

COVID-19 (CORONAVIRUS) - GUIDANCE TO EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Updated: 16 March 2020

1. PURPOSE

This guidance is intended to assist schools and other educational settings, including early years and youth settings, across Northern Ireland in providing advice for pupils, students, staff and parents or carers regarding COVID-19 (coronavirus).

The position on COVID-19 is exceptionally fast moving. New developments are emerging on a daily basis. The Department of Education is working intensively with its education sector partners and across government on a range of issues, many of them very complex. As new information becomes available, and decisions are taken, this guidance will be updated.

2. COVID-19 GUIDANCE

The Public Health Agency (PHA) has highlighted the new guidance for self-isolation following the decision to move from the containment to the delay phase for COVID-19.

The main implication of these changes is the requirement for anyone who displays specific symptoms to self-isolate, **even if they haven't travelled from an affected area**. People who have travelled from affected areas and those who have been in close contact with a positive case should also follow the same guidance.

The most common symptoms of COVID-19 are a new, continuous cough or a high temperature. For most people COVID-19 will be a mild infection.

People who are self-isolating with mild symptoms will not be tested. Testing will generally not be offered unless people are admitted to hospital.

Health related information on COVID-19 can be found on <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/news/covid-19-coronavirus>

3. GUIDANCE FOR STAFF

This guidance will assist staff in addressing COVID-19 in educational settings. This includes schools, early years and youth settings.

This guidance will continue to be updated in line with the changing situation.

COVID-19 appears to affect children less than other age groups. However, it should be remembered that children can pick up the infection and can spread it to others.

Therefore good practice in terms of hand-washing, for at least 20 seconds, should be encouraged and supported before and after any activity, such as meal times, break times and sporting activities.

Key points:

- Children should be kept at home if they are unwell with a new, continuous cough or a high temperature to avoid spreading infection to others. Otherwise they should attend as normal.
- If staff, young people or children become unwell on a school or educational site with a new, continuous cough or a high temperature they should be sent home.
- Clean and disinfect regularly touched objects and surfaces more often than usual using your regular cleaning products.
- Supervise young children to ensure they wash their hands more often than usual for at least 20 seconds with soap and water or hand sanitiser and that they catch coughs and sneezes in tissues and then bin these tissues (this is our **catch it, bin it, kill it** approach).
- We recommend all educational settings remain open unless advised otherwise.

What to do if someone develops symptoms of COVID-19 in a school or other educational setting

If anyone becomes unwell with a new, continuous cough or a high temperature in an educational setting they should be sent home and advised to follow the home isolation advice on the [PHA website](#).

If a child is awaiting collection, they should be moved, if possible, to a room where they can be isolated behind a closed door. Ideally, a window should be opened for ventilation. If it is not possible to isolate them, move them to an area which is at least two metres away from other people.

If they need to go to the bathroom while waiting to be collected, they should use a separate bathroom if possible. The bathroom should be cleaned and disinfected using standard cleaning products before being used by anyone else.

If a member of staff has helped someone who was taken unwell with a new, continuous cough or a high temperature, they do not need to go home unless they develop symptoms themselves. They should wash their hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds after any contact with someone who is unwell.

Limiting spread of COVID-19 in educational settings

Educational settings can help reduce the spread of COVID-19 by reminding everyone of the public health advice. Posters, leaflets and other materials can be found [here](#).

Staff, children, pupils, students and families should be reminded to wash their hands more frequently than normal for at least 20 seconds.

Frequently clean and disinfect objects and surfaces that are touched regularly, using your standard cleaning products.

The Council for Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (CCEA) has a range of resources for schools.

- [PDMU progression grids](#) have suggested hygiene activities for each key stage in primary. See Theme 4 – Health, Growth and Change.
- CCEA's Living.Learning.Together. resource has classroom activities to help children learn more about hand hygiene and bacteria/viruses/infections – see links below. They help address the statutory PDMU requirements about learning about how to stay healthy and safe.

[Primary 1: Yellow Box \(Unit 3\)](#) – ‘The Feely Box’ activity

[Primary 3: Yellow Box \(Unit 3\)](#) – ‘Healthy Choices’ activity

[Primary 6: Yellow Box \(Unit 3\)](#) – ‘Keeping Clean’ and ‘Infection and body protection’ activities

- CCEA Primary 5 Thematic Unit ‘[Liquid Gold](#)’ has an activity called Water for the Body about water and hygiene.

4. TRAVEL

Travel advice for educational settings

The UK Government is advising against **all** overseas education trips for children under 18 until further notice.

Ensure that you keep up to date with the latest [travel advice](#).

5. SCHOOL CLOSURES

The Department will continue to follow the expert medical and scientific advice from the Chief Medical Officer, Public Health Agency and the UK Government and Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE).

Schools will continue to stay open until such time as this expert scientific advice changes.

The UK Government is considering the introduction of emergency legislation to respond to a COVID-19 pandemic. This is likely to include powers for the Departments of Education and Health respectively to direct schools and childcare providers to close if required.

Remote learning

In the event of schools having to close, the priority is to ensure that teaching and learning continue, particularly for those who have GCSE or A Level examinations.

The capacity and provision exists via the EA Education Network service to facilitate teaching and learning outside of the classroom environment through digital and online platforms such as C2k, the computer system used by the vast majority of schools.

