

Team Public Health
Contact Robyn Dewis
Our ref RD/NO

Date 7th January 2021

Dear Head Teachers,

Firstly I would like to wish you a Happy New Year and hope that you had time for some rest over Christmas.

The COVID situation locally and nationally has changed significantly since the end of the autumn term. We know that Omicron is dominant in our City, we know that case rates have been rising significantly and we know that access to testing has been challenging due to pressures on the national system, so our local figures will be a significant underestimate of cases. Despite this, in our latest week up to 1st January we were notified of almost 5000 cases in the City, five times the levels we were seeing at the beginning of the autumn term. This next half term is going to be extremely challenging; case rates are expected to continue to increase leading to staff and pupil absences and challenges to business continuity. We hope that there will be a significant improvement when you return after half term.

Sibling isolation and PCR testing

Previously I have advised that children who are household contacts of positive cases should isolate until they have received a negative PCR test result. It is expected that household transmission is an even greater risk with Omicron than with previous variants and I believe this would continue to help to reduce spread within schools. However, over the next few weeks it is highly likely that demands on PCR testing will increase and this approach will create real challenges for parents. I advise following the national guidance regarding daily lateral flow tests at the current time, with continued attendance at school for children who test negative, and we will review as access to PCR testing changes over coming weeks.

If a child over the age of 5 is a household contact, then national guidance recommends that they should undertake a daily lateral flow test before they leave the house each morning for 7 days. Children under the age of 5 can also undertake testing if parents are happy to do this and the child is not distressed. This must remain a choice for families. You may feel that, to ensure the health and safety of the school staff and pupils, it is appropriate to ask for some evidence of this test. This may include the test itself, an email or text notification or an online reporting mechanism. Some



secondary schools, who are asked to maintain the option of a small area for pupils to self-test under supervision, may feel that this is the appropriate route for the daily testing of some children.

I believe that a move to 7 days of lateral flow testing for household contacts is a less robust approach but fits with the national guidance and is a pragmatic response to the challenges in accessing PCR tests. We will keep this advice under review and would appreciate any specific feedback you have on this approach.

Current guidance for asymptomatic testing has changed to reflect the high prevalence of COVID in the community, the improved accuracy of LFD tests when prevalence is higher and to relieve some of the pressures on lab capacity. Now a positive LFD test during regular testing should be registered on the Gov.uk website and does not need to be confirmed with a PCR test. This is because it is highly unlikely to be a false positive given the infection rate of up to 1 in 15 people in the UK. However, please continue to promote PCR testing and immediate isolation for anyone with symptoms.

Day 6 and 7 testing to release from isolation

Current guidance has changed to support business continuity in response to high levels of staff absence. If someone has a negative lateral flow test on day 6 and 7 of their isolation, they are able to end their isolation. However, a small percentage of these people may still be infectious. Therefore, you should individually risk assess staff members returning to teaching to assess the risks and benefits of returning to work after negative LFD testing at 6 and 7 days vs. continuing isolation to 10 days. Please discuss individual cases with the CCT team if you require support.

Health and Safety Risk Assessments

The Health and Safety team have updated the template risk assessments and I would recommend reviewing all your measures. We know that Omicron is much more transmissible than previous variants and so measures that were previously effective may need to be tightened.

Business continuity

We are aware that combining classes has been proposed as a way of managing business continuity issues. If you are currently managing an outbreak within your setting this needs to be appropriately risk assessed. There needs to be suitable ventilation and adequate physical space where classes are combined. Please ensure that groups of children or staff who currently have cases are not mixed with groups who do not. Our approach to outbreak management is to reduce the mixing of groups so please speak to the CCT team if you need advice on this .

Secondary Schools

The school aged immunisation service will be revisiting Secondary schools to deliver the second COVID vaccine dose in the coming weeks; children aged 12-15 require a 12-week gap between doses. Parents can also book to take their children to a vaccination centre if they prefer.

Face coverings are now required to be worn in classrooms as well as communal areas unless children are exempt. As part of the Health and Safety measures being implemented in your school it is reasonable to have an expectation that this is complied with unless you are satisfied of a legitimate exemption. There is some national debate regarding the effectiveness of this measure, but we have seen good evidence locally of the impact face coverings can have on reducing transmission. Please also emphasise to your pupils that they are also required to wear a face covering when on public or school transport.

Primary Schools

Face coverings and immunisation are not available for the majority of Primary school pupils to reduce the risk of outbreaks in your setting. In view of the increased risk of transmission with Omicron I recommend that you consider measures that you have previously used to reduce spread. Please consider reducing the mixing of classes and teaching staff including by staggering the start and end of the day and lunch/ break times.

Visitors to the school

Please consider if it necessary for any individuals to visit the school in person. If anyone does need to attend in person, please ask them to wear a face covering unless exempt. Schools are also advised to ask all visitors, including parents or contractors, to undertake a lateral flow test before entering the school.

CCT Inbox

Due to the change in national guidance and the emphasis on individuals reporting their own lateral flow results we are currently uncertain whether we will receive complete data. Please continue to report cases to Public Health (by email to cct@derby.gov.uk) as the information we receive from schools, alongside information from UKHSA and the national Test and Trace service, allows us to monitor current infection rates among young people and promptly identify outbreaks that may require additional control measures. Derby Public Health will continue to provide specialist public health advice to schools and other education settings across Derby. Please contact us on: cct@derby.gov.uk to request support.

The situation regarding the Omicron variant is rapidly changing, and I will be in contact with you again should any major changes be required to the recommended measures in place.

Finally, I would like to thank you all for everything that you and your staff continue to do to keep our children and young people educated and communities safer.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robyn Dewis".

Dr Robyn Dewis
Director of Public Health