

# A Principal and Manager Guide to Long COVID



Department of  
**Education**  
[www.education-ni.gov.uk](http://www.education-ni.gov.uk)



## INTRODUCTION

This guidance aims to provide the latest information and advice for Principals and Managers who may have staff experiencing protracted ill health as a result of COVID-19 infection. This will ensure staff are supported effectively during their recovery.

This guidance was developed in conjunction with Birmingham Hospital Saturday Fund (BHSF) Occupational Health provider, Workplace Health Leadership Group N.I. and the latest available published medical advice. This will be reviewed and updated regularly as required. See Appendix A for more information on the Workplace Health Leadership Group N.I. (WHLG N.I.).

## Key phases and definitions

- 1 Acute COVID**  
Signs and symptoms of COVID-19 for up to 4 weeks.
- 2 Ongoing symptomatic COVID-19**  
Signs and symptoms of COVID-19 from 4 -12 weeks.
- 3 Post-COVID-19 syndrome also known as Long COVID<sup>1</sup>**  
Signs and symptoms of COVID-19 that develop during or after an infection consistent with COVID -19, continue for more than 12 weeks and are not explained by an alternative diagnosis. WHLG N.I. May 21

*“Usually presents with clusters of symptoms, often overlapping, which can fluctuate and change over time and can affect any system in the body”. NICE on Long COVID October 20*

*For more information on typical symptoms please see Appendix A.*

## Long COVID and absence from work

For some staff the effects of Long COVID can be long-term and debilitating, with a resultant impact on absence from work.

## Evidencing of Long COVID

Clarity on Long COVID diagnosis is important and informs the best steps for staff support. Due to the potential long-term nature of absence caused by Long COVID, evidence will be normally presented in the form of a Certificate of Fitness for Work “Fit Note”. It is reasonable and expected that school leaders/ managers should request and be furnished with such evidence or further information if the “Fit Note” is unclear. If there is uncertainty which cannot be resolved via the G.P. an alternative medical opinion can be obtained via the Occupational Health service.

<sup>1</sup>For the remainder of the document Post-COVID-19 syndrome will be referred to as Long COVID



## Key underlying principles required to support staff experiencing Long COVID

- ▶ Flexibility
- ▶ Sympathetic approach
- ▶ Responsiveness

## How to best support staff experiencing Long COVID

When supporting staff experiencing Long COVID it is important to understand that no two cases will be the same as there are different systems that have been attacked by the virus. Ongoing advice and guidance should be based on individual medical assessment. This ensures support is tailored to their specific rehabilitation needs. The Office for National Statistics recently highlighted that the Long COVID impact on functional ability will vary by individual.

The following key steps have been outlined to guide Principals / Managers to support their staff<sup>2</sup>.

### Step 1: Initial support

- ▶ **Keeping in touch with staff.** This helps to ensure staff feel supported and valued.
- ▶ **GP support and advice.** Staff must be assessed by their GP. Their GP will advise staff on the care and support needed. If long COVID symptoms present concern, staff may be referred to a specialist rehabilitation service or a service that specialises in the specific symptoms they have.
- ▶ **Signposting.** This includes access to free, confidential 24/7 Inspire counselling (Tel: 0808 800 0002)  
Consideration of independent **Occupational Health** (BHFS) support and advice when appropriate<sup>3</sup>. This can help identify the best time to commence a return to work.

### Step 2: Prepare for the worker's return

When returning to work the following is advised:

- ▶ Develop a return to work support plan considering adjustments based on expert medical advice.
- ▶ Be flexible in approach. For example initially reducing normal workload. This better ensures the workload is achievable. From here you can gradually increase to build up tolerance (physical or mental) towards normal duties.
- ▶ Be sympathetic to issues and concerns beyond just the workplace e.g. home.  
Your Employing Authority or external adviser may be able to provide support on adjustments beyond a phased return/ temporary reduced workload<sup>4</sup>.

There may be scope in some cases to avail of [Access to Work N.I.](#) support to assist staff returning to work e.g. travel support.

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<sup>2</sup>These steps may also be helpful for earlier stages of COVID-19 support (i.e. Acute and Ongoing) as well as other types of long term sickness absence support.

<sup>3</sup>For advice on when to make an Occupational Health referral contact your normal Employing Authority representative.

<sup>4</sup>Please note EA staff can avail of support from the dedicated Disability Employment Support Service (DESS), within the Equality & Diversity Unit Email: [disabilitysupport@eani.org.uk](mailto:disabilitysupport@eani.org.uk)

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## Step 3: Hold a return to work conversation/s.

- ▶ It is important to make time to have these conversations. Discuss what is achievable taking into account specific medical advice and reinforce the support plan. Many of the tips in Step 2 may apply.

## Step 4: Provide support during the early days of the return to work

- ▶ Making sure the individual is greeted back on day one and reinforce the return to work support plan and modifications.
- ▶ Give updates on changes in the workplace. This can reduce anxiety.
- ▶ Arrange regular check-ins to review modifications and make adjustments accordingly.

