

**ADVICE FROM THE COVID-19 ADVISORY SUB-GROUP
ON EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S ISSUES**

**Phased return to in-person learning in schools and ELC settings:
Mitigations to minimise transmission of COVID-19**

12 February 2021

In support of the advice which was published on 3 February¹, the advisory sub-group has considered its existing advice² on the mitigations required to ensure a safe return to in-person learning for staff and pupils, and has identified some key areas where the advice should be strengthened. Where no amendment has been made, the existing advice still stands.

This advice is subject to continued reductions in prevalence and community transmission of the virus, no significant changes in the evidence, and reassurance that appropriate infection prevention and control mitigations are in place both within schools and ELC settings, and in the wider community.

Key messages

- While vaccination is being rolled out, non-pharmaceutical interventions, such as physical distancing, hand and respiratory hygiene, face coverings and zero-tolerance to symptoms are the main public health tool against COVID-19. It is important, therefore, to focus on how to encourage and support widespread compliance with these interventions, including clear, unambiguous guidance on the required behaviour.
- A combination of physical distancing approaches that prevent crowding (e.g. classroom distancing, staggered start times), especially in older age groups, along with hygiene and safety measures (e.g. handwashing, cleaning, ventilation) have a role in limiting the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 in educational settings. Measures should be adapted to the age group and the setting. It has not been possible, thus far, to assess the effectiveness of individual measures.³
- There are already a number of mitigations in place to reduce transmission of COVID-19 in schools and ELC settings in Scotland, and these all continue to apply to the new variant (B.1.1.7). Advice from the New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (NERVTAG), published in January 2021, on Mitigations to Reduce Transmission of the New Variant SARS-CoV-2 Virus⁴, concluded that a step change in the rigour of application of mitigations is required, given the increased transmission risk associated with the new variant.

¹ [Coronavirus \(COVID19\): Advisory Sub-Group on Education and Children's Issues – advice on phased return to in-person learning in schools and early learning and childcare \(ELC\) settings - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/advice-on-phased-return-to-in-person-learning-in-schools-and-early-learning-and-childcare-elc-settings-2021/pages/1-1-introduction.aspx)

² [Advisory+sub-group+updated+advice+FINAL+-+UpdateV3-+30+October+2020+%28007%29.pdf \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/advice-on-phased-return-to-in-person-learning-in-schools-and-early-learning-and-childcare-elc-settings-2021/pages/1-1-introduction.aspx)

³ https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/COVID-19-in-children-and-the-role-of-school-settings-in-transmission-first-update_1.pdf

⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/948607/s0995-mitigations-to-reduce-transmission-of-the-new-variant.pdf

- Schools and ELC settings should therefore place very high priority on reinforcing the mitigations designed to reduce the risk for staff and pupils as set out in the existing guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in schools⁵ and any supplementary guidance associated with the phased reopening of schools; and the equivalent guidance on [ELC settings](#), [Childminding settings](#) and [School-Aged Childcare](#). Risk communication, community engagement and ongoing learning about implementation good practice, are crucial components of an effective response.
- Scottish Government, Education Scotland and local authorities should provide appropriate support to schools and ELC settings to enable them to implement the mitigations fully, to ensure the safety and wellbeing of staff, children and young people, taking into account local circumstances and the practical constraints faced by different schools in terms of issues such as building design.
- As an additional protective measure, 2 metre distancing should be put in place at the current time for secondary-aged pupils, in addition to continuing to be in place for staff in secondary schools.
- Physical distancing requirements in primary schools remain unchanged: 2 metre distancing between adults not from the same household should be maintained. There should also be 2 metre distancing between adults and primary aged children whenever possible.
- In line with the strengthened advice on 2 metre physical distancing in secondary schools, it will be also be necessary to ensure 2 metre distancing on school transport for secondary schools, recognising that this may not be possible in the case of school taxis or planes.
- It was noted that local authorities and schools, as they begin to return on a phased basis, will start routinely to offer at-home testing using lateral flow devices to
 - all primary, secondary and special school staff in local authority, independent and grant-aided schools;
 - all ELC and childcare staff based in local authority, independent and grant-aided schools; and
 - all senior phase pupils in local authority, independent and grant-aided secondary and special schools.

This offer will be extended to regulated day care of children services which are non-school based, in the weeks following the start of the programme.

