

# Practical steps to reduce the risk of Covid-19 disruption in schools and other education settings

Spring/Summer 2022



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## Joint union guidance for schools and other settings

Though there has been extreme pressure on schools again in 2022, most school and college staff have now had their double vaccination and booster. Our focus has always been, and remains, on preventing educational disruption, which has meant recommending measures to keep staff and children as protected from the virus as possible in very challenging circumstances. Prevalence is still high, and the pandemic is not over. Covid-19 still has the potential to cause disruption to education whether through new variants, Omicron spikes or through the impact of repeat infections.

This revised guidance has been issued by the joint unions (NEU, GMB, UCU, Unison and Unite) for use in schools and other settings from March 2022. It:

- ▣ brings together the relevant public health guidance, including from the DfE;
- ▣ reflects what is required by health and safety law; and
- ▣ incorporates the joint unions' steer on how best to implement this in education settings.

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## Risk assessments

- ▣ It is still a legal requirement that leaders regularly review and update risk assessments, in consultation with union reps and staff, whenever circumstances change, to reflect the current level of risk. The DfE guidance [Schools COVID-19 operational guidance \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk) is also clear on this, referring to risk assessments as 'living documents' with active arrangements needing to be in place to monitor whether the controls are effective. Revision of risk assessments offers an opportunity for staff to organise around what is important to them collectively.
- ▣ Revised procedures should be clearly communicated to staff, students, parents/carers, contractor staff, visitors and visiting workers and their implementation monitored.
- ▣ The position of the most vulnerable staff, and those who are pregnant, should continue to be addressed through individual risk assessments. Read our full joint union advice for staff at greater risk [here](#).

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## Vaccinations

Although it is an individual's choice, we continue to urge all members to get fully vaccinated, including boosters. This message is reflected in the DfE's own guidance [Schools COVID-19 operational guidance \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk). This is to protect everyone, including more vulnerable colleagues and students, the community, the provision of in-person education and, ultimately, the ability of the NHS to treat the backlog of serious non-Covid-related conditions. Where necessary, any remaining staff who have not yet been vaccinated should be allowed paid time off so they can receive their jabs and boosters at the earliest possible opportunity. Health professionals are continuing to urge pregnant women to get their vaccines as unvaccinated pregnant women are at greater risk of severe illness and pre-term birth.

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## Ventilation

Covid-19 spreads through the air. Good ventilation reduces the amount of virus in the air and therefore helps reduce the risk from aerosol transmission. It is key to a safer indoor working environment, and this is recognised by the DfE which recommends Health and Safety Executive guidance on air conditioning and ventilation during the Covid-19 pandemic [Ventilation and air conditioning during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic \(hse.gov.uk\)](https://www.hse.gov.uk) and CIBSE Covid-19 advice [CIBSE - Coronavirus COVID 19](https://www.cibse.org).

- The level of CO2 acts as a proxy for the Covid-19 risk as people exhale airborne viruses when they exhale CO2. All settings should by now have access to Government-provided 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 available include reducing the number of people in the room, reducing the length of time groups spend in the room, or temporarily vacating the room. Any areas identified as having levels of CO2 consistently above 800ppm should be provided with equipment to supplement ventilation, such as a HEPA filtration unit. The Department for Education (DfE) rolled out a very limited number of these units, but most schools were not able to benefit from this scheme. We cannot recommend models, but this resource [Portable Air Cleaner \(HEPA filter\) buying guide - Clean Air Crew](#) should be helpful.

- Improving ventilation must remain a focus for the long term, to reduce the risk of transmission of other airborne viruses, to aid concentration in the classroom and to help schools meet their sustainability goals.

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## Face Coverings and PPE

- The joint unions believe that face coverings played a valuable role in reducing transmission of the Omicron variant, which could otherwise have been even higher. Although face coverings are no longer recommended by the Government, we encourage schools and other settings to adopt an agile approach and respond appropriately and proportionately to spikes and outbreaks by reinstating the wearing of masks as part of risk assessments and in response to local public health guidance. This is in line with DfE guidance which states that schools need to be ready with contingency plans to step up guidance where required.
- No member of staff or pupil in any setting should be prevented from wearing a face covering in any part of the premises.

