

CORONAVIRUS (COVID19)



EDUCATION RESTART

Absence, Pay and Staffing
Guidance Relating to
Coronavirus (COVID-19)



Department of
Education
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Absence, Pay and Staffing Guidance Relating to Coronavirus (COVID-19):

Advice for Principals, Managers and Staff (Updated 10/01/2022)

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GUIDANCE ON ABSENCE RELATING TO CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)

ADVICE FOR PRINCIPALS, MANAGERS AND STAFF

(Updated 10/01/2022)

1.0 Introduction

This guidance provides the latest advice on absence, pay arrangements and staffing matters linked to COVID-19.

The health, safety and wellbeing of pupils and staff is of paramount importance to all education employers in the sector. The following guidance has been produced to ensure employers and employees are aware of arrangements regarding absences in relation to COVID-19.

This guidance should be read alongside the latest Public Health Agency (PHA)/Government guidance, to support Principals/Line Managers and staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, we draw your attention to the Department of Education's Education Restart [Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings](#)

The following information and guidance applies to employees subject to NJC/JNC and TNC terms and conditions including substitute teachers and non-teaching staff providing emergency cover for the period of time they have been engaged to work.

Procedures for other absences not related to COVID-19 remain extant.

This guidance should be used to supplement any specific guidance and social distancing protocols linked to schools and it recognises that for the majority of school based staff it may not be feasible to work from home.

This guidance includes current advice from the PHA which is subject to change. In the event of new information or guidance a further update will be issued. Please also refer to the Department's [Guidance to Support Safe Working in Educational Settings](#) and wider COVID-19 related guidance issued by the Public Health Agency (PHA).

1.1 Context/ latest developments as at 10 January 2022

1.1.1 Those who get a positive lateral flow test will no longer need a PCR

From 05 January 2022 staff who get a positive lateral flow test will no longer need a PCR test to confirm that result. If a lateral flow test is positive, staff should assume they have COVID-19 and are infectious. They should self-isolate immediately for the required period.

The removal of the requirement for a confirmatory PCR test is a temporary measure in response to the very high prevalence of COVID-19 in NI at present.

1.1.2 **Potential earlier end of self-isolation period** for those testing positive:

Under new rules introduced on 31 December 2021 staff who test positive for COVID-19 can stop self-isolating up to three days early if they meet the following criteria.

Staff who do not have a **high** temperature will be able to end self-isolation after 7 days instead of 10 if they obtain negative lateral flow results on both day 6 and day 7 (taken a minimum of 24 hours apart).

If either Day 6 or Day 7 tests are positive, staff should continue to isolate until they get two negative lateral flow tests taken 24 hours apart, or after they have completed 10 full days of isolation (whichever is earlier). It will not be necessary to provide evidence to Principals/ line managers that these conditions have been met, but staff are required to report their lateral flow test results via the Gov.uk [website](#).

1.1.3 **New rules for fully vaccinated close contacts**: Staff who are a close contact of someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 and are fully vaccinated (more than 14 days since you received the second dose of an approved COVID-19 vaccine) or have taken part in an approved COVID-19 vaccine trial, should self-isolate immediately. They **do not** need to get a PCR test¹. Staff in this scenario should take a lateral flow test as soon as possible.

- If the lateral test is negative, isolation can stop but staff should continue to take a daily lateral flow test every day until the tenth day after their last date of contact with the positive case. The lateral flow test should ideally be taken before you leave the house for the first time each day.
- If staff subsequently develop symptoms, they should isolate immediately and book a PCR even if the lateral flow test is negative.
- If any lateral flow test is positive staff should isolate immediately. Staff no longer need to book a PCR test unless they are [clinically extremely vulnerable](#).
- Even if you are fully vaccinated, if you have been identified as a close contact, you are advised not to visit hospitals or care homes for 10 days and to minimise contact with those known to be at higher risk of severe illness if they contract COVID-19, such as the [Clinically Extremely Vulnerable Group \(CEV\)](#), for 10 days.
- Principals/Line Managers should be flexible, accommodating and supportive to enable staff to access tests and/or vaccines.