Non-pharmaceutical interventions

1. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) published guidelines for the implementation of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPI) against

⁵ [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance on reducing the risks in schools - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

COVID-19 in September 2020.⁶ While there is no “one size fits all” approach, the guidelines recognise that there are some key principles that can be applied in all settings, based on the common sense idea that a given behaviour occurs when both the capability and opportunity are present, and when the individual concerned is more motivated to enact that behaviour than any other. School settings already provide individuals with the capability and opportunity to comply with NPIs by setting out clear guidance and providing essential products such as hand sanitiser and face coverings as required. It may, therefore, be more helpful to focus on how to encourage, support and motivate staff and pupils to continue to comply with the NPIs and understand any changes by, for example, appealing to community solidarity and working with children and young people to help develop a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for the safety of the school community.

2. The ECDC risk assessment of new SARS-CoV-2 variants of concern⁷ includes considerations for school settings which suggest that “a wide range of mitigation measures should be considered that minimise social mixing between school classes and adult staff, and these appear to be effective”. It goes on to say that “the school community should be viewed as a partner and a resource in order to optimise the response. Moreover, schools are important venues for science education and learning about good hygiene practices, such as handwashing. Students can become effective advocates for disease prevention and control in their homes, the school and the community at large.”

Physical distancing in schools

3. Given the new variant and the high current prevalence of COVID-19, and the advice from senior clinicians (as set out in the sub-group advice published on 3 February) the sub-group has concluded that its advice on physical distancing for secondary schools should be strengthened. At the current time, and during the phased return to in-person learning, 2 metre distancing should be in place for secondary aged pupils, in addition to continuing to be in place for staff.

4. Physical distancing requirements in primary schools should remain unchanged: 2 metre distancing between adults not from the same household, and 2 metre distancing between adults and children whenever possible.

Physical distancing in ELC settings

5. The current evidence is that young children remain less likely to transmit the virus and to have serious health effects from it. This, combined with the fact that it is not appropriate for young children to maintain physical distancing, either practically or in terms of child development, means the sub-group has concluded that its previous advice on physical distancing in ELC settings should be maintained: 2 metre distancing should be in place between staff, but no distancing should be required between young children, or between young children and staff.

⁶ [Guidelines for the implementation of non-pharmaceutical interventions against COVID-19 \(europa.eu\)](https://ecdc.europa.eu/en/guidelines/implementation-non-pharmaceutical-interventions-against-covid-19)

⁷ <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/COVID-19-risk-related-to-spread-of-new-SARS-CoV-2-variants-EU-EEA-first-update.pdf>

Face coverings

6. The sub-group considered whether advice on face coverings should be strengthened in order to require medical grade face masks to be worn in secondary schools. The clinical view was that such a requirement was not commensurate with the risk in school settings, and that cloth face coverings, when combined with the other important mitigations of physical distancing and hand hygiene, were considered appropriate in schools. This is in line with the current World Health Organisation (WHO) checklist to support schools re-opening which suggests that medical masks are only required under certain conditions (e.g. for immunocompromised children or those with other diseases, in consultation with the child's medical provider).⁸

7. The sub-group has concluded that its previous advice on face coverings in schools and ELC settings should be maintained, with the additional requirement that senior phase pupils should wear face coverings in classrooms (as set out in the enhanced protection measures for levels 2-3 in the strategic framework⁹). Schools and ELC settings should consider whether additional guidance, practical demonstrations, or communications for staff and pupils to support the correct wearing, storage and disposal of face coverings, including the use of hygiene products when doing so, would support better and more effective deployment of face coverings.

⁸ [Checklist to support schools re-opening and preparation for COVID-19 resurgences or similar public health crises \(who.int\)](#)

⁹ [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Scotland's Strategic Framework - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

Face Coverings	Secondary School	Primary School	ELC
To be worn by adults where they cannot keep two metre distance from other adults and / or children and young people.			
To be worn by adults where they cannot keep two metre distance from other adults.			
To be worn by adults when not working directly with children, for example when moving around settings, when gathering in staff, office and admin areas, and in canteens			
Should be strongly encouraged for parents and other visitors to the school site (whether entering the building or otherwise) including parents at drop-off and pick-up			
Classroom assistants and those supporting children with Additional Support Needs, who routinely have to work within two metres of secondary or special school pupils, should wear face coverings as a general rule. However, this should be balanced with the wellbeing and needs of the young person, recognising that face coverings may limit communication and could cause distress to some young people.			
Any adult wishing to wear a face covering should be enabled to do so.			
To be worn by pupils and adults in communal areas in schools.			
To be worn by senior phase pupils in classrooms			
To be worn by senior secondary pupils attending college or university for courses, or workplaces for training / work experience.			

