

SECONDARY SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES TO BENEFIT FROM WEEKLY CORONAVIRUS TESTING FROM JANUARY

- Lateral flow tests to be deployed to all secondary schools and colleges to help detect asymptomatic cases and break chains of transmission
- Staff to be tested weekly, and staff and students to be tested daily if identified as a close contact
- Government has made keeping schools open a national priority and testing will help keep children and young people in education

Every secondary school and college in England, as well as special schools and alternative provision, will have access to rapid coronavirus testing from January to help keep staff and students as safe as possible and in education, the government has announced today [Tuesday 15 December].

Building on the success of testing pilots in schools and colleges over the past few months, from January all staff in secondary schools and colleges will be eligible for weekly rapid tests as part of an initial rollout.

Students will be eligible for daily testing for seven days if they are identified as a close contact of someone who has tested positive. Under current guidelines, up to a whole school bubble has to self-isolate if one student or staff member tests positive. From January, those in the same bubble not need to self-isolate if they agree to be tested once a day. This will improve attendance and ensure young people can benefit from face-to-face teaching as much as possible.

Staff will also be eligible for daily testing if they are identified as a close contact.

Roughly one in three people have the virus without symptoms so could be spreading the disease unknowingly. Asymptomatic testing helps to identify positive cases more quickly, and break chains of transmission.

Primary schools will then be supported to roll out testing as quickly as possible over the spring term.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

“This huge expansion of rapid testing for those working in education is a milestone moment in our work to keep schools and colleges open for all.

“I know it has taken a phenomenal effort from everyone to ensure approximately 99% of schools have been open each week since the start of term.

“Testing on this scale brings real benefits to education, it means more children, teachers and staff can stay in their classes in schools and colleges without the need to self-isolate.”

Consent will be given in all cases by the staff member, student, or parent as appropriate. Close contacts of positive cases who do not want to participate in daily testing will still be able to self-isolate as is currently the case.

Guidance, training materials and webinars will shortly be made available to secondary schools and colleges so they can start to use the new testing capacity as soon as possible.

The pilots that have taken place in schools and colleges over the autumn term have shown the positive impact regular testing can have in finding asymptomatic cases before they spread and reducing the need to self-isolate amongst staff and students.

The pilots have shown how testing is an additional reassurance and protective measure, on top of the wide range of effective measures schools and colleges already have in place, including increased hygiene, ventilation, and wearing of face coverings in communal areas where appropriate.

Test kits will begin arriving at secondary schools and colleges for the first phase of rollout to staff from the first week of January.

Dr Susan Hopkins, Senior Medical Adviser to PHE and NHS Test and Trace:

“Lateral flow devices are a vital additional tool in helping us detect COVID-19 cases that we wouldn’t otherwise know about, meaning that we can break chains of transmission and save lives.

“In schools these tests can help make students and staff safer by helping us quickly identify many people who are unknowingly carrying high levels of the virus, preventing them from passing it on to others.”

Hamid Patel, CEO of Star Academies, a trust with schools participating in the autumn testing trials, said:

“Testing was arranged to be as unintrusive as possible, and the benefits have been tremendous.

“Attendance has improved as fewer close contacts have been required to self-isolate. Parents who may have been wavering have gained confidence to send their children to school, and staff have been reassured by the availability of testing.

“Testing has allowed us to refocus on teaching and learning. I am heartened that the scheme is to be rolled out nationally: it is a game-changer for the sector.”

Gerard Garvey, Principal of Newcastle Sixth Form College, a college participating in the autumn testing trials, said:

“Testing at Newcastle Sixth Form College has given all of our students and staff the reassurance that the college is a safe environment for them to work and study.

“The testing process is smooth and has minimal impact on teaching and learning.

“The daily testing of close contacts has enabled students who would normally have had to self-isolate to continue to attend and enjoy the benefits of face-to-face teaching.”

There is no expectation that school and college staff will need to work on this over the Christmas break. Existing staff meetings or inset days can be used for training as appropriate for each individual setting.

Schools and colleges will be provided with the necessary equipment and materials to deliver the testing and will be reimbursed for reasonable administrative costs such as staff time.

We continue to work with local authorities to trial approaches to regular testing in early years settings, and expect provision to increase throughout the spring.

ENDS