

Via E-mail

Mr Gerry Murphy and  
Ms Caroline McCarthy  
Irish National Teachers' Association  
Vere Foster House  
23 - 24 College Gardens,  
Belfast  
BT9 6BS

*Tel: 028 95363406  
Website: [www.publichealth.hscni.net](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net)*

22 October 2020

Dear Mr Murphy and Ms McCarthy,

Thank you for your correspondence dated 22 September 2020 on behalf of your members.

The PHA's dedicated COVID-19 School Team has been operational seven days a week since 10<sup>th</sup> September 2020 and it continues to offer a high level of support and advice to schools in these very challenging times. We are also working very closely with the Department of Education and the Education Authority to ensure our schools receive the required level of support from all relevant bodies. The team has liaised with hundreds of schools to date.

Your letter contains a number of case studies. I am not in a position to respond to each scenario presented without full information and discussion with the school principal involved. However, it is important to note that while the same guidance and close contact definition is always applied, every case is unique. This is why PHA supports school principals in undertaking individual risk assessment and identification of those who meet the close contact definition for every case in a school community.

Should a school principal have a question or concern about the advice being provided by PHA's school team, they should raise this with the call handler who can escalate this to the consultant in charge who will discuss further with the principal.

With reference to the specific questions you raise, I have set out our responses to these below:

**1. Are PHA officers call handlers following an agreed script which includes a set of standard responses to a list of common questions arising from school queries?**

Call handlers within the PHA COVID-19 School Team are not provided with a script. All call handlers in the team who speak to school principals about the management of positive cases are trained health care professionals. They work using the most up to date guidelines and protocols agreed for managing cases of COVID-19 in the school setting. The team is supervised by a Consultant in Public Health Medicine who is available to provide further advice and guidance on the management of unusual or complex scenarios.

The PHA COVID-19 school information pack, which has been shared with all schools by the Education Authority, gives an overview of the approach taken. The pack, along with samples of the letters issued to staff and parents are also available on C2K exchange. PHA has also developed a list of FAQ's for schools. These were developed in collaboration with colleagues from the EA and are available on our website. For ease of reference, the information pack and some sample letters are enclosed. The FAQ's can be accessed by following the link below:

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/guidance-professionals-and-organisations/frequently-asked-questions-covid-19>

**2. INTO requests a copy of the script [should one exist] from which PHA Officers/call handlers are operating.**

See point 1 above.

**3. What steps are PHA managers taking to ensure that advice given in telephone conversations with school leaders is consistent with the published advice from your organisation and the other bodies who are also providing advice to schools?**

All staff working in the school's team have an induction and training. Guidance documents are available for reference. Briefing meetings are held each morning to brief the team on any updates as needed. There is a mid and end of day consultant led review of all school managed by the team that day. Any issues are identified and further action taken as appropriate. As noted above, a consultant is always available to provide further advice and support as required.

The advice provided by staff working in the PHA school team is based on the latest health protection evidence and guidance available. The steps described above are all designed to ensure that the most up to date guidance is applied consistently by the team.

The PHA has been working closely with both the Education Authority and Department of Education to keep those organisations apprised of the latest public health COVID-19 guidance. A twice weekly call with senior DE, PHA, EA and Department of Health staff is in place. In addition, a weekly zoom call is held with senior EA officers working on the EA COVID emergency line to make sure they are up to date with current guidance and to answer any questions that have arisen. In between these calls, PHA staff are in regular communication with EA and DE officers.

**4. Does PHA have a policy of putting in writing the advice it provides to school leaders who telephone? This would go some way to reassuring staff and families that the safest measures are being followed as opposed to what appears to be a focus on keeping classes/schools open despite risks.**

A brief written record of the call is made on our health protection case management system by the call handler. Letters are then shared with the principal for onward dissemination as appropriate. Depending on the school involved this may include a letter to staff and students who are not close contacts as well as those who are.

Occasionally, if the situation is more complex a summary of the actions agreed is shared by email. However, it would not be possible to do this for every case managed due to the volume of calls.

