

**Joint Statement from Public Health Scotland and the Scottish Directors of Public Health on the re-opening of schools and other educational settings**

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The Directors of Public Health in Scotland and Public Health Scotland jointly welcome the Scottish Government's ongoing commitment to returning children and young people to childcare and education as soon as possible. Given the current prevalence levels and evidence of the wider harms and educational impact of the current measures on children, young people and their families, we strongly support all early learning and school children returning to face to face learning as soon as is practical. To enable this, we would recommend that other sectors including universities should only re-open when appropriate mitigation measures are in place to deal with the recent variant of concern (VOC); that travel should continue to be restricted; employers should continue to enable parents to work from home when their children return to education; and there is strong messaging about adults and children not mixing outside of school. Protecting our children and young people from the current and potentially lifelong harm that disruption to learning and social development brings must be a priority.

Prevalence of COVID-19 has declined substantially since the peak in December. Evidence from the PHS Education Surveillance Programme and local Health Protection Teams has consistently indicated that ELC and schools are not a high risk environment for the transmission of COVID-19. Very few children who isolate as contacts from the school setting go on to become positive cases themselves. Evidence shows that transmission is driven within households and other interactions outside of the school setting, and rather than causing harm, working or living with children is associated with a *lower* risk of severe COVID.

Emerging evidence collated by NERVTAG indicates the possibility of an increase in the risk of death with the UK VOC and while the increased risk is proportionate across population groups, the risk of severe COVID remains very low for children overall. Adult to adult transmission, as in all work place settings, should be mitigated by strict social distancing between adults at all times, and a review of current mitigation advice should be undertaken and then followed with renewed attention.

We appreciate the need for the cautious approach being taken to education return and agree that all of ELC and primary school children return as soon as practically possible, with a blended approach for all secondary school children. We would not recommend a geographically based return (unless on an exceptional basis) because of the inequalities this would exacerbate. In general we believe it is safe for education staff to return, however, we recommend that staff who are in the shielded category should continue to work from home at the present time.

We are committed to prioritising support for the public health measures required to provide confidence to education staff, parents and pupils. To support this Public Health Scotland and the Directors of Public Health will:

- 1) Advocate for all remaining school settings to open as soon as is practical
- 2) Work in partnership to develop a communications plan for local areas to use to raise confidence around school safety, and engage proactively with environmental health officers prior to the re-opening
- 3) Continue to provide an education surveillance programme to monitor the situation in schools closely so that emerging issues can be addressed rapidly especially transmission of the new variant in contacts of cases in education settings. If very few child contacts become cases we will review the criteria used to identify contacts for self-isolation within educational settings. This would apply to children and not education staff. In the meantime, to reduce the number of children isolating when there is a case, education settings should continue to have the smallest bubble sizes possible.
- 4) Explore, as part of the review of the criteria used to identify contacts in educational settings, whether enhanced testing of contacts when there is a case - through either repeated testing in-school or with at-home LFT test kits - would reduce anxiety levels for staff, pupils and parents.
- 5) Seek advice from the JCVI as to whether the two thirds of educational staff not vaccinated within the current nine priority groups for vaccination should be included in any subsequent prioritisation (after the first nine priority groups), along with other essential key worker staff who cannot work from home.

We have re-considered the mitigations currently in place within educational settings and do not recommend any further changes. We acknowledge the excellent work that the education sector has undertaken to follow the recommendations, and will support education staff to follow these recommendations at all times. We do not recommend distancing of children in ELC or primary school settings, and we do not recommend the use of face masks for ELC or primary school children. The importance of education staff strictly following the mitigations in staff rooms, classrooms, around car sharing and shared equipment (e.g. keyboards), hand hygiene, ventilation and symptom vigilance, cannot be stressed enough. Current measures should remain in place for senior phase pupils. We advise that schools and ELC settings should review their public health measures, cross match it with the public health guidance, and identify gaps and improvements they can make (e.g. restricting movement where possible).

In closing, we reaffirm our commitment to support the Scottish Government and to work alongside the childcare, education, and youth work sector in Scotland to return all our children and young people to formal and informal education as quickly and safely as possible.

15/02/2021