

Autumn term guidance on infection control decision framework for schools

Included in this bulletin:

| | |
|--|---|
| Introduction | 1 |
| Risk assessments | 2 |
| Clinically vulnerable and pregnant members | 2 |
| Testing | 3 |
| Contact groups | 3 |
| Contact tracing | 3 |
| Face coverings | 4 |
| Cleaning | 4 |
| Ventilation | 4 |
| Remote education | 4 |

Introduction

In July 2021, the First Minister published the updated [Coronavirus Control Plan for Wales](#), which sets out arrangements to move to 'alert level zero'. Wales moved to alert level zero on 7 August 2021.

The Control Plan signals the expectation that schools should operate as normally as possible. Baseline measures, including risk assessments, improved hygiene and ventilation, and preventing attendance by individuals with COVID-19 symptoms, will continue to be in place, but other measures are being relaxed as part of a proportionate system of controls.

The Control Plan sets out the protective behaviours that continue to be very important – these include:

- keeping your distance wherever possible;
- minimising the number of social contacts and time spent with them;
- meeting outdoors or in well-ventilated places;
- avoiding crowded places wherever possible and wearing a face covering when that is not possible.

However, this guidance does NOT apply to schools. The Welsh Government issued the *Local COVID-19 Infection Control Decision Framework for schools* (The Framework) on 27 August. This sets out arrangements for the delivery of learning in schools and it enables schools to tailor interventions to reflect local risks and circumstances. It takes effect from 1 September 2021, and schools have been told to adopt it as soon as possible. The deadline for adoption is 20 September 2021, when the existing Welsh Government Operational Guidance for schools will cease.

The Welsh Government at the end of The Framework Guidance states that the fundamental principle remains that the most effective way to prevent transmission of COVID-19 in our schools is to stop infection being brought into the school.

The NASUWT, therefore, remains concerned that for schools, the restrictions have, by and large, been removed. Schools are being allowed some flexibility for local decision-making and tailored interventions. This provides potential difficulties, as the Union is aware that some school management may rush to remove current protections. However, it also provides opportunities for schools to maintain the current protections. In particular, the Control Plan states that employers should consider the use of face coverings in the workplace as part of their coronavirus risk assessment.

continued overleaf

The NASUWT is also concerned in the context of rising case rates due to increased transmissibility and the spread of the delta variant. This has been particularly noticeable in Scotland, where schools have been open since 17 August, despite face coverings still being required in secondary settings. The Union also notes that continued asymptomatic transmission is common in school-aged young people.

Schools will be supported in their consideration and risk assessments by local authorities, Incident Management Teams (IMTs) and public health officials.

The full Framework can be found at: <https://gov.wales/written-statement-local-covid-19-infection-control-decision-frameworks-schools-and-colleges-autumn>.

Risk assessments

Despite other regulations being relaxed, workplaces and public spaces will still need to put in place mitigations to minimise risks. The general regulations pertaining to risk assessment remain in place and schools and employers remain obliged to risk assess and take all reasonably practicable steps to ensure the health, safety and welfare of staff and pupils.

As part of this, schools will need to ensure that regular COVID-19 risk assessments continue to be undertaken. The assessment should directly address risks associated with COVID-19, to enable measures to be put in place to control those risks. The practical steps can include retaining coronavirus restrictions.

Employers will need to take full account of the requirement to keep staff safe at work and should offer individual risk assessments for their members of staff, dependent on the roles they play and whether they are at increased risk or clinically extremely vulnerable. Headteachers will need to discuss the mitigations and adjustment required with individual teachers.

As throughout the pandemic, risk assessments should be shared with members, and any concerns should be raised with school management in the first instance. Risk assessments must be specific to the workplace, situation or specific activity in question.

Clinically vulnerable and pregnant members

The guidance makes clear that employers still have a legal responsibility to protect their employees and others from risks to their health and safety, and that employers should be able to explain to employees the measures they have in place to keep them safe at work.

In respect of the clinically vulnerable (CV) and clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV), the guidance states that staff in schools who are CEV should currently attend their place of work if they cannot work from home. The Welsh Government has published updated guidance, which can be found at: <https://gov.wales/guidance-protecting-people-defined-medical-grounds-clinically-extremely-vulnerable-coronavirus>.

Staff who are at increased risk can continue to attend school, but they should have an individual workplace assessment. While in school, they should follow the interventions to minimise the risks of transmission - including taking particular care to observe good hand and respiratory hygiene, minimising contact and maintaining physical distancing.

The NASUWT would advise CV and CEV people to ensure that their individual risk assessment is updated, taking into account any advice from their medical professional or occupational health advisor.

Updated guidance has also been produced for pregnant women, which can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-for-pregnant-employees/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-for-pregnant-employees>.

This states that women who are 28 weeks pregnant and beyond or with underlying health conditions that place them at a greater risk of severe illness from coronavirus should take a more precautionary approach.

The NASUWT has produced specific guidance on this.