The purpose of the service is to identify all those in the school setting who meet the close contact definition and issue advice to self-isolate. Where there are two or more cases in a school all cases are reviewed to ensure the correct groups are isolating and to consider whether any further measures are required in the school. The focus is on limiting transmission of COVID in our schools and making sure they are a safe environment for children and staff.

**5. How many schools have had positive cases since reopening? How many schools have been identified as having a 'cluster' and have subsequently been subject to a PHA risk assessment?**

Information about COVID in schools will be published shortly.

**6. Will the PHA consider emailing updates on the number of covid-19 cases identified in educational settings so this information can be shared with members?**

See point 5 above.

**7. What has been the effectiveness of how successful the 'protective bubble' strategy has been in schools? Where there has been a positive case identified in a class, in how many cases have other members of that bubble subsequently tested positive?**

One aim of the "bubble" strategy as set out in the Department of Education's "new school day guidance" was to limit the number of close contacts each member of the school community has. Where "bubbles" are in operation it tends to be easier and quicker for schools to identify all the staff and children who meet the close contact definition and have to isolate. This results in a timely instruction for the close contacts to isolate.

Analysis of transmission within and between bubbles is ongoing and will be published as soon as possible.

**8. Will the PHA consider developing a more effective and user-friendly presentational approach on their website to highlight changes to guidance & directives ensuring school leaders find them easier to discover and implement?**

Any significant updates are communicated directly to schools via EA as well as being updated online. The PHA would be happy to review the online format and implement amendments to how updates are highlighted. The definition of 'close contact' is contained within the information pack referenced in point 1 and included as an appendix to this letter.

**9. Do the PHA have the capacity to manage the increasing demand developing in schools for answers to COVID related questions as the school experience evolves?**

The PHA is continually evaluating the demand on the COVID-19 School Team and working to ensure that staffing is adequate to provide support to schools with positive COVID cases in their school community. The development of the FAQ's and ongoing support to EA staff to deal with general queries means that our staff can focus on managing cases and on replying to more complex queries which are referred by the EA helpline. We are using the half term break to further streamline our processes to improve the efficiency and timeliness of our support to schools with positive cases.

**10. Can you share with INTO from where PHA has had the authority conferred upon it to instruct principals/ school leaders to undertake the work of tracing pupils?**

The current arrangements for tracing close contacts in school settings were put in place as they are the quickest and most accurate means of identifying and alerting close contacts in a school setting. This is in the best interest of the entire school community. The arrangements were put in place following discussion between DE, PHA, EA and DoH.

I hope these responses provide you with the information you require on behalf of your members. Please be assured that the safety of the whole school community is of the upmost importance to the PHA and remains a priority for us. Will continue to work hard to ensure that our support to schools meets the needs of schools. We are in daily dialogue with school leaders and are taking their comments and suggestions into account in how we develop the service in the coming weeks.

Should you require any more information please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Yours sincerely



**Olive MacLeod**  
**Interim Chief Executive**

CC Robin Swann  
Peter Weir  
Richard Pengelly  
Derek Baker  
Sara Long  
Chris Lyttle  
Education Committee Members  
Peter McCallion (Education Committee)



**DATE and SCHOOL**

Dear Parent/Guardian,

### **CLOSE CONTACT OF CONFIRMED CASE OF COVID-19 IN SCHOOL SETTING**

The Public Health Agency has been notified of a confirmed case of COVID-19 associated with [REDACTED] School. The Public Health Agency has worked with the school principal to undertake a risk assessment and has identified your child as a **close contact**, which occurred on [REDACTED] date.

In general close contacts are people who had direct face to face contact within one metre an infected individual for any length of time, including a face to face conversation, being coughed on or having direct physical contact (skin-to-skin). People who spent more than 15 continuous minutes within two metres of the infected person are also close contacts.

#### **Advice to self-isolate**

In line with national guidance, your child should stay at home and self-isolate for 14 days from the last contact with the case, which is up to and including **ADD DATE**

Your child must not go to school or any public areas during this time: your child must remain at home.