¹ Exceptions exist for Clinically Extremely Vulnerable staff who should still book a PCR test – [click here](#) for more information

1.1.4 Interim changes to the provisions of GP Fit Notes (Statement of Fitness for work certificates) are in effect from 17 December 2021 until 27 January 2022.

For more information [click here](#)

1.1.5 Ongoing position

- A person who develops symptoms (as defined in section 3) of COVID-19, whether vaccinated or not, must immediately isolate and book a [PCR test](#).
- Current school/workplace social distancing protocols remain in place and under regular review.
- Staff face covering requirements remain in place and under review. Post-primary students are required to wear face coverings in class and will also be required to do so in corridors and suggested areas, and on transport to schools or other educational settings. This position remains under review.
- Staff should continue to work remotely where they can do so effectively and fully. However, if required by their Principal/Line Manager to attend the work place for an essential reason they are expected to do so. Where attendance in the work place is required, this will necessitate consideration of any personal medical or exceptional circumstances.
- Since 12 April 2021 CEV staff should continue to work from home where this is possible. Where it is not possible to work from home, CEV staff can attend the work place, provided their employer has taken all reasonable measures to ensure social distancing in the place of work.
- The latest requirements and advice for social distancing on public transport can be found [here](#).
- This change in advice will be subject to ongoing review of the status of the virus in Northern Ireland.

2.0 Underpinning Principles

- Guidance will adhere to all PHA/N.I. Executive directives and updates will continue to be shared with staff through email, FAQs, website and social media platforms as appropriate.
- Staff who can work from home should be facilitated to do so. It is recognised that for the majority of school based staff, or services who provide critical services to schools, it may not be feasible to work from home.

- Staff will be required to follow any relevant guidance and raise any concerns with their Principal/line manager in the first instance.
- Employing Authorities will work in close collaboration with others such as Health and Safety and Occupational Health Services to support staff as appropriate. Staff will also continue to have access to the Employee Assistance Programme (Inspire Wellbeing), Independent Occupational Health Services and Health and Wellbeing services.
- All of the PHA advised protection and hygiene measures will continue to apply to minimise the spread of infection. The [general restrictions](#) which apply to everyone must be followed.
- Decisions regarding an employee's attendance at the work place should be taken in line with the latest (PHA) guidance. Staff must keep their Principal/Line Manager informed on attendance issues and barriers.

3.0 Definition of COVID-19 Symptoms

The main symptoms of COVID-19 are:

- **a high temperature** – this means you feel hot to touch on your chest or back (you do not need to measure your temperature);
- **a new, continuous cough** – this means coughing a lot for more than an hour, or 3 or more coughing episodes in 24 hours (if you usually have a cough, it may be worse than usual); and/or
- **a loss or change to your sense of smell or taste** – this means you have noticed you cannot smell or taste anything, or things smell or taste different to normal.

Most people with COVID-19 have at least one of [these symptoms](#).

4.0 Pay and Absence Scenarios

The following applies to all staff. This includes both substitute teachers and non-teaching staff providing emergency cover for the period of time they have been engaged to work.

Schools must adhere to the guidance on self-isolation provided by PHA and with the Department's latest COVID-19 guidance available [here](#).

Scenario 1: No COVID-19 Symptoms and no contact with a positive case

If an employee has no symptoms of COVID-19 as described above, the current PHA advice is that staff can attend their work place if required (e.g. when working from home is not feasible) and in line with Government advice including social distancing guidelines. Other arrangements, for example, working from home will require planning and regular contact with the Principal/Line Manager.

Scenario 2: Employee displays symptoms of COVID-19

Staff who are displaying symptoms have a duty of care to themselves and others so therefore must self-isolate and self-refer for a [PCR test](#) immediately¹. [To self-refer follow this link](#). staff should continue to isolate until the result of the test is available.

- Employees in the above scenario must refrain from attending the work place, and follow medical advice including the period of self-isolation (available via telephone from their GP or via [NI Direct](#)).
- This period of self-isolation will be excluded from any calculation of contractual sick pay. The employee will receive normal pay². There will therefore be no impact on absence trigger points or contractual sick pay. The employee must keep their Principal/Line Manager informed throughout this period.

Note: if a staff member has a positive lateral flow test a PCR will not be required, as outlined in section 1.1.

