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Written Statement: Extension to the testing offer for schools, colleges and childcare settings to include upper secondary and college learners

CABINET STATEMENT

Written Statement: Extension to the testing offer for schools, colleges and childcare settings to include upper secondary and college learners

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First published: 22 February 2021

Last updated: 22 February 2021

On 5 February we announced our plans to make rapid testing at home available to staff working in all registered childcare settings including Flying Start settings, schools and further education settings, with the aim of quickly identifying those who are unknowingly carrying the virus so that they can self-isolate. These tests will also help us to gain a much clearer picture of what is really happening in our schools and settings and provide reassurance to the wider community. It is recognised that asymptomatic testing is likely to lead to an increase in case rates initially, however this increase is likely to decline once positive cases are isolated and transmission chains are broken.

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There is still no evidence to suggest widespread transmission in our schools and colleges but there is no way of knowing where transmission may occur outside of the regulated classroom environment. It is with this in mind that we are extending the offer of regular, twice weekly, Lateral Flow Tests (LFTs) at home to all those of upper secondary age. This will start with offering tests to years 11 to 13 and all FE college learners and learners on work-based Apprenticeship and Traineeship programmes.

Learners of this age group are, on the whole, significantly less likely to become unwell from COVID-19, however symptomatic prevalence data suggests that this age group are more likely to test positive than younger teenagers and there is evidence to suggest that older secondary aged pupils may transmit the virus to the same level as adults. We will continue to be led by the latest scientific advice and so this testing offer will be regularly reviewed to ensure that we are including the right people in the offer in order to meet the intended outcomes.

We intend to make these tests available to all those who are eligible in line with the next phase of return to face-to-face learning, which if infection rates allow will be from 15 March onwards and will work diligently with our partners and stakeholders to make this a reality.

It cannot be stressed enough that testing alone cannot eradicate the risks associated with contracting and transmitting Covid-19. No test is perfect and negative tests cannot be the only means of assurance that infection is not spread. Testing helps to mitigate the risk but anyone included in the testing offer should continue to adhere to other more effective infection prevention control measures such as appropriate social distancing and good hand hygiene measures. We are grateful to everyone in the sector who has worked so hard to make sure protective measures are in place and to the children and young people who have adapted to the new arrangements and are playing their part in keeping us all safe.

First published

22 February 2021

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