

Section 3 - School Transport

The following guidance has been developed in line with advice from the Public Health Agency. It will be kept under review and updated as necessary.

The Education Authority is responsible for ensuring the provision of all home to school transport. This is provided on either **dedicated school transport** services or on **public transport services**. Dedicated school transport includes EA yellow buses, Translink buses that are only used by pupils and not used by the general public, privately operated bus services that are only used by pupils and taxis. Public transport services are scheduled bus and train services that are used by both pupils and the general public. This document draws a clear distinction between the guidance for those using dedicated school transport and those using public bus/train services.

Limited transport provision will be available for eligible pupils who require it in those year groups returning to school on 24 August 2020 with a full service resuming from 1 September.

Key Messages

Children showing any symptoms of COVID-19 **should not travel** to school.

The Education Authority is working collaboratively with transport providers such as Translink to maximise capacity across the home to school transport network. **Home to school transport, either on public bus services or on dedicated transport services, should only be used where there is no alternative available.**

All pupils should therefore seek to use alternative methods of travel in particular:

□ **Active travel** such as walking and cycling, where it is safe to do so. Using active travel for pupils' journey to school carries the lowest risk of transmission of COVID-19 and will bring a range of health benefits as part of a healthier lifestyle. Department for Infrastructure travel guidance - Safer travel guidance for public transport users, walkers, cyclists, drivers - provides a range of advice and information on how to safely use active travel methods.

□ **Use of "Park and Stride" facilities:** acknowledging that many parents may wish to bring their children to school, many towns now have Park and Stride facilities or other parking facilities whereby parents could park and walk with their children to school providing it is safe to do so, or alternatively drop their child at the park and ride facility and the child will either walk to school on their own or as part of a "walking bus" which schools are encouraged to facilitate.

For those children who have no alternative but to use the home to school transport service then the EA will make transport available as far as possible. Where children travel on dedicated school transport a series of mitigation measures will be put in place. These are outlined later in this section.

It is mandatory for all pupils to wear a face covering on public transport. It is also strongly recommended that all pupils regardless of age should wear a face covering on all buses, trains or taxis for the journey to school where it is appropriate for them to do so and they are able to handle them as directed.

Good hand hygiene practices must be adhered to at all times and these are detailed on the PHA website.

Schools are encouraged to work with the EA and Translink to determine how they might assist to **minimise pressure on the school and public transport network**. They should explore, for example, what steps could be taken to minimise the number of staff and pupils travelling on public transport services at peak times and maximise the use of existing buses by coordinating start and finish times in an area. This is particularly important for those who have no alternative to using public bus services, especially Metro services. Translink is planning to run additional dedicated school buses on routes where there is a large number of members of the public wishing to use Translink's peak time public bus services. Some pupils will continue to be provided with a pass for use on Translink's public bus services.

Schools may also wish to give consideration to their arrangements for/advice to pupils when disembarking from vehicles arriving on the school site and should make available access to waste disposal and handwashing facilities for EA transport colleagues where required.

Despite all the actions referenced in this guidance, there may be instances when parents/carers and children are delayed in getting to school due to transport issues and schools are encouraged to show understanding in such instances.

Dedicated Home to School Transport

This section applies to all **dedicated home to school transport**. By this, we mean bus and taxi services which exclusively carry children and young people travelling to school and other education institutions, including those with a transport escort. This includes services commissioned or provided by either the Education Authority or by schools or other educational establishments.

Pupils on all buses should always seek to maintain a social distance from others wherever possible, however the **guidance for public transport on social distancing will not apply on dedicated school transport in the new school year**. All other mitigating measures below will apply. Further information on pupils minimising contact and mixing is shown in mitigating measure (e) later in this section. **Pupils using public bus/train services will continue to follow the social distancing guidelines that apply to all passengers.**

The Department considers that this is an appropriate balance because:

- The overall risk to children and young people from COVID19 is considered to be low.
- Pupils will usually face forward on a vehicle except in a small number of cases such as some pupils with special educational needs.
- Pupils on dedicated school transport do not mix with the general public on those journeys.
- Dedicated home to school transport often carries the same group of children and young people on a regular basis, and those children may also be together in school.
- The predictability, which public transport does not afford, will allow for planning so that protective measures can be put in place.

Where capacity on a vehicle allows for additional space to be put between pupils, that should be done, however it is recognised that this will not always be possible. Where it is not possible, other measures to protect pupils, outlined below, will be implemented.

Home to School Transport on Public Transport Services

The Department for Infrastructure's Safer travel guidance for public transport users, walkers, cyclists, drivers documents state that when travelling, users should keep two metres social distance at all times - where that is not possible, they should try to keep at least one metre, taking suitable precautions such as wearing a face covering. **This advice applies for pupils aged 13 and over using public bus/train services where members of the public may also be on board. The wearing of face coverings for those under 13 on all buses, trains or taxis for the journey to school is strongly encouraged for those who are able to do so.**

Under the current social distancing guidelines, it is unlikely that there will be capacity to provide all eligible pupils with a seat on a public transport service. The Department of Education and the Education Authority are currently exploring all options for minimising the disruption that this may cause, including the provision of more dedicated school bus services. **Parents, children and young people are strongly encouraged to consider alternatives to using public transport, to plan their journey to and from school and to use active travel methods such as walking or cycling.**

Measures to Protect Pupils on Dedicated and Public Transport Services

There are a range of measures that will be taken by the EA and by transport providers to minimise the risk to pupils. These measures can be applied to both dedicated and non-dedicated home to school transport services. The EA will also ensure that it takes account of the individual needs of pupils with special educational needs and work with the parents and schools in considering the implementation of these measures for these pupils.

a) Use of face coverings where possible

Executive guidance is that from 10 July 2020, it is mandatory for all persons aged 13 and over to wear a face covering on public transport. Children using dedicated school transport, and those who have a physical or mental illness or impairment, or a disability that means that they cannot put on, wear or remove a face covering are exempt as are all children under the age of 13 on public transport. Further details are contained within the relevant guidance document.