Scenario 3: Employee Tests Positive for COVID-19

If an employee tests positive for COVID-19 they must self-isolate immediately and follow PHA advice.

Staff who receive a positive test result³, with symptoms, must follow advice from PHA relating to their recovery and isolation.

Normal pay² and no impact on absence trigger points or contractual sick pay will apply, if required, for a maximum of 10 calendar days⁴ from the point of confirmed positive diagnosis. Any subsequent absence will transfer to contractual sick pay in line with the relevant absence management procedures from day 11.

Note the latest rules and advice around self-isolation periods outlined in section 1.1.

The employee must keep their Principal/Line Manager informed throughout this period. Staff are required to report their lateral flow test results via the Gov.uk [website](#). Relevant staff will receive confirmation of their recorded test result. This can be provided to the Principal/Line Manager to keep them informed when a positive result occurs.

¹ A PCR may not be required if a positive lateral flow test result has already been obtained and the individual is not clinically extremely vulnerable

² This should include continued payment of normal/ regular overtime

³ PCR or Lateral Flow test

⁴ A staff member with a period of imposed self-isolation will continue to receive normal pay prior to a positive diagnosis

Scenario 4: A member of staff's household or close contact tests positive for COVID-19

[Self-isolation rules](#) have varied in recent times. Outlined below is a summary of the current position depending on a staff member's vaccine status.

Staff fully vaccinated

If a staff member is fully vaccinated or has taken part in an approved COVID-19 vaccine trial they should still self-isolate immediately and take a lateral flow test. A PCR test is not required.

- If the lateral flow test is negative, isolation can stop but they should take a daily lateral flow test every day until the tenth day after the last date of contact with the positive case. The lateral flow test should be taken before they leave the house for the first time each day.
- If staff develop symptoms, they should isolate immediately and book a PCR even if the lateral flow test is negative.
- If any lateral flow test is positive, staff should isolate immediately and follow the latest [NI Direct advice](#) outlined in section 1.1.
- Even if staff are fully vaccinated, if they have been identified as a close contact, they are advised not to visit hospitals or care homes for 10 days and to minimise contact with those known to be at higher risk of severe illness if they contract COVID-19, such as the [Clinically Extremely Vulnerable Group \(CEV\)](#), for 10 days.

Staff not fully vaccinated

If the staff member is not fully vaccinated and a member of their household or [close contact](#) tests positive they must self-isolate immediately and follow PHA advice.

Not fully vaccinated is defined as someone who is either unvaccinated, has had one dose only, or if it is less than 14 days since their second dose.

Staff who fall within this definition should self-isolate immediately and for the 10 full days following last contact with the positive person. They only need to book a PCR test if they develop symptoms.

If applicable, see scenario 3 for advice for staff who received a positive test result.

The latest close contact definition can be found [here](#).

Other considerations

Principals/Line Managers do not require proof of vaccination and should accept a verbal confirmation from the member of staff.

Staff required to self-isolate, without symptoms, will continue to receive normal pay and will be required to work from home, where feasible, during any isolation period.

A staff member with a period of imposed self-isolation will continue to receive normal pay prior to a positive diagnosis.

The employee must keep their Principal/Line Manager informed throughout this period.

It is important that Principals/Line Managers are fully aware of staff within their school/service who are self-isolating at any time. Testing is available for them or a member of their household.

Scenario 5: Employee is in a Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) health group

As defined in the supporting information below some employees will fall into categories specified as clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) with respect to the effects of COVID-19. There is an onus on employing authorities and managers to take extra measures to support our most vulnerable staff to self-isolate or engage in social distancing as appropriate.

Since 12 April 2021 CEV staff were written to and informed by the Chief Medical Officer that they should continue to work from home where this is possible. Where it is not possible to work from home, staff can attend their workplace, provided their employer has taken all reasonable measures, as part of an individual risk assessment, to ensure social distancing in the place of work.

This advice will be subject to ongoing review of the status of the virus in Northern Ireland.

Risk Assessment

Principals/Line Managers should undertake an individual risk assessment with the member of staff to assess and control measures to reduce risk. This may involve reviewing a prior risk assessment in light of new advice. The aim of the risk assessment and subsequent control measures is to reduce risk to the individual. Therefore, in most cases this will assist in reducing the risk to a staff member and support a return to the work place if they are unable to work from home. See the relevant [risk assessment template](#).

