

Joint union safety guidance for schools and other settings

**Measures to slow the
spread in schools and other
education settings**

January 2022

Coronavirus crisis
Workplace guidance



Measures to slow the spread in schools and other education settings – January 2022

We face yet another critical moment in the pandemic in January 2022, with the dominance of the Omicron variant. This advice has been issued in light of the refreshed Welsh Government guidance and will be kept under review.

Welsh Government has moved the level which schools need to adhere to on the [“Local COVID-19 infection control decision framework for schools”](#) to “Very high”.

Our priority, as always, is to protect education, and this means keeping staff and students as safe as possible from the impact of the virus. By following our guidance, schools and other settings can seek to minimise the risk of disruption.

According to Office for National Statistics (ONS) figures last term, education workers were at greater risk of testing positive for Covid-19 than the general population because of high cases amongst school children. This has led to increased levels of staff absence and disruption in schools.

Vaccinations

Although it is an individual’s choice, we urge all members to get fully vaccinated and to encourage colleagues to do so too. Vaccination is to protect yourself, your more vulnerable colleagues and students, your community, the provision of face-to-face education and, ultimately, the ability of NHS Wales to treat those with serious conditions.

Where necessary, staff should be allowed paid time off so they can receive their jabs at the earliest possible opportunity. Health professionals are particularly urging pregnant women to get their vaccines. Unvaccinated pregnant women are at greater risk of severe illness and pre-term birth.

Risk assessments

It is critical, and a legal requirement, that leaders review and update risk assessments in consultation with union reps and staff, in light of the much more transmissible Omicron variant.

- Revised procedures should be clearly communicated to staff, students, parents/carers, contractor staff, visitors and visiting workers.
- Risk assessment implementation should be continuously monitored.
- In special schools, revised risk assessments should fully reflect the additional challenges in protecting pupils and staff.
- The position of the most vulnerable staff should be addressed through individual risk assessments. Although it is not a Welsh Government requirement, until we know more about the Omicron variant, the joint unions urge all employers to permit staff who are clinically extremely vulnerable and pregnant women to work from home. Vulnerable staff should also be offered the option of a non-contact role with FFP2/FFP3 masks. More detailed joint union advice for staff at greater risk is also available.

Ventilation

- All settings should by now have access to CO₂ monitors and ventilation measures should keep CO₂ below 800ppm in all occupied classrooms.
 - The CO₂ monitoring results should feed into a risk assessment, and if the levels are consistently above 800ppm, and ventilation cannot be improved, naturally or mechanically, then options include:
 - reducing the number of people in the room.
 - reducing the length of time groups spend in the room.
 - temporarily vacating the room.
 - Any areas identified as having levels of CO₂ consistently above 800ppm should be provided with supplemental ventilation, such as a HEPA filtration unit. We cannot recommend particular models, but [this list](#) does offer a wider range of options.
 - Welsh Government has produced [guidance](#) on using CO₂ monitors. Joint union guidance on ventilation can be found [here](#).
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Face Coverings and PPE

- Welsh Government is recommending that face coverings should be worn by pupils and staff in secondary schools. This includes special schools where children and young people who are able to do so.
- Pupils in Year 7 and above must wear a face covering when travelling on public transport and dedicated school transport.
- No member of staff in any setting should be prevented from wearing a face covering in any part of the premises.
- Personal protective equipment (PPE), including FFP2 or FFP3 grade masks as appropriate, should be provided for staff administering first aid, medical care or personal care activities where social distancing cannot be maintained, including special schools and nurseries.
- Appropriate PPE should be provided for all catering, cleaning, and estates staff.
- FFP2/3 masks should be provided for staff who are clinically extremely vulnerable or otherwise at significantly greater risk in the workplace. (Risk assessments should address whether such staff should be working from home and where it is necessary staff should be supported to do so).
- Where pupils rely on lip reading, or facial expressions to communicate, transparent face coverings should be worn.