## Step 5: Provide ongoing support and review regularly

- ▶ Individuals may fluctuate in terms of the functional level from day to day. Regular review of workloads and expectations are key to manage this period. If concerns present about regular and reliable service OH can provide further advice.
- ▶ Flexibility of hospital/ G.P. appointments is important as there may be more than one specialist consultant involved in their support.

## Consideration of Reasonable Adjustments

Whilst Long COVID is not universally accepted as a disability, it is acknowledged this potential exists. To be proactive, Principal/ Managers are encouraged to consider phased returns (normally 4- 6 weeks WHLG NI) for all Long COVID cases. Depending on the symptoms, there may be a need for a longer phased return in severe cases. This will be informed by expert medical opinion.

*“Management of staff return is symptomatic with slow reintegration to normal activities. They must not push themselves and must be careful to resume strenuous activities slowly. A small minority of employees will be absent for months and will probably require slow reintegration back into the workplace, possibly with reduced workload and a period of part-time working”. BHFS (April 21)*

WHLG NI advise that staff do not have to be fully recovered from Long COVID before they return to work in this context. Some work is better than no work to help individuals improve their health outcomes, in particular psychological wellbeing.

The Department of Education (DE) has put in place provisions to ensure staff remain at **normal pay** for the first 10 days following a COVID-19 diagnosis. From day 11 this reverts to the relevant attendance process and entitlements<sup>5</sup>. Based on length of service this can be up to 6 months full pay and 6 months half pay.

If all reasonable adjustments to support a return to work have been considered and implemented without a likelihood of short-term return, please seek appropriate advice.

## Occupational Health

Rehabilitation that is specifically focussed on Long COVID is effective in accelerating recovery times and enabling people to return to work safely. Where a staff member is being medically advised to remain out of work for 12 weeks or more and specialist support does not appear to be in place we recommend referral to Occupational Health to explore what additional support can be offered. In addition, please see further signposting below.

<sup>5</sup>With effect from 11 February 2021



## Long COVID - What we know so far/ accessing further support<sup>6</sup>

*“Long COVID can result in a wide variety of symptoms. These are commonly fatigue, shortness of breath and muscle aches as core symptoms. It will only become clear as the year progresses what the true long term toll of COVID 19 will be” BHSF (April 21)*

### Current NI Health developments with Long COVID support

On the 14 June it was announced that “people in Northern Ireland who have long COVID will have access to new services dedicated to treating the condition” [Robin Swann, Health Minister](#).

The Department of Health have confirmed services would be available across all health trust areas in Northern Ireland and would be open to referrals from primary and secondary care.

Services will include:

- A bespoke pulmonary rehabilitation
- Dysfunctional breathing service for patients with significant respiratory symptoms post COVID-19
- Follow-up services for patients discharged from critical care
- Strengthening psychology support to all health trusts and directing patients to self-management resources. In the meantime, patients displaying long COVID symptoms will be treated through existing services.

### Other COVID 19 latest information

- 121, 821 confirmed cases in N.I to date (HSNI COVID Care NI app (21.5.20)
- N.I rates for Long COVID are lower than the rest of the UK based as at March 21 (ONS)
- Long COVID is more prevalent in women and individuals who have underlying health conditions (WHLG NI – May 21)
- Women reported higher anxiety, depression and loneliness than men throughout the pandemic period ([ONS March 21](#))
- There appears to be no real correlation between acute COVID-19 symptoms initially and long COVID symptoms which subsequently present.

### How many are affected in N.I.?

- 10% of those testing positive for COVID-19 go on to develop Long COVID
- Approx. 12,200 predicted Long COVID cases in NI as at May 21. Workplace Health Leadership Group (NI).

### COVID recovery - Specific conditions

Advice for specific effects on the body can be found [here](#).

Advice for specific effects on the mind can be found [here](#).

Specific advice for those with heart or diabetes related issues can be found [here](#).

Some people recover from the acute symptoms, return to work and subsequently develop long COVID symptoms later. If this occurs the Principal/ manager should revert to the support options outlined above.

We are yet to fully understand the long term implications of COVID-19. The position will be monitored and reviewed as and when new information becomes available from PHA, and other expert medical sources.

<sup>6</sup>Principals and managers should share this support and signposting information with staff experiencing Long COVID symptoms.



## Additional signposting



**Long COVID Support:** <https://www.longcovid.org/>

Long COVID Support is a peer support and advocacy group for people living with Long COVID.



**Royal College of Occupational Therapists:** [Click Here](#)

Guides to support people to manage post-viral fatigue and conserve their energy as they recover from COVID-19. These guides are endorsed by the Intensive Care Society.



**British Lung Foundation:** [Click here](#)

Advice to support mental health and energy management.



