



**To: All providers of early learning and childcare (early learning and care,
school age childcare and childminding)**

Updated COVID-19 Guidance to Early Learning and Childcare from 28 February 2022

This note is to inform early learning and childcare providers of the new public health advice from the 28th of February 2022. On the 21st of January 2022, the Government announced the easing of a number of public health measures. The infection prevention control measures and restrictions in early learning and childcare settings were to remain in place until 28th of February 2022.

On the 17th of February 2022, the NPHET reviewed the remaining public health measures including the infection prevention control measures and restrictions in early learning and childcare settings. Having closely considered relevant epidemiological data and other matters as set out in their letter of the 17th of February 2022, the Government has accepted the recommendations of the NPHET to remove remaining restrictions relating to mask-wearing and physical distancing in early learning and childcare. If members of staff or children wish to continue wearing face masks or coverings, they may do so.

The continued use of good infection prevention and control measures such as hand washing, respiratory hygiene, and ventilation is advised.

Critical components of the collective response in relation to COVID-19 continue to apply including self-isolation if symptomatic (even if fully vaccinated/boosted) or if having a positive COVID-19 test.

In general, services should now resume normal routines and normal learning and care activities.

Staying at home if you have symptoms

The requirement to stay at home if you have symptoms remains – for children and staff alike. One of the key messages to manage the risks of COVID-19 is to do everything practical to avoid the introduction of COVID-19 into the setting. If infection is not introduced it cannot be spread.

Hand hygiene

Services should continue to promote good hygiene. Hand hygiene can be achieved by hand washing or use of a hand sanitiser (when hands look clean). These measures are important for mitigating the spread of COVID-19 but also for mitigating the spread of other viral infections.

Face coverings/mask wearing

From the 28th of February it is no longer a requirement for staff or children aged 9 and above attending school-age childcare services to wear a face covering/mask. Staff and children may continue to wear a face covering/mask if they wish to do so on a personal basis.

Transport to services and face coverings/mask wearing

With effect from the 28th of February the wearing of face coverings/masks on early learning and childcare transport will no longer be required but will continue to be advised.

Cleaning and hygiene in services

Early Learning and Childcare services should continue to engage in routine cleaning and maintain a good basic cleaning schedule, which has always been a feature of Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, to reduce the risk of spread of all infections, both for mitigating the spread of COVID-19 but also for mitigating the spread of other viral infections.

Physical distancing

Physical distancing has been implemented in early learning and childcare settings mainly by structuring children and their early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners into play-pods, i.e. a grouping which stays apart from other play-pods as much as possible, to the extent that this was practical.

It is recognised that this has impacted on learning and care and the normal socialising and mixing between children and all early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners. As the general requirement for physical distancing in society no longer applies, early learning and childcare services are no longer required to maintain play-pods.

This will facilitate a return to larger group activities. The use of staff rooms, lockers, changing rooms, etc., can resume where there has been limited access in this regard.

Where services implemented staggered drop offs or pickups or breaks, these are no longer necessary. We know some services reduced operating hours in response to COVID-19 public health restrictions. This change in guidance will allow services to return to normal operating hours.

Visitors to services/meetings with parents

There is no longer a requirement to restrict parents and visitors to early learning and childcare services and services should revert to the normal arrangements for visitors. Anyone who has symptoms should not visit.

In this context regular meetings between parents and early years educators and school-age childcare practitioners should resume.

Return to early learning and childcare declaration form

Services no longer need to request children's parents to complete a Return to Early Learning and Childcare Setting Parental Declaration Form when a child returns to the service after an absence or holidays/breaks.

Antigen testing arrangements for children in early learning and childcare

As part of the transition arrangements the HSE will continue with the current processes to support the provision of antigen tests to early learning and childcare settings, special schools and primary schools.

The Antigen Free phone number is: 1800 110055 or parents may order antigen tests online from the primary schools and early learning and childcare services antigen programme: www.hse.ie/schooltest.

The call centre opening hours will be altered slightly and from next week onwards will be 8:45am to 6:00pm Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays). The online portal will remain operational 24/7 and will shortly be available through Irish as well as English.

Participation in antigen testing is voluntary, therefore it is not necessary for parents to share information with the early learning and childcare service about whether they have requested antigen tests, nor to confirm negative antigen tests

Children who are well may continue to come to early learning and childcare whether they participate in antigen testing or not.

Helplines for providers

The HSE Live helpline for COVID-19 related queries remains open during the transitional period: 1800 700 700 or 01 240 8787 or the HSE dedicated Early Learning and Childcare facility line on 01 511 9777.

If early learning and childcare providers need support over the weekend, they should contact the helpline, being hosted by the City/County Childcare Committees, on 1800 940341 between the hours of 10am-1.00pm and 1.30pm-4.00pm on Saturday, Sunday and bank holidays.

Notifications of cases to Tusla, Early Years Inspectorate

As COVID-19 is still included in the list of infectious diseases, in the event of a case in an early years service, it must be notified to Tusla:

<https://www.tusla.ie/services/preschool-services/update-for-early-years-service-providers-on-covid-19/>

Key pieces of guidance for Early Learning and Childcare sector from Monday 28th February are:

- This information note
- HPSC guidance – National Interim Guidance for Public Health Management of COVID-19 cases and close contacts, published on 25 February
<https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/contacttracingguidance/Public%20Health%20advice%20for%20the%20management%20of%20cases%20and%20contacts%20of%20COVID-19.pdf>
- Society-wide COVID-19 guidance from the HPSC which is expected to issue shortly
- 2012 Management of Infectious Disease in Childcare facilities and Other Childcare settings guidance - <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/lifestages/childcare/File,13444,en.pdf>

Please note that the previous Infection Prevention and Control guidance for Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare settings during the COVID-19 Pandemic (which was most recently updated on 14th January 2022) will be stood down by the HPSC, and will no longer apply from 28 February.