

E: ELCPartnershipForum@gov.scot

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To all registered childcare providers and childminders

Dear Colleagues,

I am writing to provide details of the updated and simplified Coronavirus (COVID-19) guidance for childcare settings that the Scottish Government published today. This replaces the suite of COVID-19 guidance previously in place for early learning and childcare (ELC) services, school-age childcare services and childminder services. It can be found at the following link: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-early-learning-childcare-services/>

This single piece of guidance sets out the updated routine Covid measures for:

- all providers of registered day care of children's services who provide care to children under primary school age including nurseries, playgroups, family centres, crèches and fully outdoor services for children aged 5 and under;
- Care Inspectorate registered childminders and assistants; and
- all providers of Care Inspectorate registered school age childcare services in all sectors – local authority, private and third sectors, including breakfast clubs, after-school care and holiday care.

We are publishing this guidance now to give settings time to communicate these changes to staff and to parents, and to ensure there is sufficient time to prepare. We are asking that **all relevant changes are made from 18 April**, although settings may begin to implement these sooner if they wish, following their own risk assessment.

Why we are making these changes

As the First Minister set out in her statement on Tuesday 15 March, although case rates are currently high we remain optimistic that we are increasingly moving into a calmer phase in the pandemic. This has been made possible by the remarkable progress on vaccination and in new treatments, which have both helped reduce the severity of the impact of the virus. COVID-19 remains a threat but we are hopeful that this threat will continue to reduce as we head into the spring and summer.

Based on the latest public health advice, Ministers have decided that the time is right to make further changes to the measures in place to manage the disease across society, including within childcare settings. We hope these changes will allow children and families to have a more 'normal' experience of childcare as we go forward.

As always, this decision has been informed by a range of scientific advice and clinical evidence. Although infection rates are high at the moment, evidence shows that compared to adults, children and young people still have a very low risk of severe COVID-19 related health outcomes, and that those without symptoms (asymptomatic) are also at a relatively low risk of transmitting the virus to adults. Although the Omicron variant has higher transmissibility than previous variants there is no evidence to suggest that it disproportionately impacts children and young people or childcare staff.

Severe health outcomes for all age groups are far less likely to arise while vaccination rates are high and the Omicron variant is less severe than its predecessors. Our [Advisory Subgroup on Education and Children's Issues](#) – which includes scientific and public health experts, clinicians and academics, as well as experts in education, early learning and children's services – routinely publishes its advice and supporting evidence should you wish to explore this further.

Routine protective measures

At their meeting on 8 March, the Advisory Sub-Group on Education and Children's issues advised that it would be appropriate to phase in routine protective measures in childcare settings in step with changes in wider society.

From 18 April we are ending restrictions on contacts within settings, the use of groupings or 'bubbles' and limitations on day trips. We are also advising settings that they can allow parents and other visitors back into settings once more, subject to local risk assessments. I know that many families and members of staff will welcome these changes.

However, the pandemic is not over and I would like to emphasise the importance we are placing on retaining a sensible set of routine protective measures to keep staff, children and families safe. In childcare settings, these measures are as follows:

- children, young people and adults should stay at home and self-isolate if they:
 - have symptoms of COVID-19, whether they feel unwell or not
 - have tested positive, even if asymptomatic
 - are required to self-isolate for any other reason e.g. travel-related reasons
 - are identified as a close contact and are over 18 years and 4 months and are not fully vaccinated
- retaining good hand and respiratory hygiene, and routine cleaning regimes
- an ongoing focus on the importance of good ventilation and the potential for CO2 monitors to be used to ensure good air quality in enclosed spaces
- use of face coverings by staff, parents and visitors, in line with society-wide guidance (although face coverings do not need to be worn when working directly with children)
- physical distancing between adults, in line with society-wide guidance (although there is no need for physical distancing when working with children)
- the ongoing need for outbreak management capability, including active surveillance

We recognise that head teachers, setting managers and childminders and are best placed to understand the unique circumstances that they operate in and the needs of the families they support, and therefore to make their own judgements about risk assessment and how to operate safely within the parameters of the guidance.

Testing

I know that you and your teams have been testing regularly using Lateral Flow Devices (LFDs) in line with public health advice. The asymptomatic testing programme has played an important part in the suite of measures to reduce risks in ELC settings over the course of the pandemic.

However, in view of the latest data and evidence, from 18 April we will no longer ask ELC staff to test regularly if they do not have symptoms. As outlined in our letter of [15th March](#), the regular asymptomatic testing programme will therefore end in ELC settings on 17 April.

This is in step with the wider [Test and Protect Transition Plan](#), which will also see regular testing in other low-risk workplaces and the universal testing programme come to an end. Further details on the planned changes to other aspects of testing (including close contact testing) can be found in the Transition Plan.

I appreciate that many people who have built regular testing into their daily lives may feel anxious about these changes in our overarching approach to dealing with COVID-19. Please be assured that this decision has been informed by expert advice, including from Public Health Scotland and the Advisory Sub-group on Education and Children's Issues.

As highlighted above, the Scottish population now has much stronger protection against COVID-19 than at any other point in the pandemic as a result of the vaccination programme and the development of natural immunity to the infection. Severe health outcomes are now far less likely to arise because of this protection, the availability of and access to antiviral treatments, and increased scientific and public understanding about how to manage risk.

We will continue to monitor the virus through existing surveillance programmes. It will still be possible for local health protection teams to opt to make use of asymptomatic testing in outbreak management situations in schools or settings, if their expert judgement is that it is appropriate to do so. ELC settings can continue to distribute test kits to staff until 17 April.

The remaining routine protective measures will also play an important role in helping minimise risks in settings. We continue to encourage people to get vaccinated if they are eligible to do so. Further information can be found at: [Registering for a coronavirus vaccine](#)

Event for practitioners on 24 March

We are hosting an event at 19:30 on 24 March to discuss the evidence behind the changes to guidance and testing programmes. The event will feature a public health expert, the Scottish Government policy team and colleagues from the Care Inspectorate. The event is open to anyone working in childcare, across all sectors, and will be held virtually via Microsoft Teams. If you don't have the Microsoft Teams app you can access the session via a web browser. Anyone wishing to join the event can do so by clicking [here](#).

The event will last for 45 minutes and we'd ask that you submit questions in advance as we anticipate high numbers on the call. You can submit questions [here](#).

I hope that this provides you with some clarity and reassurance about our approach to managing Covid-19 within childcare settings, in step with the wider changes being brought in across our society. In closing, I'd like to add my sincere thanks to you and your teams in recognition of the immense efforts you have made to protect and support your colleagues and communities during these challenging times.



ELEANOR PASSMORE
Deputy Director, Early Learning & Childcare