**MIND:** [Click here](#)

Advice and support to empower anyone experiencing a mental health problem



**Inspire Workplaces (free confidential counselling):** [Click Here](#)

Inspire Workplaces as an independent source of support. This service is free to staff. Inspire can help staff to access specialist support and information (anytime 24/7, 365 days a year). Contact Inspire free and confidential on **Tel: 0808 800 0002**



**EA HealthWell Hub:** <https://healthwell.eani.org.uk/>

A digital solution developed to support the themes of EA's first staff focused Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2019-22. Other Education Employers are welcome to access this support provision at this time.



**EA HealthWell Programme:** The programme provides staff with the latest health and wellbeing initiatives, sessions and campaigns providing a wide range of support linked to the EA Health and Wellbeing Strategy. [Click here](#) to view. Other Education Employers are welcome to access this Programme at this time.



### Appendix A – The Workplace Health Leadership Group N.I. (WHLG N.I.)

Established in 2016, the Group's vision is to ensure that 'Workplace Health' receives the same recognition in the working environment as 'Occupational Safety' and to encourage employers to have a 'healthy' as well as a 'safe' culture. The lead partners on the steering committee are:



British Occupational Hygiene Society (BOHS)



BuildHealth



Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI)



Local Councils



Institution of Occupational Safety and Health, NI Branch (IOSH)



Northern Ireland Safety Group (NISG)

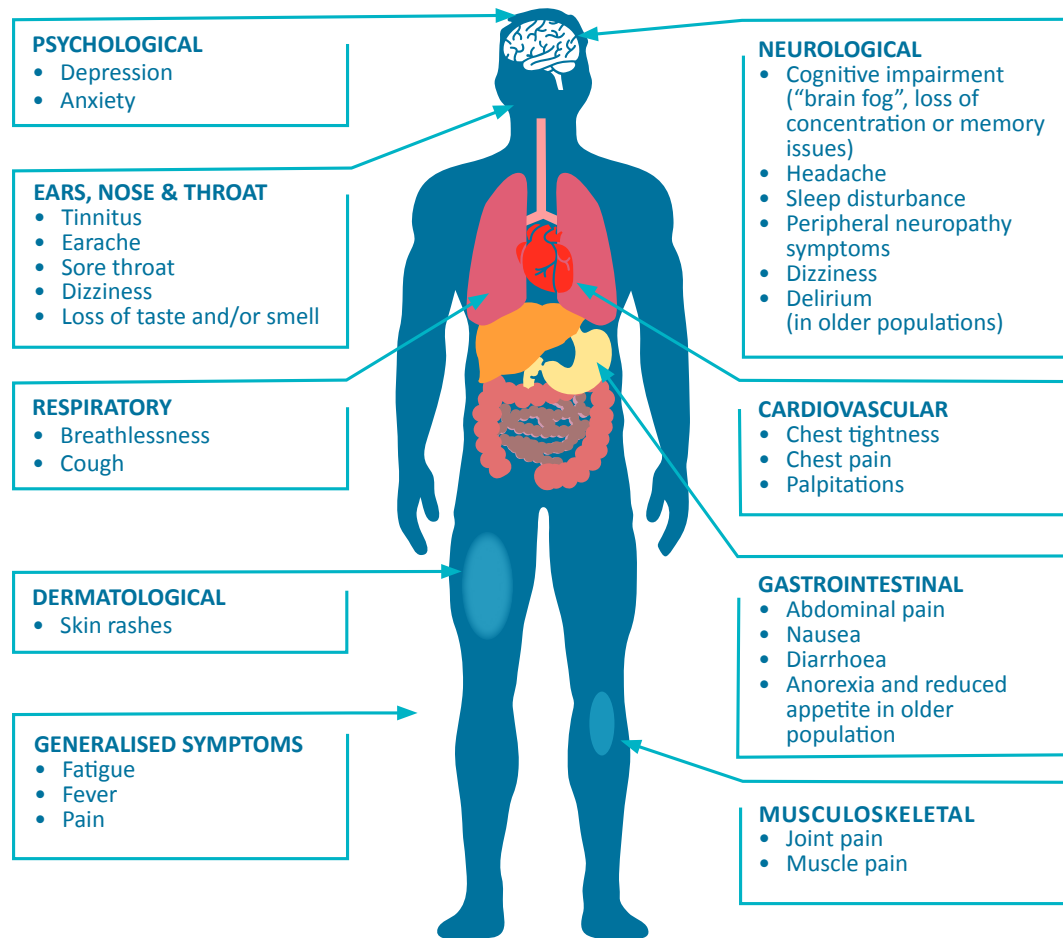


Public Health Agency

For more information on this Group [Click here](#).



## Appendix B – Common symptoms



*These Long COVID symptoms can be interconnected*

These can be quite debilitating and impact on function on a day to day basis.

Common long COVID symptoms include:

- Extreme tiredness (fatigue)
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain or tightness
- Problems with memory and concentration ("brain fog")
- Difficulty sleeping (insomnia)
- Heart palpitations
- Dizziness
- Pins and needles
- Joint pain
- Depression and anxiety
- Tinnitus, earaches
- Feeling sick, diarrhoea, stomach aches, loss of appetite
- A high temperature, cough, headaches, sore throat, changes to sense of smell or taste
- Rashes