Based on the outcome of a risk assessment the Principal/Line Manager and Employing Authority reserve the right to request that clinically extremely vulnerable staff do not attend the work place. In this case the individual would continue to receive normal pay there would be no impact on absence triggers or contractual sick pay.

Exceptional CEV Directives and Evidence

In exceptional circumstances an individual may be directed by their GP or other medical specialist to continue to self-isolate. In this exceptional case the individual would continue to receive normal pay and there would be no impact on absence triggers or contractual sick pay. The Principal/Line Manager and Employing Authority may request evidence that a staff member has been advised to shield or self-isolate.

The Government is regularly monitoring its position on clinically extremely vulnerable individuals.

[Click here](#) for advice and further information on those considered Clinically Extremely Vulnerable.

For advice on and further information on other vulnerable Groups, including advice on pregnant staff see **Section 5**

Scenario 6: Staff who have a dependent who is required to self-isolate as a result of COVID-19

The exceptional circumstances presented by the COVID-19 pandemic have particularly impacted on staff with dependents. It is recognised that in an emergency situation a member of staff may be unable to attend school/work place in their usual capacity at very short notice due to their child being required to self-isolate for a period of time as a precaution against COVID-19 and there being no one else available to care for the child.

In these specific circumstances, the member of staff should be facilitated to work from home. If the nature of the individual's job prevents this the member of staff, in these circumstances and for the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, may request **exceptional dependents' leave** from their Principal/Line Manager up to a maximum of 10 working days (pro-rated for part time staff) on normal pay¹.

In all other circumstances staff with dependents should continue to investigate and source all care options available to them in order that they can attend the school/work place. Principals/Line Managers and staff can also refer to the [Responsive Working Toolkit](#) for more information on the range of existing flexible working and special leave options available to support them.

Scenario 7: Employee is directed by their Principal/Line Manager not to attend their place of work due to a temporary closure relating to COVID-19

If an employee is directed by their Principal/Line Manager, not to attend their place of work due to a temporary closure e.g. a school (or a particular year group/department) on a short-term basis due to a COVID-19 outbreak, following agreement from the employing authority/DE, they shall receive their normal pay¹. Where possible these employees should work from home or other agreed work place and return to work when directed to do so.

Scenario 8: Where staff are contacted by “Test and Trace and Protect” and directed to self-isolate

The N.I. Executive's Test and Trace and Protect strategy is designed to control the spread of COVID-19 and staff are expected to follow the [latest advice](#).

¹ This should include continued payment of normal/ regular overtime

As outlined in Scenario 4 staff will need to self-isolate if they are directed to do so and for different durations depending on their vaccine status. *See section 4 for more information on when staff can end their self-isolation period.*

Principals/Line Managers do not require proof of vaccination and should accept a verbal confirmation.

What about staff not fully vaccinated?

If staff have been informed by Test and Trace that they are a contact of a person who has had a positive test result for COVID-19, they must

- Self-isolate immediately and for 10 days following last contact with the positive person. Even if lateral test results are negative, they still need to complete the 10 day isolation period.
- These staff do not need to book a PCR test unless they develop symptoms.

The member of staff will continue to receive normal pay for this period and will be required to work from home, where feasible, during any isolation period.

Staff who exhibit any symptoms or have a confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19 must not attend the school/workplace. Anyone who tests positive will be contacted by the Public Health Agency, and will need to share information about their recent interactions.

It is essential that all staff follow this guidance, as by doing so staff will not only protect themselves but limit the spread of the virus to educational settings and the wider population. For full details of the Test and Trace and Protect strategy click [here](#).

StopCovid NI Proximity App

The [StopCOVID NI Proximity App](#) is available to assist in stopping the spread of COVID-19 in Northern Ireland, by anonymously contacting people who have been in close contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19. All staff are encouraged to download this free application to help reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Scenario 9: Requirement to quarantine due to travel outside of the UK and Ireland

Foreign and Commonwealth Office Advice

It is appreciated that the situation concerning travelling outside the Common Travel Area is uncertain at this time and official advice may change. Staff must ensure they follow Foreign and Commonwealth Office advice regarding foreign travel.

