

23rd February 2021

Dear parents, carers and guardians,

I would like to thank you for the sacrifices you have made and, where possible, for keeping your children and young people at home during this period of national restrictions. I recognise that for many of you this will have been a very challenging time. I am writing to you to set out in greater detail the easing of restrictions on face-to-face teaching announced this week.

When the Prime Minister announced this lockdown, he was clear he would review the situation in mid-February. This was dependent upon the most vulnerable adults being offered the first dose of the vaccine by 15 February, meaning they should have developed some immunity from the virus by about three weeks later, that is by 8 March.

I am pleased to say that, thanks to the efforts of the NHS, volunteers and scientists, the government has achieved this target and, following an in-depth analysis of the virus prevalence data, and the data on NHS capacity, both suggest that infection rates have fallen across all ages, including in children and young people.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister set out the next phase of the government's response to coronavirus (COVID-19), including where restrictions on attendance at education settings can be lifted.

Return

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health has made clear that the overwhelming majority of children and young people still have no symptoms or very mild illness only. We also know that returning children to face to face teaching is vital for their educational progress, for their wellbeing, and for their wider development.

If your child attends a primary, secondary, special or alternative provision school, college or further education setting they will return to their setting from 8 March – or if already attending, will be joined by their classmates. Secondary age students will be tested for Covid on their return, schools and colleges will organise the testing of groups of pupils during the first week. Since the start of term 4 million tests have been done in schools and weekly testing of pupils and staff will help keep everyone safe. If your child uses wraparound childcare, including childminders, these should also allow attendance for eligible children.

If your child attends an Early Years setting, these will continue to be open to all children, as they have throughout the period of national restrictions.

16- to 19-year olds (or 19- to 25-year olds with an EHCP) who attend further education settings will also undertake the majority of their planned hours on site.

Students in higher education undertaking practical or practice-based (including creative arts) courses who need access to specialist equipment and facilities will be able to recommence in-person teaching and learning from the 8 March. The Government will review, by the end of the Easter holidays, the options for timing of the return of remaining students. This review will take account of the latest data and will be a key part of the wider roadmap steps. Students and providers will be given a week's notice ahead of any further return.

Rapid testing

Since January, schools and colleges have been delivering rapid asymptomatic testing. Rapid testing remains an important part of the government's plan to suppress the virus, in education and childcare settings and across society. This sort of testing means that people who have COVID19 but do not have any symptoms of COVID 19, who might otherwise continue to attend educational settings, can be identified and self-isolate.

If your child has attended a secondary school or college through January, they may have been offered a test, and we are now asking that secondary schools and colleges offer tests for all students across the week of the 8 March as they return. If your child attends a primary school, they will not be offered a test upon return.

Twice-weekly asymptomatic testing is already available for the secondary school, most college, primary school, school-based nursery and maintained nursery school workforce, including support staff such as teaching assistants and those supporting with wraparound childcare.

Yesterday, we announced the further expansion of this asymptomatic testing programme, asking that all secondary age pupils and students in most colleges who consent will be offered three rapid tests at school or college in the first two weeks of their return three to five days apart. This will help them to get used to swabbing themselves for the tests. Schools and colleges will then provide students with two rapid tests to use each week at home. The home test kits come with clear instructions for use and how to report the results. All secondary and college staff will also be provided with home test kits to allow them to test twice a week at home. Testing is voluntary but we would encourage as many people as possible to take part to help reduce the prevalence of the virus. If your child attends a special school, where possible they will also be offered a test. Rapid testing is already in place for those arriving or staying at university.

We will be asking HE providers to offer two tests to all students eligible to attend their university or HE institution upon their return, and twice weekly asymptomatic testing to all students eligible to attend on-site, as well as providing testing for staff.

All staff at private, voluntary and independent nurseries will have access to tests to use twice weekly at home, building on the testing already available to maintained nursery schools and school-based nurseries. Childminders can continue to access community testing, and the Department continues to work with colleagues across government to review the testing approach available for childminders.

Safety measures

We have worked closely with Public Health England to develop and refresh the system of controls that schools and colleges already have in place to reduce the risk of transmission in education and childcare settings, based on scientific rationale. The system of controls supports schools and colleges to assess risk and implement measures to mitigate risk, including ventilating occupied spaces, introducing enhanced cleaning and minimising contact and mixing. We ask all pupils, students and staff to continue to do everything they can to adhere to these measures, because it is vital that they are implemented well and consistently.

In addition to the system of controls and the expanded testing programme set out above, in schools or colleges where pupils in year 7 and above are educated, we recommend that face coverings should be worn by staff and pupils where social distancing cannot easily be maintained when moving around the premises outside of classrooms or teaching spaces, such as in corridors and communal areas. In the

same settings for a limited period, we also recommend the use of face coverings in classrooms and other teaching spaces, unless wearing a face covering would impact on the ability to take part in exercise or strenuous activity, for example in PE lessons, or for those who are exempt from wearing a face covering as per government guidance.

Children in primary schools do not need to wear a face covering.

We have published further guidance for parents [here](#). We will be setting out further measures for immediate support to children, early years settings, schools, colleges and local authorities later this week. I am very pleased that we are able to return children and young people across England to their classrooms and colleges, to allow them to spend time with their friends and teachers and get back into the rhythms of the school or college year.

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education