You do not need to arrange a test for your child unless they develop symptoms.

If your child does have a test and it is negative they still need to complete the 14 days isolation. This is because it can take up to 14 days for the symptoms of infection to develop.

Provided your child and everyone else in their household have no COVID-19 symptoms, the remainder of the household can carry on with their normal activities. If your child is well at the end of the period of self-isolation, then they can return to usual activities.

Further details of what your child needs to do are found in the self-isolation guidance, which can be accessed at the following link:

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/covid-19-information-public/frequently-asked-questions#what-does-self-isolation-mean>

### **What to do if your child develops symptoms of COVID 19**

For most people, especially children, COVID-19 will be a mild illness.

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)

If your child develops any of these symptoms, they should remain at home and arrangements should be made for them to be tested. At that time all other household members must also stay at home, not go to work, school or public areas, even for exercise. Testing for all symptomatic individuals in Northern Ireland can be booked at [www.nhs.uk/ask-for-a-coronavirus-test](https://www.nhs.uk/ask-for-a-coronavirus-test)

### **If the test is negative:**

Your child should still complete their 14 days self-isolation period.

Household contacts can resume normal activities.

### **If the test is positive:**

A **new** period of self-isolation will begin for your child, for 10 days from the date of onset of symptoms. After 10 days, if your child has not had a fever for at least 48 hours, they can return to normal activities.

Household contacts should remain in self-isolation for 14 days from the onset of symptoms of their household member.

### **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:

- 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

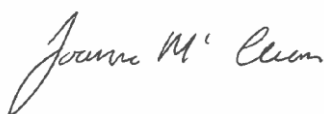
### **Further information**

For further information, please see the 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.

I know that staying at home for a prolonged period of time may be hard for you and your child but it is vital to help reduce the risk of transmission in the community.

Your support is very much appreciated.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Joanne McClean  
Consultant in Public Health Medicine

SAMPLE



ADDRESS

DATE

Dear Parent / Guardian,

RE: Confirmed COVID case in SCHOOL NAME

The Public Health Agency has been notified of a confirmed case of COVID-19 in the SCHOOL NAME community. The Public Health Agency has worked with the school principal to undertake a risk assessment to identify people who have been in close contact with the case. These individuals have been advised to stay at home and isolate.

In completing this risk assessment your child has **not** been identified as a close contact in the school setting and does not need to make any change to their usual routine, including school attendance.

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)

If your child, or anyone in your household, develops any of these symptoms, your whole household must remain at home and not go to work, school or public areas. You should arrange testing for the person who has developed symptoms. Testing for all symptomatic individuals in Northern Ireland can be booked at [www.nhs.uk/ask-for-a-coronavirus-test](http://www.nhs.uk/ask-for-a-coronavirus-test) . When the result is known further advice will be available.

**How to stop COVID-19 spreading**

***Improving Your Health and Wellbeing***

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

- 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 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.

Yours sincerely,

Dr \_\_\_\_\_

Consultant in Public Health Medicine



## **SCHOOL INFORMATION PACK ON MANAGING COVID IN THE SCHOOL SETTING**

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.

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 and Section 2- Managing more than one positive case.

### **Contact Details**

When a school receives notification of a confirmed case of COVID-19 (that is, confirmed with a positive 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](mailto: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 on **028 9536 0484** who will 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.

If your query is not an emergency you should contact:

<b>EA Education Restart Helpline</b>	<b>028 38368186</b>	Options: 1. Human Resources 2. Provision of school meals 3. Home to school transport 4. Health and Safety related (inc. Risk Assessments, PPE, Confirmed Covid case within school) 5. Learning and Curriculum 6. Ordering PPE and cleaning materials 7. Cleaning advice for premises	<b>Operating Hours</b> 9am – 5pm Mon - Fri
<b>EA Covid-19 assistance via email</b>	<a href="mailto:Covid-19@eani.org.uk">Covid-19@eani.org.uk</a>		<b>Operating hours</b> 9am – 5pm 7 days per week
<b>Confirmed Covid-19 case – please see flowchart diagrams for further information</b>	Contact Education Authority. Complete the 'Confirmed Covid-19 Case Pro-forma' (available through C2k and the EA website) and email it to EA at <a href="mailto:confirmed.covid19@eani.org.uk">confirmed.covid19@eani.org.uk</a>		
<b>EA Cleaning Service</b>	EA Cleaning Service can be contacted on <b>028 9041 8057</b>		

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.