School transport

8. The current advice is that dedicated school transport should be regarded as an extension of the school estate. As the advice on physical distancing in secondary schools has now been strengthened to require 2 metre distancing as part of the arrangements for the return to secondary schools, it will be also be necessary to ensure that 2 metre distancing also applies on school transport for secondary schools, recognising that this may not be possible in the case of school taxis or planes. This is a precautionary approach, which will be reviewed as the phased return to in-person learning proceeds, and as more evidence becomes available on transmission of the new virus and its prevalence in the community.

9. The advice remains that face coverings should be worn by children aged 5 years and over on dedicated school transport (unless exemptions apply) in line with the position on public transport.

10. The sub-group also considered the issue of car sharing, and concluded that staff and pupils should follow the existing Transport Scotland guidance on car and

vehicle sharing¹⁰ and should not share a vehicle with someone from another household unless absolutely necessary.

Ventilation

11. The Scottish Government has received feedback from the Scottish Heads of Property network on the existing heating and ventilation sections within the guidance on reducing the risks from COVID-19 in schools. The guidance is still considered to be robust and appropriate, and the period of school closure is being utilised by local authorities to carry out the assessments and practical mitigations generated by the current guidance.

12. The SAGE Environmental and Modelling Group (EMG) has looked at ventilation actions to mitigate the risk of COVID-19¹¹ and is clear that ventilation is only one part of a hierarchy of risk controls approach to be put in place alongside other source control measures.

13. The Centre for Disease Control has stated¹²

*“Existing interventions to prevent the spread of SARS-CoV-2 appear sufficient to address transmission both through close contact and under the special circumstances favorable to potential airborne transmission. Among these interventions, which include social distancing, use of masks in the community, hand hygiene, and surface cleaning and disinfection, **ventilation** and **avoidance of crowded indoor spaces** are especially relevant for enclosed spaces, where circumstances can increase the concentration of suspended small droplets and particles carrying infectious virus. At this time, there is no indication of a general community need to use special engineering controls, such as those required to protect against airborne transmission of infections, like measles or tuberculosis, in the healthcare setting.”*

14. In light of this evidence, the sub-group has concluded that the existing advice on ventilation should stand and that local authorities should continue to meet regularly to discuss issues relating to heating and ventilation in schools and share expertise to optimise their individual strategies.

Residence halls/hostels provided by local authority secondary schools.

15. The sub-group considered the issue of senior phase pupils who would need to stay in local authority provided residence halls or hostels, in order to attend school, even on a limited basis, for the purpose of practical assessment for the alternative certification model for national qualifications. In order to ensure equity of access for such senior phase pupils, the sub-group advised that such pupils could remain in their residential “bubbles” for the majority of the time and still attend school for the purpose of practical assessment. However, all other interactions with the wider community should be minimised, in line with existing guidance.

¹⁰ [Advice on car and vehicle sharing \(transport.gov.scot\)](https://www.transport.gov.scot/advice-on-car-and-vehicle-sharing)

¹¹ [EMG: Simple summary of ventilation actions to mitigate the risk of COVID-19, 1 October 2020 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/emg-simple-summary-of-ventilation-actions-to-mitigate-the-risk-of-covid-19-1-october-2020)

¹² [Scientific Brief: SARS-CoV-2 and Potential Airborne Transmission | CDC](https://www.cdc.gov/science/2020/sars-cov-2-potential-airborne-transmission)

School trips

16. Guidance on school trips is available at [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance for school visits and trips - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/Topics/education/schooltrips). This currently advises that no school trips are recommended, including day trips. The sub-group recognised the value of outdoor activities and learning and advises, in line with previous advice that outdoor learning is safer than indoor and should be promoted where possible, that short, local visits which promote outdoor learning (e.g. to a local park or green space) should be encouraged subject to being fully risk-assessed.

Very small schools

17. The phased return to in-person learning is less straightforward for those very small schools that have the entire primary cohort in a single class. For some of these schools, there will be only one teacher for the whole class, which means there is unlikely to be sufficient staff to teach P1-P3 children in school, while also enabling remote learning for the remainder of the class. The numbers involved are very low, and options involving fewer numbers of younger children returning are likely to have a smaller impact on R. The sub-group has therefore advised that an exception should be made for very small schools (those with 25 children or fewer on their school roll) which have the entire primary cohort in a single class, to allow them all to be taught in school. This also takes into account the particular challenges faced by Scotland's rural and island communities.