-schools-mass-testing-report.html>

It is important to note that many childcare facilities continued to operate over the summer and also some schools were operating summer provision. The data from this period is very reassuring and consistent that there are low levels of onward transmission in childcare and schools, with implementation of mitigation measures, and exclusions of symptomatic members. This reflects the effectiveness and adherence to the infection prevention and control measures.