



Education Through Covid Programme
**Northern Ireland COVID-19 Special Schools
Testing Programme
Project Overview**

1. Project Background and Rationale

There are 39 special schools in Northern Ireland, attended by 6,420 pupils. The children and young people attending special schools have a wide range of special needs. Many have complex underlying medical conditions. There are over 3,000 staff working in special schools.

Up to 10th January 2021, 35 out of 39 special schools have reported at least one confirmed COVID case to the Public Health Authority (PHA) education team since schools re-opened in September 2020. In total since schools opened in September 2020 there have been 190 confirmed COVID cases among special school staff or students reported to the PHA schools team with 135 in staff and 55 in pupils.

Special schools have high staff to pupil ratios compared to mainstream schools. Due to the individual needs of special school pupils staff are unable to socially distance from children. Work undertaken includes the provision of personal care which means staff can be required to work closely together. Often multiple members of staff are required to care for one child. While appropriate PPE is provided for activities like personal care, there are parallels between special schools and care settings.

Special schools remain open during the current period of restrictions, and while children, even those with significant underlying medical conditions, do not generally become very unwell if they contract COVID, some children in special schools have extremely complex medical needs and all possible steps should be taken to protect them from COVID.

The benefit children and families get from special school is very significant. There are a range of therapies that are only available to children in school to support their access to educational provision. In addition, schools provide important respite for families caring for children with complex needs. The routine of regular attendance at school is a protective factor for many children.

Some parents are very worried about the risk of their child contracting COVID and have chosen not to send their child to school. This is reflected in attendance figures which show 51.4% attendance for week commencing 11 January. While this is understandable, missing school and the associated therapies coupled with added stress placed on families caring for children may have negative consequences for some children.

This proposal should contribute to reducing the rate of infections in special schools as regular testing will identify cases either before they are symptomatic, or asymptomatic cases, allowing immediate self-isolation (including remote learning), thereby reducing potential for wider transmission, both within the school and in the contact groups of pupils and staff. Schools will continue to follow PHA advice on self-isolation of close contacts.

Planning for the roll-out of testing is well advanced across the PHA, Queen's University of Belfast (QUB) and the Education Authority (EA). A feasibility study has been completed in Sperrinview Special School, Dungannon and initial results have been encouraging.

2. Project Objectives and Outcomes

| Project Objectives | Outcomes |
|--|---|
| Increased confidence among special school staff and pupils that school is a safe environment | This will be measured by a fall in the absence rate for both staff and pupils. |
| Positive reception by teaching and non-teaching unions that safety of staff in special schools is a departmental priority. | Positive Industrial relations will be maintained, as measured through ongoing engagement with special school principals and trade unions. |
| Early detection and isolation of asymptomatic/pre-symptomatic staff and pupils in special schools thereby reducing the transmission of COVID 19 within the school setting. | Fewer absences among special school staff and pupils as a result of contracting COVID or needing to self-isolate. This will also have the wider societal benefit of reduced overall COVID transmission in external contact groups. |

3. Project Approach

The initiative is being led by the Public Health Agency working together with the Education Authority and Queens University Belfast. The programme is jointly sponsored by the Departments of Health and Education.

The programme offers all asymptomatic staff and pupils attending special schools in Northern Ireland regular testing using a new testing technology called LAMP (loop-mediated isothermal amplification). LAMP is a saliva based test.

The project target is to offer weekly asymptomatic testing of all 10,000 special school staff (teaching, non-teaching and ancillary) and students. By finding asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic cases they can be quickly isolated along with their contacts, therefore reducing the risk of transmission of COVID in the school setting, and consequently the wider community.

All students and staff in special schools will be offered weekly testing using saliva rather than the usual nose and throat swab. This approach has been chosen as it is less invasive and children in special school would not be able to tolerate regular nose and throat swabs. Parental consent will be sought. The same method of testing using saliva will also be used to test the staff. PHA have confirmed that the test is accurate and reliable.

The saliva samples will be collected at home and brought into school on an agreed day per week. The samples will be transported to Queen’s University Laboratories by EA Transport; and tested using the direct LAMP (loop-mediated isothermal amplification) method. Results will be available and notified to the school on the same day, and school principals will work with the PHA School Team to take any required public health action on receipt of a positive result. This means any individuals who tested positive and their contacts will be isolated quickly.

The programme will be offered across all 39 special schools from February to the end of summer term 2021. This testing programme will be voluntary. However, all staff and students will be encouraged to participate.

The EA will work with schools to determine resourcing requirements to facilitate the administration of the programme. All schools will be offered the equivalent of one day per week administrative support.