It is mandatory for all pupils aged 13 and over to wear a face covering on public transport. It is also strongly recommended that all pupils regardless of age, should wear a face covering on all buses, trains or taxis for the journey to school where it is appropriate for them to do so and they are able to handle them as directed.

Face coverings should not be worn by those who may not be able to handle them as directed (for example, young children, or those with special educational needs or disabilities) as it may inadvertently increase the risk of transmission. They should also not be used by some children and young people with special educational needs who may become distressed.

Schools should also consider a process for removing face coverings for pupils and staff when they alight from home to school transport or arrive at school and communicate it to them clearly. This process should enable them to wash their hands immediately on arrival (as is the case for all children and young people), dispose of temporary face coverings in a covered bin or place reusable face coverings in a plastic bag they can take home with them, and then wash their hands again. A further face covering should be used when travelling home on public transport.

b) Minimise contact with individuals who are unwell

Anyone with symptoms of COVID-19 must follow the Public Health Agency guidance 'COVID-19: Information for the Public'. This includes parents ensuring that their child(ren) do(es) not travel to or attend school if they or a member of their household has symptoms. If a child or young person develops symptoms whilst at school, he/she should be collected by their parents and must not travel on home to school transport including public transport.

Parents should ensure their child knows that if they become aware of COVID-19 symptoms while on board a vehicle, they should either inform the transport driver or escort (if there is one on board their vehicle) and school staff immediately upon arrival at school.

Drivers and escorts will be provided with PPE as necessary to complete their duties. This will be dependent on the pupils being transported and any requirements for close contact. If a driver and/or transport escort have concerns that a child may be showing symptoms, they should make the child's school aware of these concerns as soon as possible. The school should then follow the procedures detailed earlier in this document in responding to a child who may be showing COVID-19 symptoms.

If requested by the PHA's Contact Tracing Service, the EA should seek to identify pupils who may have travelled on the same home to school transport vehicle for tracing purposes. It is recognised however that this may not be possible for pupils using Translink services.

Children, young people, drivers and transport escorts who have been in contact with someone that has developed symptoms whilst at school or on home to school transport do not need to go home to self-isolate unless they develop symptoms themselves (in which case, they should arrange to be tested) or the symptomatic person subsequently tests positive or if they have been requested to do so by PHA's Contact Tracing Service.

c) Good hygiene measures

It is the responsibility of parents to ensure that all children and young people travelling to school clean their hands before they leave their home. Where transport providers have made hand sanitiser available on board a vehicle, all pupils should use it upon entering a vehicle and when arriving at school and again when leaving school, boarding a vehicle and arriving home.

Parents should ensure that their children carry tissues on home to school transport and that their children are aware of the need to follow the PHA's "Catch it, bin it, kills it" messages.

In order to reduce the potential risks associated with pupils sharing food or drinks on board a school transport vehicle, no pupil should eat or drink on board unless it is for a medical reason.

When the EA is considering the safeguards to put in place in order to support children and young people with special needs and the staff working with them, it will take into account that some of these pupils may struggle to maintain as good hygiene practices as their peers.

It is important to maximise the ventilation of fresh air (from outside the vehicle) on dedicated school transport vehicles, particularly through opening windows and ceiling vents. Air recirculation will be avoided where possible

d) Vehicle cleaning

The EA will work with transport operators to agree the arrangements for cleaning vehicles. Operators should maintain high hygiene standards for buses delivering home to school transport. This should include rigorous cleaning standards including frequent cleaning of high frequency touch points should be undertaken or other mitigating options put in place to limit the spread of COVID-19.

e) Minimising contact and mixing

The EA will work with schools and transport operators to consider how mixing might be minimised on **dedicated school transport**. Children should, as far as possible, sit beside their siblings on a bus and/or be grouped together by year group or school. The same children always sitting together would help to minimise the number of contacts each child has. Schools and families/children should work with the EA and Translink to try to facilitate pupils sitting on a vehicle in the same groups wherever possible. However, it is recognised that vehicle capacity and the complexity of some home to school transport arrangements mean there will often be limits to the extent to which grouping can be arranged. It is therefore acknowledged that there may be mixing of wider groups on home to school transport.

On many **dedicated school transport** services, pupils from more than one school will be on board. Where it is not possible to have only pupils from one school on a dedicated school vehicle, or to socially distance or group these pupils, the mitigation measures put in place should minimise risks to pupils.

Schools should consider how they can put in place appropriate queuing or other arrangements needed for picking up and dropping off children at school.

Education Authority Operational Guidance

The Education Authority will provide more detailed operational guidance to staff, parents/carers, pupils, and operators that is consistent with the guidance from other government departments and bodies such as DfI and the Public Health Agency.