

COVID UPDATE



Scotland's largest
education trade union

Some progress has been made in relation to the new Test and Protect (T&P) procedures regarding EIS concerns about teachers and schools not being informed promptly around positive cases amongst pupils.

This stems from contact tracing now being handled by Local Health Teams, which have adopted the approach that pupils are deemed low risk and therefore routine contact, such as sitting next to someone all day, is similarly deemed low risk and only something such as an overnight stay would create a high-risk category, instigating direct contact from T&P and the need for a PCR test.

We are wary of this approach and argued for all close contacts, as previously defined, to be required to take a PCR test. This was not conceded by either PHS or the Scottish Government but it has been agreed that all pupil contacts, as identified by schools, will now get a targeted “warn and inform” letter, renamed an “information letter”, with a recommendation that a LFT (Lateral Flow Test) is undertaken before pupils return to class.

Teachers of classes where positive cases have been identified will receive an information letter also, which is an improvement.

The Test and Protect approach, both within schools and outwith, is that routine contact between children and adults will not trigger a direct notification to adults unless there are circumstances which create a higher risk threshold e.g. family circumstance.

As a result, teachers are unlikely to be identified by Local Health Teams as high-risk contacts, with that aspect now reverting to schools (as it did under the old system).

Schools, however, are not routinely contacted by LHTs, whose default is to advise the parent of a positive child to report the matter to the school. In our view this potentially creates a delay in teachers becoming aware of any increased risks.

Whilst double vaccination does offer a level of protection, it is clear, given the record high number of teachers infected despite nearly 94% double vaccination, that it is not a guaranteed protection. Additionally, many teachers have heightened vulnerabilities or live with family members in the same situation.

We have expressed serious concern, therefore, at the potential lack of rigour in the communication process and are pressing for LHTs to automatically inform schools of all positive cases.

Once the school is aware of a case, it should issue the information letters to pupils and staff as required.

EIS advice to members, thereafter, is that if you receive an “information letter” letter you should immediately take a Lateral Flow Test and, further, if you are anxious about the personal risk, believe that you are in fact a close contact of the pupil (as previously defined), or have increased vulnerability you should request that your HT immediately seeks further advice from the LHT **and** you should book an asymptomatic PCR test (schools are now able to request a supply of PCR tests to enable quicker processing) whilst awaiting any contact from LHT.

If you are blocked in this pathway, you should seek advice and support from the EIS.

The updated Scottish Government guidance can be found at www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-reducing-the-risks-in-schools/pages/overview/

The latest statistical data can be found at www.gov.scot/publications/covid-19-education-recovery-group-children-and-young-people-infographic/

ASN

The advice on Test and Protect currently applies to ASN settings also but clearly it is much more likely that there will have been closer contact between staff and students in such settings and the need for automatic PCR testing will be greater. The updated Scottish Government Guidance does have additional advice re ASN settings, which we have pressed for, but the issue is also specifically to be looked at next week by the Advisory Group on Education and then reported back to CERG. We will keep members updated on developments.

Testing

Uptake amongst teachers of the twice weekly lateral flow test is reported at below 30%. Whilst this figure is probably lower than reality, as not everyone records negative tests, the EIS would urge members to take advantage of the LFTs as an additional measure to protect themselves and colleagues and minimise the risk of in-school transmission.

SQA Update

The SQA has issued advice re 2021/22, which can be read at www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/99158.html

The EIS has been clear in the 2022 National Qualifications Group that we cannot run a dual assessment system whereby schools prepare for exams but also collate a portfolio of evidence, “just in case”. Such an approach would create a huge workload implication for staff and an assessment burden for students. This position is reflected in the SQA guidance, but members should be alert to any deviance from the guidance and raise concerns as quickly as possible with school reps or LA secretaries.

There is reference in the SQA communication to its quality assurance of evidence – we are clear that much of the additional workload from the 2021 ACM model was driven by SQA quality assurance processes, which led to the £400 payment and the need for additional inset days. In our view there is no justification for any external quality assurance by SQA unless and until a decision is made to cancel exams – anything other than that will create unnecessary additional workload for schools. We have also been clear that in the event that any quality assurance is required, this must be light-touch.

Return of Inspections

Education Scotland has announced a planned return of ‘scrutiny activity’ i.e. inspections, beginning initially with those schools which are due follow up visits. The EIS is clear that this is the wrong time for such an initiative. EIS General Secretary Larry Flanagan commented publicly that, “This move shows Education Scotland and the Scottish Government to be deeply out of touch with the reality that schools are currently facing, amidst record levels of pupil and teacher Covid-related absence and therefore significant ongoing disruption.”

Read the full press release at www.eis.org.uk/Latest-News/Inspections