Social distancing

- Measures to minimise mixing, for example keeping groups as consistent as possible, should be reintroduced. **Any suggestion to consider combining classes to address staff shortages will increase virus transmission, leading to further disruption, and therefore should not be adopted.**
- One-way systems, where no longer in place, should be reintroduced to cut crowding in corridors.
- Seating plans, and other measures, should be reintroduced in line with Welsh Government [guidance](#).
- Large gatherings such as whole school or whole year group/key stage assemblies, should be avoided or moved on-line. Face-to-face staff meetings and parents' evenings should not take place. They should be held online and should have appropriate social distancing maintained where there is no alternative to them being held in person.
- Staggered timings for lunch breaks, other breaks, and start and finish times should be reintroduced.
- Safe arrangements for students and parents queuing on arrival, parents waiting to collect students, staff supervising students on arrival or departure and reception of visitors should be reintroduced.

Testing and isolation

- Leaders should strongly encourage testing for all staff and three times a week, and where possible daily, including registering of test results. Schools, staff, and families should be advised where they can access these.
- In order to slow the spread of Omicron, Welsh Government advice is that people who are:
 - fully vaccinated
 - aged between 5 and 17 years
 - identified as a contact of someone with Covid-19should take a lateral flow test (LFD) every day for seven days.
- **The joint unions would urge that, in addition to LFD testing, sibling and other household contacts be encouraged to stay at home until a negative PCR test result has been received, to protect other pupils/staff and families.**
- Where close contacts are unable to get hold of LFDs due to supply issues, they should be supported to work from home for the isolation period.
- Without identifying any individuals directly or indirectly, we would urge leaders to inform staff, parents and students of any positive cases, as soon as possible.
- Welsh Government have issued template [“inform”](#) letters, to be sent to a class when one child has tested positive. If two test positive then everyone undertakes a daily LFD test and [“warn and inform”](#) letters are issued.
- Contractors should be required to comply with this guidance and ensure full pay for all Covid-related absences. Education providers should engage with contractors to ensure consistency in managing all aspects of Covid-19 mitigation measures on site.

Staff shortages

- Teachers at a school (other than those employed wholly or mainly to cover, including supply teachers) should be expected only to cover for absence in circumstances that are not foreseeable. Given the ongoing nature of the pandemic, teacher absence as a result of Covid-19 is foreseeable and should be planned for accordingly.
- Teaching Assistants are not expected to cover for absent teachers. Given the ongoing nature of the pandemic, teacher absence as a result of Covid-19 is foreseeable and should be planned for accordingly. Any proposed changes in role or responsibility for support staff should be discussed and agreed with the individual staff member and raised with their union should there be a query. Only suitably qualified teaching assistants (usually HLTAs) should be asked to lead classes, and even then, only in situations known about in advance, under the direction and supervision of a teacher, and not on an indefinite basis.
- Teachers should not routinely be expected to cover for absent colleagues, nor should they be expected to teach pupils who they have not been assigned to teach, i.e., pupils who are not registered for timetabled lessons with them, collapsed classes or multi-class assemblies. Cover is not an effective use of a teacher's time and collapsing/combining classes is not only cover, but increasing the numbers of pupils in classrooms, or having large numbers of pupils in halls, will also only serve to increase transmission of the virus.
- PPA time is a statutory requirement, under the STPC(W)D, and cannot be encroached upon. Use of PPA time should be a professional judgement for teachers.
- Where teachers are being expected to cover routinely, or accept additional pupils from combining classes, this should be urgently raised with their union.
- In special schools recruiting suitable cover for absent staff can be challenging and disruptive for pupils. Where schools have staff shortages, they should use risk assessments and discussion with union representatives, staff, and parents, to decide whether additional measures need to be introduced.

Hygiene

- A renewed focus on enhanced hygiene and cleaning regimes is needed throughout the premises, including arrangements for enhanced hand washing; for employing additional cleaning staff; and for additional payments to cleaning and estates staff for extra workload or hours worked.