- Personal protective equipment (PPE) should continue to be provided for staff administering first aid, medical care or personal care activities in all educational settings.
- FFP2/3 masks should be made available to staff who were previously classified as clinically extremely vulnerable or otherwise at significantly greater risk, and any member of staff who is anxious about their situation.
- Where face coverings are worn, pupils who rely on lip reading or facial expressions to communicate, can be supported by the wearing of transparent face coverings.

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## Asymptomatic testing

- Staff and pupils in specialist SEND settings, AP and SEND units in mainstream schools or equivalent in FE colleges, are currently advised by DfE to continue regular twice weekly testing.
- In all other settings, staff and pupils are no longer expected by the Government to continue taking part in regular asymptomatic testing and are instead advised to follow testing advice for the general population. Further information on testing is available in [Get tested for coronavirus \(COVID-19\) - NHS \(www.nhs.uk\)](https://www.nhs.uk/get-tested-for-coronavirus-covid-19).
- We think the Government is withdrawing free testing earlier than it should, and, alongside public health advice, we recommend asymptomatic testing for as long as tests remain freely available.
- In the event of an outbreak, schools may also be advised by their local health team or director of public health to undertake testing of staff and students of secondary age and above for a temporary period.
- We continue to urge leaders to inform staff, parents and students of any

positive cases, as soon as possible, without identifying any individuals directly or indirectly, so people can follow the relevant public health advice that applies to them.

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## Isolation

- Despite the removal of the legal requirement for positive cases to self-isolate, public health advice COVID-19: people with [COVID-19 and their contacts - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-and-their-contacts) is that this should continue to happen so schools are strongly urged to require anyone, staff or pupil, who tests positive, or with suspected Covid-19, [nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/symptoms/main-symptoms/](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/symptoms/main-symptoms/), to stay at home and avoid contact with other people. This is also what should happen when experiencing symptoms of other infectious diseases, such as diarrhoea, vomiting, chicken pox etc. Public health advice is that usual routines may resume if negative results are obtained from two lateral flow tests on day 5 and 6 after a positive test/ symptoms began, and temperature is normal. Some people experience a wider range of symptoms beyond a high temperature, new, continuous cough and loss or change to sense of smell or taste [covid.joinzoe.com/post/what-are-the-symptoms-of-covid#part\\_2](https://www.covid.joinzoe.com/post/what-are-the-symptoms-of-covid#part_2)
- The DfE guidance [Actions for schools during the coronavirus outbreak - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak) makes clear that if a parent or carer insists on a pupil attending school where they have a confirmed or suspected case of Covid-19, schools can insist the child stays away, to protect other pupils and staff from possible infection.
- Such absences should be on full sick pay for those staff who are feeling unwell, or on ordinary pay for those who aren't and can work from home.

Such absences should not be counted against trigger points in sickness/absence management procedures.

- UKHSA guidance [COVID-19: people with COVID-19 and their contacts - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/covid-19-people-with-covid-19-and-their-contacts) advises that people (not including school children) who live in the same household as someone who has tested positive for Covid-19 should work from home if they are able to do so (this is not the same as guidance to isolate). The joint unions would, therefore, expect that school staff who live with someone who has Covid-19 be permitted to work from home where possible. This guidance is not dependent on vaccination status.

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## Hygiene

- A continued focus on enhanced hygiene and cleaning regimes, particularly handwashing, is recommended both in the context of Covid-19 and in preventing outbreaks of other infectious diseases. [Guidance on infection control in schools poster.pdf \(hscni.net\)](https://www.hscni.net/guidance-on-infection-control-in-schools-poster.pdf)

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## 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.
- 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.

- Where teachers are being expected to cover routinely, or accept additional pupils from combining classes, this should be urgently raised with their union rep or branch.
- Any proposed changes in role or responsibility for support staff should be discussed and agreed with the individual staff member. Only suitably qualified teaching assistants (usually HLTAs) should be asked to lead classes, and even then, only in situations not known about in advance and not on an indefinite basis.
- Support staff who are asked to undertake a role they are not trained or qualified for should urgently raise this with their union rep or branch.
- 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 staff and parents, to decide whether additional measures need to be introduced.