[The Foreign and Commonwealth Office](#) continues to provide the [latest advice](#) for those considering international travel. This includes [advice](#) on the country you plan travelling to and the requirements for your return.

Quarantine arrangements are a legal requirement and staff cannot attend the work place during an imposed quarantine period. Any staff likely to be affected by quarantine arrangements as detailed below should ensure that they notify their Principal/Line Manager at the earliest opportunity so they can assess if working from home is feasible and be fully informed on pay implications. For ease of reference two scenarios have been identified linked to staff travel related quarantine implications:

- A. Staff who are subject to new quarantine rules while abroad (unforeseen). Staff who have travelled to a country which is added to the UK quarantine list during their stay will be required to quarantine upon their return. As this is unforeseen staff will continue to receive normal pay¹ and will be required to work from home, where feasible, during any imposed quarantine period.

Where an employee cannot do their normal work at home during the quarantine period, the Principal/Line Manager should consider whether it would be reasonable to redeploy them to alternative duties that they could carry out at home.

- B. An employee who travels abroad in full knowledge of the requirement to self-isolate on their return will be required to bring this to their Principal/Line Manager's attention, prior to departure, to facilitate an open conversation about the potential impact of this including discussing the feasibility of working from home during the quarantine period.

Where working from home is not feasible, the following options (or combination of options) should be considered as appropriate:

- take additional paid annual leave (where the contract of employment allows for this)
- take paid special leave²
- make up the days over a period of time (where the contract allows for this to prevent a loss of pay)
- take unpaid special leave
- take unpaid leave
- redeployment to alternative duties that they could carry out at home
- It must be emphasised that there is no automatic entitlement in this category to normal pay¹ for this period of quarantine upon their return to Northern Ireland.

Consideration will be given to granting paid special leave on an exceptional basis if travel is for compassionate reasons.

Examples of reasons for considering a compassionate approach might include:

- attending a close family funeral
- receiving urgent and serious medical attention

¹ This should include continued payment of normal/ regular overtime

² For more information for teaching staff [click here](#) and [here](#) respectively
For non-teaching information [click here](#)

- accompanying a family member requiring urgent and serious medical attention
- complying with urgent legal responsibilities overseas
- supporting a relative overseas who needs urgent and immediate help

5.0 Other Important Information

5.1 Concerns about remaining or returning to the work place

If an employee has any concerns regarding their attendance at work they should discuss this with their Principal/Line Manager in the first instance who will contact the Employing Authority if necessary.

The Education Sector will have employees who are in various defined vulnerable groups. In some cases this may necessitate the need for working at home or remaining out of the work place.

5.2 Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV)

See section 4 (scenario 5)

5.3 Clinically Vulnerable groups

Clinically vulnerable individuals who are at risk of severe illness (for example, people with some pre-existing conditions as set out in the NI Government website [Click here for more information](#)) have been advised to take extra care in observing social distancing and should work from home where possible. This includes pregnant staff. Principals/Line Managers should endeavour to support this, where possible, for example by asking staff to support remote education, carry out lesson planning or other roles which can be done from home.

If clinically vulnerable individuals cannot work from home they should take extra care in the work place observing social distancing, staying 2 metres¹ away from others wherever possible.

The individual may choose to take on a role that does not allow for this distance or has sufficient mitigations in place that provide additional protection i.e. screens, PPE etc.

In situations where 2 metres¹ cannot be maintained Principals/Line Managers should consider this within an individual risk assessment involving occupational health and the staff member's GP if necessary to assess and control measures to reduce risk or review previous risk assessments in the context of any new advice. They should, if

¹ **Based on current PHA Guidance**

The Stormont Executive has agreed to reduce social distancing in Northern Ireland from 2 metres to 1 metre with restrictions from 29 June 2020. The Stormont Executive agreed that people should keep 2 metres distance where possible, but from 29 June 2020 can come within no less than 1 metre where appropriate mitigations can be made.

necessary, be offered the safest available on-site roles. [Click here to see the latest Risk Assessment template.](#)

Pregnancy And Risk

Once notified in writing of pregnancy Principals/Line Managers should carry out a risk assessment to follow the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations.

