

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER



Department of
Education

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To: School Principals

Contact Tracing

Firstly, I would like to take this opportunity to thank you and your staff for all of your incredible hard work in preparation for children returning to school. The effort which has been undertaken in difficult and challenging circumstances does not go unnoticed and is greatly appreciated.

I am also aware of a number of issues which have arisen this week in relation to schools taking part in contact tracing, due to the new rules on close contacts, the numbers of cases and the pressure which this had caused in some schools.

As we start the new term, I want to assure you that we have been working closely with our colleagues in the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency (PHA) and the Education Authority (EA) this week to quickly address these issues.

The EA has just confirmed it has earmarked an allocation to schools of an additional £5.65m in DE funding to assist schools in addressing the current challenges presented by COVID-19 cases, Contact Tracing and asymptomatic testing. I fully understand the importance of providing a safe environment in our education settings for our children and staff. To that end and in conjunction with the EA, I will continue to monitor our schools' funding requirements as the pandemic progresses in order to secure adequate funding to keep our schools open and protect our children and young people.

We have made a number of immediate changes to the current processes, which aim to improve the situation, to come into effect in the week commencing Monday 6 September:

- I can confirm that the EA Confirmed Cases Helpline will now extend its hours from 8am-8pm Monday to Friday, to offer dedicated support to schools wishing to progress with contact tracing without the need to wait for the PHA to call. This should also reduce the burden on schools and free up PHA resource for those schools which require it.
- We have agreed with Department of Health and PHA colleagues in addressing the issues surrounding contact tracing there will be a more focussed approach to identifying close contacts to mitigate the risk of whole year classes being sent home unnecessarily and the disruption that causes to schools, pupils and parents.
- EA and PHA officials have also agreed an operational change to how schools handle contact tracing to give schools the tools and autonomy to identify close contacts without first contacting PHA, if schools feel able to do so. With the aim of minimising time spent by school staff waiting for a call back from PHA staff, or for communication materials to arrive, the PHA Schools' Team suggests that, if principals are content to apply the guidance and begin identifying and notifying close contacts, they can proceed to issue template letters themselves.

These practical steps should start to help to address some of the main issues schools have raised.

I would also like to emphasise again the continued importance of asymptomatic testing as an important mitigating measure in schools and to take this opportunity to ask that all school staff and pupils in post-primary schools are encouraged to take twice-weekly lateral flow tests, and follow PHA guidance in recording their result.

Along with the other mitigations in schools in relation to good ventilation, respiratory and hand hygiene, face coverings and management of space, the use of LFD tests will help us to minimise the impact of COVID in our schools in the new term.

My officials and colleagues in the EA, the Department of Health and PHA will keep these processes under review, and continue to engage with schools where any issues arise.

Yours sincerely

Michelle McIlveen

Michelle McIlveen MLA
Minister of Education