

Directors of Education



10 December 2021

## Education update regarding the new Omicron variant

Following yesterday's meeting of the Covid-19 Education Recovery Group (CERG) we are writing to all Directors of Education to provide an update on the current situation regarding the Omicron variant.

You will appreciate that this is a fast-moving situation, and that a degree of uncertainty remains. However, the doubling time for Omicron cases may be as short as two to three days, and the R number associated with the new variant may be well over 2. There are significant clinical and public health concerns about the impact of the Omicron variant. It is clearly important that we treat this situation very seriously and start to plan for the days and weeks ahead.

As has been the case throughout the pandemic, we also need to ensure that such planning strikes the right balance between the competing risks and harms. We know that all children and young people will have been affected in some manner by the pandemic – with some bearing greater weight than others – and protecting their welfare must remain a top priority.

First, we wish to emphasise again the vital importance of adherence to *all* current mitigations within education and ELC settings as part of our cross-society efforts to slow down the transmission of Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2), including the new Omicron variant. The full list of those mitigations is shown in the guidance for both [schools](#) and [Early Learning and Childcare](#) (ELC) settings. Any risk-based assessments should take account of the new set of circumstances.

These messages echo those set out by the First Minister in her statement earlier today, where she confirmed that based on the latest [published evidence](#) and clinical advice, enhanced self-isolation measures are to be introduced for all household contacts of any Coronavirus strain from Saturday 11 December. This means **household contacts of all cases**, regardless of which variant is suspected, **must isolate for 10 days**. This applies to everyone in the household, irrespective of age, testing negative or being vaccinated. She also referred to the application of exemptions for critical services, and more information on those will follow shortly.

Given the evidence of risk, the First Minister also highlighted the importance of minimising unnecessary contacts, especially in crowded places, and to consider deferring events such as staff parties. This is aligned with Public Health Scotland (PHS) [advice](#) that was published yesterday.

Both CERG and the Advisory Sub-Group for Education and Children's Issues are closely monitoring developments and will continue to review the latest data and developments relating to the Omicron variant.

At CERG yesterday, we discussed the merits of reinstating some of the protections that were present within schools and ELC settings last year and have since been removed. While we hope that such caution is not needed, we need to recognise the gravity of the situation and be prepared for all possible scenarios. If there is a need to update guidance documents, we will work with partners to develop that and look to provide the sector with as much notice as possible. Please treat this letter as early notice that such an update may be forthcoming.

There are obviously a number of related issues that need to be worked through – not least regarding national qualifications - so we have provided some additional detail on key issues in the annex below.

Please be assured that we are keeping a very close eye on developments and we will continue to keep you updated through the usual channels.

Yours sincerely



**SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE**



**COUNCILLOR STEPHEN McCABE**

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## ANNEX: Detailed information on key issues

### Contact tracing and self-isolation

You received a communication from Public Health Scotland earlier this week. This highlighted that the current advice to cases and contacts linked to Omicron cases continues to evolve. Based on the latest [published evidence](#) and clinical advice, enhanced self-isolation measures are to be introduced for all household contacts of any Coronavirus strain from Saturday 11 December.

The requirements are that **household contacts of all cases regardless of which variant is suspected must isolate for 10 days**. This applies to everyone in the household, irrespective of age, and **the self-isolation period cannot be reduced by testing negative or being vaccinated**.

Contacts should arrange for PCR testing at their [local testing site](#). Your support in ensuring this advice is shared and understood is vital in tackling this new challenge, and is much appreciated.

This policy change still allows non-household contacts of positive cases to be exempted from isolation if they are fully vaccinated adults/aged under 18, asymptomatic and return a negative PCR test

In addition, exemptions for critical services are under consideration.

### National Qualifications

As confirmed in August, we are planning for exams to take place in 2022, and this continues to be the case. Significant modifications have already been made to course assessments (exams/coursework) to take into account disruption to learning.

Contingency plans are also in place - as outlined by SQA in [August](#) and in more detail in [September](#) - to offset any further significant national disruption arising from Covid. These include additional measures should the overall level of disruption increase significantly, for example through levels of absence of self-isolation or any potential future lockdowns. In this scenario, SQA will provide more focused support for learners to help them prepare and revise for the 2022 exams and thereby reduce exam pressure on them.