Information contained in the [RCOG/RCM guidance on coronavirus \(COVID-19\) in pregnancy](#) should be used as the basis for a risk assessment.

Extra consideration is required for pregnant staff when they

- have underlying health conditions that place them at a greater risk of severe illness from COVID-19
- are 28 weeks or more pregnant

Under 28 weeks with no underlying health conditions

There is no evidence that pregnant staff at 28 weeks or less are more likely to get seriously ill from COVID-19 but pregnant staff have been included in the list of people at moderate risk (clinically vulnerable) as a precaution. This is because pregnant individuals can sometimes be more at risk from viruses like flu.

Pregnant staff in all trimesters should have a work place risk assessment with their Principal/Line Manager to assess and control measures to reduce risk in addition to any existing risk assessments. Pregnant staff should only continue within the work place if the risk assessment advises that it is safe to do so.

If the risks cannot be mitigated, pregnant staff should be offered suitable alternative work or working arrangements (including working from home) or as a last resort be asked to remain out of the work place on normal pay².

See [Risk Assessment template](#) A2.

28 weeks or more or with defined underlying health conditions

Pregnant staff who are 28 weeks pregnant and beyond, or if they are pregnant and have an underlying health condition that puts them at a greater risk of severe illness from COVID-19 at any gestation, should take a more precautionary approach.

This is because although they are at no more risk of contracting the virus than any other non-pregnant person who is in similar health, they have an increased risk of becoming severely ill and of pre-term birth if they contract COVID-19.

The Principal/Line Manager should ensure pregnant staff are able to adhere to any active national guidance on social distancing and/or advice for pregnant staff considered to be clinically extremely vulnerable. The Principal/Line Manager should endeavour to support working from home where possible, for example by asking

² This should include continued payment of normal/ regular overtime

staff to support remote education, carry out lesson planning or other roles which can be done from home.

All Principals/Line Managers should consider both how to redeploy and how to maximise the potential for homeworking, wherever possible, for staff in this risk category.

Pregnant staff of any gestation should not be required to attend the work place if this is not supported by the risk assessment. Pregnant staff require special consideration as contained in Government guides for [different industries](#).

Pregnancy in public facing roles

Principals/Line Managers must undertake a risk assessment and put in place mitigating measures to reduce risk for public/ customer facing roles such as Teacher, Classroom Assistant, Drivers etc.

If unavoidable risks remain, alternative work should be offered at the safest available onsite location (where working from home is not possible). Where alternative work is not available the employee should be asked to remain at home on normal pay¹. For more information [click here](#)

Further information is available through this [link](#).

[Click here](#) for current HR FAQs on supporting pregnant staff in the work place.

[Click here](#) for the current HSE FAQs on Pregnancy and COVID-19

Further guidance on household containing vulnerable people

If a member of your household is considered clinically extremely vulnerable or clinically vulnerable, current PHA advice does not require you to self-isolate. If a member of your household falls into this category, you are able to attend work.

If a member of your household is considered clinically extremely vulnerable, employees should follow the guidance as [set out by the Government](#) and can continue to work with suitable controls in place. Such staff should have an individual risk assessment for their role and circumstances conducted before the most appropriate course of action is determined. See [Risk Assessment template A1](#).

5.4 Employees with Disabilities

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), covers a very wide range of people and is not confined to those who come within the Government's COVID-19 list of clinically extremely vulnerable people. The reasonable adjustment duty applies to all employees or job seekers who are disabled, regardless of whether they are on the Government's list or not.

Managers should make reasonable adjustments, as they are obliged to do, in addition to what they will have done to protect the health and safety of all of their employees. Where suitable risk assessments have been conducted and adequate precautions taken, all that some employees may need is reassurance. If a disabled

employee previously had tailored adjustments at work, these might still adequately meet their particular needs.

5.5 Providing Evidence in relation to COVID-19

Staff may be required to provide evidence, including medical evidence where appropriate, confirming the necessity for them or their dependents to self-isolate. Staff will be afforded a reasonable period of time to provide evidence post recovery or requirement for self-isolation, in relation to any of the scenarios above (e.g. medical correspondence). If diagnosed with an illness unrelated to COVID-19 then the absence will revert to normal sickness scheme procedures.

