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Written Statement: COVID-19 Testing in Schools

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On 3 June 2020, the Minister for Education announced that schools would open in a limited capacity from the 29th June, so all learners have the opportunity to 'check in, catch up and prepare for summer and September'.

The Welsh Government has outlined steps that should be taken in order to maintain social distancing and other measures set out in the guidelines to support the opening of schools to more pupils.

I want to be clear that we are committed to the safety of children and all school staff during this time and to that end, I want to set out what action the Welsh Government is taking.

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Outbreaks and Rapid Deployment of Antigen Testing

The rapid deployment of testing will be made available to support outbreaks by the NHS Wales TTP Programme and Local Health Boards will facilitate PCR antigen testing for everybody in the school/setting 'bubbles' (small, consistent group of no more than 8) that are affected by the outbreak and everyone in the school/setting if it has been established that the setting has not followed Welsh Government guidelines for schools and/or Infection Prevention and Control measures.

The method for delivery and sampling of rapid antigen tests can be executed in a range of ways such as the deployment of Mobile Testing Units (MTUs), temporary testing satellites and drop off and collection routes. The most appropriate testing channel will be discussed and agreed between all stakeholders.

Building upon the Disease Outbreak Plan for Wales (2020), Public Health Wales has provided specific advice regarding the investigation and management of any incidents of COVID-19 in educational settings. The advice outlines what steps should be taken to protect individuals and communities where outbreaks are occurring, as well as reducing spread.

The Welsh Government has written to all local health boards and Directors of Education to ensure that these plans are communicated clearly and that everyone understands their roles in ensuring that any incidents are reported quickly so that Test, Trace, Protect teams can provide the rapid response expected to protect children and staff and minimise further infections.

The rapid deployment of testing will be made available to support outbreaks by the NHS Wales Test Trace and Protect Programme in partnership with Local Health Boards, for example through the deployment of Mobile Testing Units (MTUs).

Antibody Testing

The Welsh Government is also undertaking a programme of Antibody testing being rolled out to at least 10% of schools staff who have worked in hub schools during the pandemic. We expect over 9000 to be tested. This will assist in understanding the seroprevalence of the virus in this cohort.

We will repeating that antibody testing following the end of term with an additional sample group consisting of the broader school community. Retesting of the original cohort will provide information about both the duration of positivity in previously positive individuals and the rate of seroconversion in individuals that previously tested negative. The latter will provide both new estimates of point prevalence over time and information about changes in prevalence in this cohort over time.

The deployment of testing is part of our public health response and keeping children and schools staff safe. As I have said on previous occasions we will keep reviewing and responding to the evidence and taking action accordingly.

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