

**FROM THE PERMANENT SECRETARY
MARK BROWNE**



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Dear Principal

I hope all of our school leaders, school staff and pupils have had an opportunity to enjoy the Christmas break. Your continued resilience, dedication and commitment to the education and wellbeing of your students has been remarkable and I want to thank you once again for all your hard work.

As we approach the start of the new school term, I know that many of you will be concerned about the continuing impact of the pandemic. I want to assure you that the Department is working closely with its partners across the education and health sectors to support you at this time.

The Department has engaged throughout the pandemic with education practitioners and trade unions as we manage our response. We have a shared objective to keep schools safe and open as we all know that the best place for our children and young people is in school, receiving high quality face-to-face learning, connecting socially, building positive relationships and engaging constructively with learning.

Yesterday's Executive meeting did not make any changes to the additional restrictions announced before Christmas and there is no change to the operation of schools and education settings from the autumn term.

As you will be aware levels of community transmission are very high and I recognise the ongoing pressures many of you are experiencing due to staff shortages. The Department has provided guidance on the use of [remote learning](#) should individual school circumstances mean it is necessary for short periods. Should you need to utilise remote learning it is important to make provision for supervised learning for vulnerable pupils if at all possible.

You will note that the Department of Health has revised its [guidance](#) on self-isolation for close contacts. Fully-vaccinated close contacts of a positive case will no longer be required to take a PCR test. They are instead advised to take a lateral flow device (LFD) test as soon as possible and continue to take daily lateral flow tests until the tenth day after the last date of contact with the positive case. I would ask you to advise

your staff of the revised position as term begins. If your staff or pupils are symptomatic, they should of course follow health advice on testing and not come into school until cleared to do so.

The NI Executive has also announced a change to the rules on self-isolation for positive cases, reducing the period from 10 days to seven, providing the individual has negative LFD results on both days 6 and 7 with tests taken 24 hours apart. The guidance remains as before – the self-testing system is based on trust and schools are not required to seek proof from staff or pupils of their test status. Specific Health advice for testing in the under-5s is available on [NI Direct](#).

Ahead of the new term beginning next week, the Department has strongly urged all staff and post-primary pupils to take a lateral flow test before returning to school and I know that you have emphasised this to your school communities. The Department will continue to reiterate this important message on social media. The Education Authority also wrote to all schools in December setting out how lateral flow devices can be ordered by schools. The tests now available to schools are a new and less invasive nasal-only swab and I would again urge schools to participate in that process and engage with their staff and pupils to encourage them to test regularly in the new term.

I also want to take this opportunity to reiterate key aspects of our response to the pandemic ahead of the new term.

1. The Department's advice on measures to reduce transmission remains highly relevant. A continued emphasis on:
 - a. good hand hygiene;
 - b. ventilation;
 - c. use of face-coverings
 - d. consistent groups where possible;
 - e. vaccination; and
 - f. reducing social contacts.
2. The Education Authority has also provided CO2 monitors to schools, along with detailed instructions on their use - approximately 95% of schools in NI have now been provided with monitors and EA has completed an order for a further 5,000 monitors, expected at the beginning of next week. The additional monitors will be delivered to the remaining schools as a priority and also to those schools that have requested additional monitors.
3. A number of schools will have staff members who are clinically vulnerable and they should continue to follow the EA guidance for these staff members, through use of individual risk assessments.
4. The Department issued an [Open Enrolment Circular](#) in November 2021 which included advice on school open days that encouraged schools to take a cautious approach to indoor gatherings, only hold an event where necessary, and proceed with alternative arrangements (such as online appointments and meetings) where possible.
5. Our current guidance also makes clear that in-school meetings between school staff should take place by tele-conference or video-conference where possible.

However face to face meetings in school without a maximum number of adults will be permitted providing other suitable COVID-19 mitigations are in place. These include ensuring that a suitably sized and well ventilated room is used in order to facilitate social distancing of 2m between adults, subject to appropriate risk assessments.

6. The Department has provided further [guidance for schools on supporting remote learning to provide educational continuity](#) (6 December 2021).

I want to reassure you that while we may face an uncertain period ahead, we have put in place mitigations to protect schools and minimise transmission and we will continue to monitor the situation closely, and to engage with you. I will also continue to work closely with the Department of Health to ensure that our guidance reflects the latest public health advice.

I want to take this opportunity to thank you for your continued dedication to the education and well-being of our young people during these challenging times.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Browne', with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the signature.

Dr Mark Browne
Permanent Secretary
Department of Education