If applicable, staff can obtain a self-isolation notice via the following NHS website [here](#).

Vaccination/ test result evidence: Principals/Line Managers do not require proof of vaccination or test results and should accept a verbal confirmation.

5.6 Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Communities (BAME)

As there is some evidence which suggests that COVID-19 may impact disproportionately on some groups with underlying health conditions, notably Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities (BAME) EA and managers should ensure that they support positive action measures such as the Occupational Health Service providing practical support and advice to BAME staff, particularly if they are anxious about protecting themselves and their families.

All Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic staff with underlying health conditions and disabilities, who are over 70 or who are pregnant should be individually risk assessed and appropriate reasonable work place adjustments should be made following risk assessment.

HR advice on this matter can be sought from the Employing Authority.

5.7 Staff In None Of The Above Categories, Who May Refuse to Return to the Work Place Despite Being Able to do so (without medical grounds).

There may be staff who are not defined as vulnerable, nor have caring responsibilities within their household, but feel they cannot return to work in any capacity at present despite the aforementioned measures, assurances and safety arrangements being implemented. In this situation, the staff member and Principal/Line Manager should consider options. These may include;

- flexible working (if possible)
- reduced hours/days
- annual leave (if the contract of employment allows for this) or
- unpaid leave as appropriate

See section 12 or the [Responsive Working Toolkit](#) for more information on flexible working policies and schemes.

If everything has reasonably been done to address an employee's concerns, and action taken accordingly, but they still refuse to attend work, this may constitute unauthorised absence or partial performance (i.e. where they are only prepared to carry out certain tasks rather than their full range of duties). The Principal/Line Manager should explain the individual's contractual obligations and the potential consequences of refusing to work, including, in extremis, the risk of withdrawal of pay.

If there is still no change in the individual's position, the manager should seek immediate advice from HR/the Employing Authority who should ensure an appropriate and consistent approach is taken across the organisation. The employee should also be reminded of their right to seek advice from their trade union representative.

6.0 Guidance for Principals/Line Managers on supporting carers to return or remain in the work place

Staff should seek to investigate and source all childcare options available to them in order that they can attend their school/work place. In an emergency situation staff can apply for emergency dependants leave should childcare arrangements breakdown as a result of COVID-19. In such circumstances they are expected to communicate effectively and regularly with their Principal/Line Manager about any concerns. If a member of staff is wishing to consider flexible working and/or a corresponding reduction in hours staff should make a formal request in accordance with the relevant policy (see Section 12).

7.0 Staff/ Children Experiencing Symptoms In School

For the latest protocol please refer to [Section 3: Identification and Response to Symptoms](#) within the department's Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings in Northern Ireland.

8.0 Return To Work Support Meetings

A re-orientation or re-induction for staff is crucial to ensure all understand what is required in relation to the school/ work place following a period of absence, whether linked to ill health, self isolation (and not working from home) or enforced absence due to COVID risk within their work place. Every Principal/Line Manager should have a return meeting or conversation with staff prior to their return to work. The key focus should be on health, safety and wellbeing.

Where possible the Principal/Line Manager may wish to provide generic information on important changes within the school/ work place to groups of staff and where necessary have a one to one sensitive and open discussion with individuals to discuss any adjustments and/or ongoing support they may need to facilitate an effective return to the work place. This should cover any changes to their work duties or tasks where it can be accommodated. It could be that some staff want to discuss a new working arrangement, especially if their domestic situation has changed because of the pandemic.

9.0 Social Distancing Responsibilities

Principals/Line Managers should consider the best ways to ensure key work progresses whilst adhering to the PHA and [Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings in Northern Ireland](#) on social distancing at work.

Principals/Line Managers should remain abreast of, comply with and enforce the requisite social distancing guidelines for schools set out by the N.I. Executive.

Members of staff who are vulnerable or extremely vulnerable, or live with someone who is vulnerable or extremely vulnerable, should be supported as they follow the recommendations set out in guidance on social distancing and shielding respectively.

All of the key protection and hygiene measures will continue to apply to minimise the spread of infection, such as reminding staff about regular and effective handwashing facilities. Depending on the working environment, it may be necessary to consider providing PPE, including gloves, masks or anti-viral hand gel. For many settings guidance has already been developed and should be followed.