4. Project Governance

Project Organisation Structure

The project is sponsored by the Minister of Education, Peter Weir MLA, and the Minister of Health, Robin Swann MLA. The project governance structure has been developed by the Education Authority in partnership with the Public Health Agency. The project structure is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

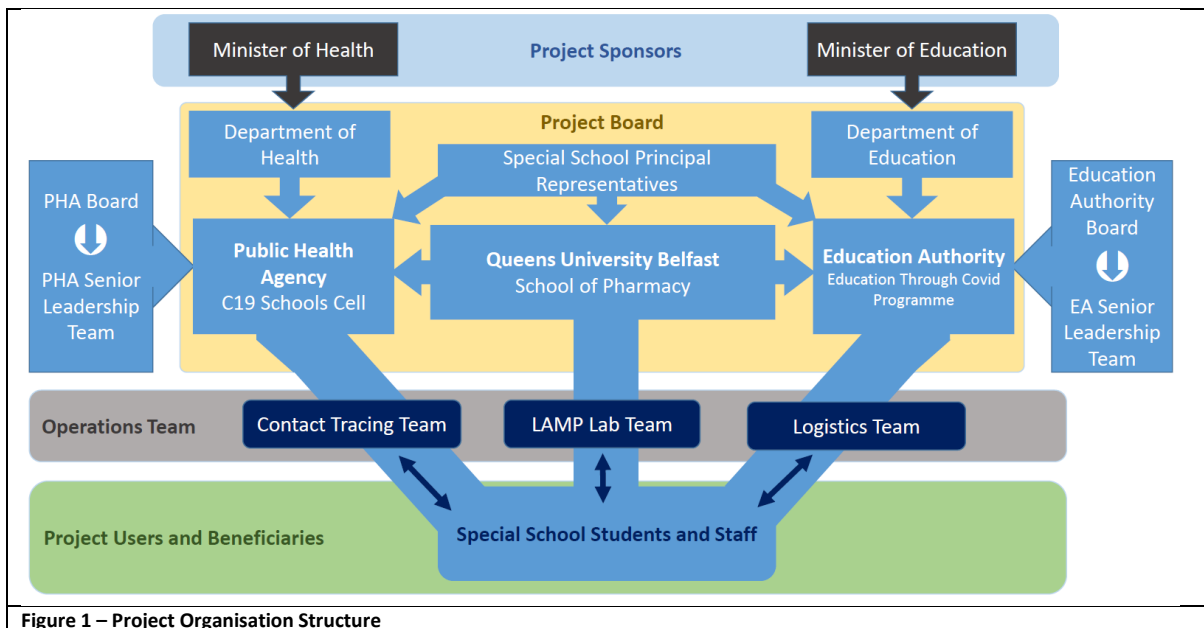


Figure 1 – Project Organisation Structure

Project Board

The project board will be facilitated by the Education Authority. It will be chaired by the nominated senior Education Authority officer and the nominated senior Public Health Agency officer will act as vice-chair. (Project Board Membership Appendix 1)

The project will be managed within Workstream 2 of the EA Education 'Through Covid programme' and project documentation will be managed by the Education Authority through its Microsoft Teams platform. This platform will enable external users subject to their own organisation's restrictions.

5. Project Controls

5.1 Quality Management Structure

Project quality management has been embedded in the project structure by inviting five Special School principals to sit on either the project board or operational team. As Senior Users they are appropriately placed to identify issues within programme delivery and to assist in identifying the impact of the project at school level. These individuals have been nominated by the Special Schools Senior Leadership Group to represent the views of special schools across Northern Ireland.

Discussions on project quality should be framed within an outcomes-based accountability structure. The key questions to be addressed should generate qualitative and quantitative evidence as illustrated below:

| Quality Management Key Questions | | |
|---|--|--------------------------------------|
| | Quantity | Quality |
| Effort | How much did we do? | How well did we do it? |
| Effect | Is anyone better off? (Numbers) | Is anyone better off? (%) |
| Project Quality Management Framework | | |

5.2 Project Reporting

A **weekly project status report** will be prepared and presented to each meeting of the project board. This report will be agreed by the project board and disseminated to all stakeholders. The report will be noted within Workstream 2 of the EA 'Education Through Covid' programme.

6. Project Termination

The Project Board will, in consultation with the sponsoring departments, decide when it is appropriate for the project to be terminated. This currently scheduled for 30 June 2021, but will be kept under review.

Appendix 1

Project Board membership will be constituted as follows:

| Organisation | Name | Role |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| Education Authority | Mrs Kim Scott | Assistant Director of Education (Project Board Chair) |
| Public Health Agency | Dr Joanne McClean | Consultant in Public Health Medicine (Project Board Vice-Chair) |
| Queens University Belfast | Professor Michael Tunney | QUB Representative |
| Department of Education | Mr James Hutchinson | Education RESTART Programme |
| Department of Health | Mr Jonathan Norwood | Healthcare Policy Group, Department of Health |
| Brookfield School | Mrs Barbara Spence | School Principal |
| Sperrinview School | Ms Paula Jordan | School Principal |
| Education Authority | Mr Seamus Bradley | Project Manager, Education Through Covid Programme |
| Education Authority | Mr Jim Dunbar | Project Manager – C19 Schools Testing |
| Education Authority | Ms Lyn McGuigan | Children & Young Peoples Services |