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Testing

Twice-weekly Lateral Flow Device (LFD) testing will continue to be offered at the start of the academic year to staff in primary schools and staff and learners in secondary schools.

Following that, it is likely, if the risk continues to be identified as low, that little or no regular LFD testing will be offered or required. Testing will be available for contacts of confirmed positive cases. Only if the risk is identified as becoming high will twice-weekly LFD testing become available for staff and secondary learners to help identify and isolate asymptomatic cases.

Staff and learners should not attend school if they have any COVID-19 symptoms. If a staff member or learner becomes symptomatic, they should get a test as soon as possible and self-isolate until the outcome of the test. If the test is negative, they can leave self-isolation. Further guidance is available [here](#).

As of now, if anyone tests positive on a lateral flow test, they will require a confirmatory Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test, although self-isolation must start immediately.

Contact groups

There is no longer any requirement to have contact groups in schools, meaning that the guidance permits pupils to mix freely in schools and that large gatherings such as assemblies can resume. Schools do have the discretion to continue with contact groups and these may be reintroduced in the case of local outbreaks.

Baseline measures, including risk assessments, improved hygiene and ventilation, and preventing attendance by individuals with COVID-19 symptoms, will continue to be in place, but other measures are being relaxed.

Schools are allowed some flexibility for local decision-making and tailored interventions, supported by local authorities, IMTs and public health officials. However, the Welsh Government Framework indicates that contact groups would only be reintroduced if the risk becomes 'very high'.

Preventing mixing of pupils is a very effective way of stopping large-scale transmission of the virus and the NASUWT would urge schools to continue to consider limiting the mixing of pupils as part of their risk assessment.

Contact tracing

If a child, learner or member of staff tests positive for coronavirus, or has any of the COVID-19 symptoms, they should self-isolate, not attend the childcare or education setting and get a test.

Schools must retain procedures for dealing with suspected cases, including immediate isolation.

TTP (Test, Trace, Protect) contact tracers will contact anyone who has tested positive, get in touch with identified close contacts and offer them PCR testing on day two (or as soon as possible once identified as a contact) and day eight. TTP will also advise them on the most appropriate actions for their circumstances and for some, this will include advising to self-isolate.

The majority of learners in a class/year group are unlikely to be identified as close contacts. However, schools may be advised to take a 'warn and inform' approach to update parents and staff on the situation and what they need to do based on TTP advice.

From 7 August, all children under 18 and fully vaccinated adults (i.e. those who have received two vaccine doses) will no longer be required to self-isolate if contacted by TTP. Instead they will be advised to take a PCR test. This includes where a household contact is symptomatic and/or has tested positive.

The Regulations set out an obligation for persons responsible for premises open to the public or for work premises to:

Take reasonable measures to mitigate the risk of exposure to coronavirus that arises where persons gather on the premises, such as seeking to prevent the following persons from being present at the premises:

- *who has tested positive for coronavirus in the previous 10 days,*

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- who has had close contact in the previous 10 days with a person who has tested positive for coronavirus,
- any person experiencing symptoms associated with COVID-19.

Face coverings

All requirements to wear face coverings were removed from 7 August. The Education Minister has written to all schools and colleges to set out that wearing face coverings in the classroom will no longer be recommended from September. However, the NASUWT would still urge all schools to strongly recommend their continued use by staff and pupils in classrooms and communal areas.

The Control Plan states that *'there is some evidence that face coverings may provide a partial protective effect against transmission of COVID-19. They are more effective if most people in a particular setting are wearing them. There is therefore a benefit to maintaining a regulatory requirement for wearing face coverings in some circumstances or settings – particularly during periods when there are higher levels of coronavirus circulating across Wales'*.

There is nothing in the regulations to prevent schools including this in the mitigation in their risk assessment.

There is nothing to stop individuals wearing face coverings if they choose to do so and pupils and staff should be permitted to do so.

Cleaning

The Framework states that appropriate levels of cleaning are maintained in line with other communicable diseases. There will, however, no longer be a need for schools to set aside specific days for deep cleaning. However, if there is a confirmed cluster associated with one class in the school, a deep clean of the immediate area will continue to be helpful in reducing transmission.

The NASUWT considers that, given the removal of most other mitigations, it is vitally important that schools stringently continue to ensure that enhanced cleaning takes place, with touch surfaces being cleaned and disinfected at least twice a day and people regularly washing or sanitising their hands.

Ventilation

Advice around ventilation remains in place and schools should continue to ensure adequate ventilation by opening windows or adjusting ventilation systems. Further Welsh Government guidance is available [here](#).

Schools should identify poorly ventilated areas and take steps to improve ventilation.

The NASUWT has specific guidance on [Ventilation and Covid-19](#), which includes the use of CO2 monitors.

Remote education

Where pupils are self-isolating, there is still a requirement to provide remote education. However, this should not extend to other situations, such as when pupils are off sick or where parents are reluctant to let their children attend school.

The NASUWT has full guidance on remote learning at [Arrangements for Remote Teaching and Learning](#).



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