



To: The Managerial Authorities of Recognised Primary, Secondary, Community and Comprehensive Schools and the Chief Executives of Education and Training Boards

Re: (COVID-19): Arrangements for certain employees (i.e. School Secretaries, Caretakers, Cleaners, Bus Escorts) of recognised Primary and Post Primary schools in the Free Education Scheme and of ETBs

Date: 21st July 2021

Working Arrangements for staff (other than Teachers and SNAs) who are categorised as Very High Risk (VHR) and for Pregnant staff (other than Teachers and SNAs) employed in recognised Primary and Post Primary Schools - 2021/22 School Year

Recent advice is that as our knowledge of COVID-19 has increased, some conditions that previously placed employees in the VHR category now place them in the high risk category or in some instances in the normal risk category. In addition, an employee's risk categorisation may now have changed due to vaccination and / or history of recent confirmed COVID infection.

This letter is to be read in conjunction with the special arrangements set out in Circular 54/2020 that apply to employees of recognised Primary and Post Primary schools in the Free Education Scheme and in Community National Schools under the patronage of ETBs, employed using grant funding provided by this Department, who are at very high risk of serious illness from contracting COVID-19, and who are employed in the following posts:

- School Secretary
- Caretaker
- Cleaner
- Bus Escort

The general principles to apply to the management of COVID-19 include the safety and welfare of employees and the minimisation of the impact on teaching and learning. Employers will need to consider how best to deploy employees to facilitate the delivery of educational services.

It should be noted that the terms of *Circular 0021/2021* apply to Clerical Officers and Caretakers employed in primary schools under the 1978/79 Scheme, Clerical Officers employed in post-primary schools under the 1978 Scheme and Secretaries and Caretakers in Department-approved posts in Community and Comprehensive schools. However, the method for the recording of leave or working remotely may differ and the usual procedures should be followed.



Secretaries, Caretakers and Cleaners employed in ETB Post-Primary Schools are comprehended by the terms of *Circular 0050/2020- Arrangements for staff other than Teachers and SNAs who are employed by ETBs.*

Introduction

In the 2020/21 school year, an employee categorised by the OHS as at 'Very High Risk' of serious illness from contracting COVID-19 was facilitated by the employer to work remotely i.e. work from home. As the COVID-19 vaccination programme is rolled out and further evidence of the efficacy of vaccinations becomes available, it is now possible to consider workplace attendance for these employees.

The HSE has recently published '*Education Sector Guidance on Employees in the COVID-19 Higher Risk Categories, including Pregnant Employees*'. Based on this HSE Guidance, the OHS will take account of whether the employee has 'significant vaccine protection' at the time of the OHS assessment. As part of this assessment, where the employee assessed as 'Very High Risk':

(a) Does not yet have 'significant vaccine protection', he/she will be categorised as 'Very High Risk' and the employer must facilitate alternative working arrangements i.e. work from home.

(b) Has 'significant vaccine protection' he/she will be categorised by the OHS as 'High Risk' and must attend the workplace, if medically fit for work.

Information Note TC 25/2021 sets out how the OHS will approach categorisation of staff and should be read in conjunction with this letter. The updated position on staff (other than teachers or SNAs) who fall into categories such as Very High Risk (VHR) staff, employees over 70 years of age or pregnant employees is set out below.

Very High Risk Category

Where the OHS categorised an employee as VHR at any time before or during the 2020/21 school year under the process set out in Circulars 54/2020 or 21/2021 as appropriate, the COVID-19 Health Risk Categorisation Report will not be valid for the 2021/2022 school year. Existing COVID-19 Health Risk Categorisation Reports **will expire on 31 August 2021** and should be recorded as such by employers in the appropriate manner unless a new COVID-19 Health Risk Categorisation Report is provided by the employee.

In that regard any employee who is of the view that they are or remain at very high risk of serious illness from contracting COVID-19 (whether previously categorised or not) will need to make a new application for the 2021/2022 school year, as per the process set out in Circulars 54/2020 or 21/2021, as



appropriate. As previously indicated, the **application should be submitted to the OHS by the 30th July 2021.**

Employees over 70 Years of Age

An employee who is over 70 years of age must also submit a COVID-19 Risk Assessment Questionnaire to the OHS, before they can attend the workplace under the process set out in Circulars 54/2020 or 21/2021 as appropriate ahead of the 2021/22 school year. **The application should be submitted to the OHS by the 30th July 2021.**

Pregnant Employees

A pregnant employee who has any of the medical conditions as listed on the HSE website under 'Very high risk groups (extremely vulnerable)' should follow the process as detailed at paragraph 4.1 of Circular 0021/2021, with regard to a COVID-19 Health Risk Categorisation assessment.

Based on the HSE Guidance for the education sector, a pregnant employee up to 14 weeks gestation, who is medically fit for work can safely attend the workplace, unless they are categorised by the OHS as 'Very High Risk' due to an underlying medical condition unrelated to their pregnancy.

The recent HSE Guidance for the education sector advises that all pregnant employees should submit a COVID-19 Risk Assessment Questionnaire to the OHS **before the end of their first trimester.**

Future Potential Change to Health Advice

An employee's existing COVID-19 Health Risk Categorisation Report may be reviewed at any time during the 2021/22 school year due to a change in:-

(a) HSE advice

Where HSE advice is updated for the higher risk group, this may change the COVID-19 health risk categorisation. The OHS will contact the employee who submitted a COVID-19 Risk Assessment Questionnaire, to invite them to re-submit a new Questionnaire. Where the employee is re-categorised by the OHS, they will be required to return to the workplace, unless they are categorised as 'Very High Risk'.



(b) Medical diagnosis

Where medical diagnosis or treatment changes, the 'High Risk' or 'Very High Risk' employee must submit a new COVID-19 Risk Assessment Questionnaire to the OHS. Where a 'Very High Risk' employee is re-categorised by the OHS, they will be required to return to the workplace.

(c) Vaccination status

Where the 'Very High Risk' employee has gained 'significant vaccine protection' since the OHS assessment was carried out, this may change the COVID-19 health risk categorisation. The employee must submit a new COVID-19 Risk Assessment Questionnaire to the OHS. Where the employee is re-categorised by the OHS, they will be required to return to the workplace unless they are categorised as 'Very High Risk'.

Remote Working Arrangements – 'Very High Risk' Group

An employee who is medically fit for work and has been categorised as 'Very High Risk' by the OHS remains available to work from home. Where the current role of the 'Very High Risk' employee is unsuitable for remote working, they may be assigned on a temporary basis to support delivery of other essential public services.

The Department will issue further communication over the summer regarding remote working duties/arrangements for employees categorised by the OHS as 'Very High Risk' for the 2021/22 school year.

All queries should initially be brought to the attention of the employer who may wish to consult with their representative organisation.

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