In the event that public health advice means that exams have to be cancelled, guidance has already been provided to schools and colleges that the assessment evidence, routinely gathered as part of teaching and learning, and used to determine course estimates, would form the basis of determining learner provisional results.

SQA is also planning to put in place similar support services as those that were in place when exams were last held, for example where exceptional circumstances mean learners cannot sit exams or where they do not perform to the standard expected. More detail on this and a further update on planning for the qualifications will be provided in January.

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## Vaccination

It is vital that we all ensure we have received the Flu and COVID vaccines that are available to us, and in particular that we have taken steps to ensure everyone is encouraged to and receives their booster when entitled. Vaccines remain very effective against COVID infection, admissions and death. This one simple step improves safety for us all individually and for others. Vaccine immunity can decline over time and it is essential that people get a booster to stay protected.

Your support in messaging on this will be very important.

If there is any doubt about how to get a vaccine or if there are questions then there is the option to either Phone the national vaccination helpline on 0800 030 8013 or visit [www.nhsinform.scot/flu-vaccine](http://www.nhsinform.scot/flu-vaccine)

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## Asymptomatic Testing

One of our most important defences against the virus is regular asymptomatic testing. This is available to all school and ELC staff, and all secondary pupils.

Schools and settings have previously been advised to ensure they have sufficient test kits to provide to staff and pupils ahead of the festive break, so that regular testing can continue and testing can be undertaken prior to the return in January.

Please continue to encourage your staff and secondary pupils to test twice weekly and – importantly – to report all test results, whether positive, negative or void. Reporting positives means that they and their families will receive the advice and support they need. Reporting negative and void results helps public health experts to understand the full picture of COVID in your area, and to plan to protect communities and keep schools and ELC settings safe and open.

We would also be grateful if you could build into your messaging the most recent advice, which is for everyone to do a lateral flow test before mixing with people from other households outside school, for example before going to a restaurant, visiting someone's house (especially if those people are old or clinically vulnerable), or shopping.

You may wish to let your staff and pupils know that the online portal for reporting results has been improved following feedback – staff and pupils can now register family accounts that save key information for all their family members, so it only takes a few minutes to report results using a phone.

We expect that, from this Monday, 13<sup>th</sup> December, some improvements will be introduced to the schools/ELC testing processes. These will reduce the requirement to maintain test kit logs and allow schools to move to a system of implied consent for distribution of test kits. This should make it significantly easier for schools/settings to proactively distribute test kits to staff and students. A separate communication on this will issue to local authority school/ELC testing leads.

Following introduction of these changes, we would be very grateful if schools/settings could be encouraged to make every effort to ensure that all secondary school pupils and all school/ELC staff are provided with a box of test kits ahead of the festive break, so that they can continue testing in line with guidance and, vitally, be ready to test shortly prior to the return to schools/settings in January.

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## Enhanced vigilance

Finally, we urge you and your staff to continue to do all you can to help protect yourself and others by:

- Getting vaccinated (whether your first two doses, or your booster when you are eligible) – this is the single most important thing we can do.
- Testing regularly
- Following the existing Covid safety guidance that applies to your setting:
  - ELC:
    - [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): early learning and childcare services - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/Topics/healthandcare/coronavirus/covid-19/early-learning-and-childcare-services)
    - [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): school age childcare services guidance - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/Topics/healthandcare/coronavirus/covid-19/school-age-childcare-services-guidance)
    - [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): childminder services guidance - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/Topics/healthandcare/coronavirus/covid-19/childminder-services-guidance)
  - Schools:
    - [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance on reducing the risks in schools - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/Topics/healthandcare/coronavirus/covid-19/guidance-on-reducing-the-risks-in-schools)

Anyone who has any of the 3 main symptoms of COVID-19 should self-isolate and arrange a PCR test at [NHS Inform](https://www.nhs.uk/inform). These are the recent onset of a new continuous cough, a high temperature, and a loss of, or change in, normal sense of taste or smell. Anyone contacted by Test and Protect or public health teams should co-operate and follow their advice.

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