When you are informed of the positive result you should ask the following:

- Name and date of birth
- What date did they first develop symptoms?

- What date did they have a test?
- When were they last in school?
- Which class/es are they in?
- To make sure the information about the positive case is accurate you may wish to ask if the parent/staff member would be willing to share a screen shot of the positive 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) – 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 48 hours prior to the test being taken.

**A close contact is:**

**A person who has been close to a confirmed case from 2 days before the person was symptomatic to 10 days after the onset of symptoms and:**

- **Lives in the same household**
- **has travelled in a car with the case OR**
- **has been within 2 metres of a case for more than 15 minutes OR**
- **has been within 1 metre of a case and had face-to-face contact including:**
  - **being coughed on**
  - **having a face-to-face conversation**
  - **having skin-to-skin physical contact**

Individuals should **only** be classed as a **close contact** if they meet the above definition. 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 older primary children and secondary pupils, this will be the children who have sat within 2 metres of the positive child/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.
- For younger children in primary school it is much more difficult to be confident children have not come into close contact. In most situations the entire class bubble will be identified as close contacts.

#### **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 primary school classes. Consider whether staff would meet definition above. In post primary schools adult 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 school/health related visitors into the school.

#### **Wider school**

- If the school has implemented the bubble approach, close contacts in other classes should be very few.
- Consider contacts in other areas – implementation of new school day guidance should mean that office, catering and other staff should not usually

be 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 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](mailto:confirmed.covid19@eani.org.uk)

You should then phone the PHA COVID19 School Team on **028 9536 0484**. They will send you the **Close Contacts template list for Schools** and then discuss the risk assessment and answer any questions that arise.

When the close contacts have been identified between yourself and the PHA you should enter the close contact information on the **Close Contacts template list for Schools** and email it to the dedicated PHA COVID19 School Team email address at: [EducationalSupport@hscni.net](mailto:EducationalSupport@hscni.net)

As contact tracing is vitally important to slow the spread of COVID19 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 not to come to school/nursery for 14 days and that a letter will follow. They will then need the letter sent to them that provides details on the name of the school, the date of last contact with the case and the date they should return to school (14 days).

**(Letter A for parents of children who are contacts of the confirmed case and Letter B for adult staff members who are contacts of the confirmed case).**

You may also wish to send a separate letter to all other parents/carers **whose children have not been** identified as close contacts (**Letter C**) and a letter to staff members who have **not** been identified as close contacts (**Letter D**). These two letters 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**

If you receive information of a new confirmed case in your school you should follow exactly the same steps as outlined in section 1.

A **cluster** of cases is two or more confirmed cases where the first date of each of their symptoms is within a 14-day period within the school setting.

If the new confirmed case(s) is one of the previously identified close contacts, then no further close contacts will be identified and no further action is required by the school.

If the new confirmed case(s) is in NOT in a previously identified close contact, for example a different class, then further close contacts will need to be identified and letter(s) sent.

The PHA will discuss whether wider measures need to take place with you on the phone. If the number of cases of COVID19 in the school continues to escalate, 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. So far in our experience, there is limited evidence of transmission within the school setting and the need for wider measures has not been required.



If the PHA determines that cases are a cluster of cases associated with transmission within the school setting they will set up an 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.

### **PHA COVID School Team documents on the COVID-19 page of C2K Exchange**

The following documents can be accessed:

- Copy of this guidance
- School Action Card
- Close Contacts template list for Schools
- Letter A (for close contacts)
- Letter B (optional letter for other staff and pupils in the school)