For the latest N.I. Direct guidance and information [click here](#)

10.0 Supporting “Healthy Minds” At Work

It must be recognised that the risks to people’s health from this pandemic are psychological as well as physical.

These include:

- Anxiety about the on-going health crisis and fear of infection, as well as social isolation due to the lockdown. Many will have experienced challenging domestic situations, such as juggling childcare or caring for a vulnerable relative, as well as financial worries if a partner has lost their income.
- Some staff will have experienced illness, or bereavement.
- Some may take more time than others to reacclimatise and it is likely that most people will need a period of readjustment. Even if staff have carried on working and participating in video meetings, etc, they will still need to adjust to working in a shared environment with colleagues again.
- Some members of staff may have concerns about travelling to work on public transport. The current Government advice can be accessed [here](#). It is the law at present for passengers and staff to wear a [face covering](#).
- Many may find that they are still coming to terms with the significant change which society has seen, and the familiar work place routines could feel very different.

- Staff should be reminded about Employee Assistance Programme (Inspire Wellbeing), our independent Occupational Health Service and Health and Wellbeing Team.
- Every Principal/Line Manager should endeavour to ensure that the school/ work place remains inclusive, and that every employee feels they are returning to or remaining in a supportive and caring environment. The pandemic has had an unequal impact across the workforce in many ways, as different groups of employees, and individuals, will have been affected in diverse ways according to their job role and individual circumstances. The uneven nature of people's work and personal experiences and the challenging nature of the lockdown and on-going situation, means there could be potential for some negative feelings creeping into the employment relations climate. Therefore, it is important that Principals/Line Managers are sensitive to any underlying tensions and proactive about nipping potential conflict in the bud.

11.0 Staff Responsibilities

Staff are expected to communicate effectively with their Principal/Line Manager regularly. Staff should make their Principal/Line Manager aware of any work restrictions or concerns they have during this time.

Staff are expected to make themselves available for work and if they cannot they must clearly explain their situation and agree options with their Principal/Line Manager.

Staff directed to self-isolate should ensure they follow the PHA advice and also inform their Principal/Line Manager. Testing is available as indicated above and the StopCovid NI app is recommended to staff to help towards limiting the transmission of this virus.

The Principal/Line Manager and Employing Authority are entitled to request and be provided with evidence to confirm medical conditions and inform, where necessary, risk assessments. ([See Risk Assessment templates](#))

12.0 Flexible Working Policies And Procedures

The following Flexible Working Policies and Procedures are available for staff if they wish to consider flexible working.

12.1 Teaching

[Flexible Working Scheme \(Teaching\)](#)

[Job Share Scheme \(Teaching\)](#)

[Temporary Variation of Contract \(Teaching\)](#)

[Career Break Scheme \(Teaching\)](#)

12.2 Non-Teaching

[Flexible Working Scheme – \(school based Non Teaching\)](#)

[Job Share Scheme \(Non Teaching\)](#)

[Career Break Scheme \(Non Teaching\)](#)

13.0 Further Concerns Or Guidance

Employing Authorities will continue to follow PHA and N.I. Executive guidance and medical advice at all times. This guidance will be kept under review and will be updated as necessary.

If an employee has any concerns regarding their attendance at work they should always discuss this with their Principal/line manager in the first instance.

14.0 Useful Contacts And Links

[Latest NI Direct advice on self-isolating and close contacts](#)

[Department of Education Restart Webpage](#)

[Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings in Northern Ireland](#)

[HSCNI COVID-19 advice \(coronavirus\)](#)

[Testing and tracing for COVID-19](#)

[Guidance to support safe working in educational settings](#)

[COVID-19 Working Through This Together](#)

[Safer travel guidance for public transport](#)

[Supporting EA Staff](#)

[COVID-19 HR FAQs](#)

[Inspire](#) - Contact Inspire counselling (free and confidential 24/7) – Tel: 0808 800 0002

[EA HealthWell](#) (24/7) – Tel: 0808 800 0002

[Latest advice for pregnant employees](#) updated Dec 2021

[Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists latest guidance](#)

[NHS - Every Mind Matters](#)