As outlined in some of the helpful guidance already issued by many schools, teachers and pupils should ensure they check their C2k passwords are working and can log on to My-School from home.

Education Authority staff are and will be available to support schools through the C2k service desk which can be accessed both online and by phone.

Preparing for a potential school closure

In the event of a decision to close all schools and educational settings on a longer term basis, the Department is considering how best to support schools in making the necessary preparations.

All schools should be preparing a work schedule for their pupils in the event of a school closure, to cover a minimum of four weeks. This schedule should provide parents with the required resources and online links to enable their children to continue their education in a home setting with the support of parents and remote access to teachers where this is possible. The links should be tested. Parents should also be provided with email contact details for their teacher. Teachers should have access to an email account for that purpose. Where access to IT equipment or internet connectivity is not available, schools should make every effort to lend equipment or provide printed material for learners.

Child welfare

The Department recognises the potential impact of school closures on the welfare of school children who are currently entitled to receive free school meals.

Together with colleagues from the Departments of Communities and Health and also from the Education Authority, Departmental officials are exploring options to mitigate the potential impact of school closures on the welfare of children entitled to free school meals.

The Department recognises there are also many vulnerable young people who are supported by the education system. We are currently working with colleagues across government to consider how these young people can be supported moving forward in the event of school closures.

Sports days, parent/teacher meetings and other school activities

As stated above, the current advice is that schools should continue to stay open and carry on with their planned activities. The Department will update schools if this advice changes.

Schools should continue to follow the public health advice but it may be prudent to take reasonable steps to postpone or cancel meetings which involve significant numbers of external parties or parents if safe distancing cannot be achieved. Based on their own risk assessment, principals may decide to cancel any such non-essential meetings.

6. PLANNING

The Department has instigated a range of contingency planning measures, including the establishment of a COVID-19 Education Planning Group to co-ordinate efforts across the education sector.

We have been working closely with colleagues across the UK as well as the Department of Health (DoH) and the Public Health Agency (PHA) on COVID-19.

We are also working closely and sharing information with the Education Authority and other educational stakeholders including liaising with counterparts in the Republic of Ireland.

The welfare, health and safety of pupils and staff is paramount and Departmental officials, in collaboration with DoH and PHA, continue to monitor the evolving situation daily and will update schools where appropriate.

The Minister for Education will communicate with the wider educational sector twice a week to ensure that the most up-to-date guidance is available.

School Contingency Plans

Schools should ensure that their contingency plans are up-to-date and able to deal with issues highlighted in this guidance document.

7. EXAMINATIONS

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) advises that learners should prepare for GCSE and A Level examinations and assessment as usual.

CCEA is working closely with Examination Regulators, Government Departments and other Awarding Organisations across the United Kingdom to consider how to manage any emerging risks to the smooth running of examinations and assessments.

CCEA already has a broad range of contingencies to ensure the smooth operation of examinations. They will update existing guidance to reflect any specific arrangements schools and colleges should put in place, if required. In the meantime, students, schools and colleges should continue to prepare for the summer examinations and assessments as usual.

CCEA's contingency plans for examinations will be kept under constant review and will evolve as circumstances change, and educational settings will be immediately informed of any developments.

8. EMPLOYMENT ISSUES

Sickness absence

The EA has issued [guidance](#) to all schools to make employers and employees aware of arrangements regarding the operation of the sickness absence scheme in relation to COVID-19. This guidance applies to both teaching and non-teaching staff.

The guidance confirms that staff who are quarantined or medically advised to self-isolate will receive normal pay for the period of absence. Such absences will not count towards the normal triggers for absence management or contractual sick pay, and will not constitute a break in service for pensions, or other purposes.

Substitute teachers and non-teaching staff providing emergency cover will also receive normal pay for the period of time they have been engaged to work. Such absences will not constitute a break in service.

The decision on whether an employee should attend work, if they believe they have been exposed to COVID-19, should be taken in conjunction with the Public Health Agency (PHA) guidance and medical advice at all times.

Teaching cover

Teachers may volunteer to provide short-term assistance in emergency situations. Such cover should only occur until arrangements for appropriate staff are in place.

The normal contractual hours of teachers may be subject to temporary alteration. If there is a need to require teachers to be class committed over the contractual 23.5 hours post primary, 25 hours primary, a payback arrangement will be provided by the school to reduce class contact following the return to normal arrangements.

Schools in Northern Ireland already rely on a contingent workforce to meet demands for short-term emergency cover and all schools have access to the Northern Ireland Substitute Teacher Register (NISTR) to arrange temporary cover. There are 9,989 active teachers on this register who have all gone through the necessary pre-employment checks. The booking system is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Schools should take every opportunity to maximise the use of supply teachers to cover for absent teachers.

Where possible, teachers will be expected to be available to work either from home or at a reasonable alternative location. This may include directing work and supporting pupils remotely, answering work-related questions and remaining contactable and available to attend school if required. Where possible this should include work activities that can be undertaken remotely such as planning, writing reports, marking and feedback of any work undertaken by pupils during school closures.

Class sizes

Depending on local circumstances, normal class arrangements and timetables may be subject to temporary alteration if substitute cover is not available. This may mean combining certain classes. No class arrangement, including composite classes, should exceed 33 pupils or 20 in practical classes where practical lessons take place. In extremis, a teacher may volunteer to cover over these numbers for a short period of time. There will be no relaxation of class sizes for special schools and units.