

CABINET STATEMENT

Written Statement: Covid-19 testing of staff and pupils

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We recognise that it has not been easy for pupils and staff who have been required to self-isolate as a result of having been identified as a close contact of somebody who has tested positive for Coronavirus and the impact this has had on face to face learning.

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On 9 December 2020 we announced the reduction in the period of time for which a person needs to self-isolate from 14 days to 10 days. We are committed to taking further steps to reduce asymptomatic transmission and to ensuring education continues with minimal disruption.

One of the new technologies developed through the UK mass testing programme is lateral flow tests (LFTs). Lateral flow testing detects the presence of the Covid-19 viral antigen from a swab sample. LFTs are handheld devices which produce results within 20 to 30 minutes, with the potential to be self-administered. While LFTs are not as sensitive as lab-based RT-PCR tests, scientific advice has indicated that by testing more frequently with LFTs, their accuracy is on a par with RT-PCR tests.

Following discussions with Public Health Wales and the Children and Schools Technical Advisory Cell, we are planning to introduce a serial testing programme in schools and further education settings from January 2021.

The lessons we have learnt from using LFTs in pilots in higher education institutions across Wales and secondary schools in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhondda Cynon Taf will help inform how we can successfully deliver lateral flow testing in schools and other education settings in the future.

From January 2021, schools and further education settings will be offered the ability to perform serial testing (using LFTs) of close contacts to replace the need to self-isolate for those within that setting. This means pupils and staff identified as close contacts would be asked to either self-isolate as normal OR to take a lateral flow test (LFT) at the start of the school day for the duration of the self-isolation period. Those who test negative may continue with their normal activities; those who test positive must self-isolate and book a confirmatory test.

Each setting will be offered support, equipment and training, and we are engaging with the sector on the specific logistical requirements.

It is our intention that all schools and further education settings, including primary and childcare staff, should have access to serial testing. However, in order to ensure there is a model that works and is safe, we will phase the roll out starting with secondary schools and further education settings.

All staff working in special schools will be offered weekly testing.

We will keep this serial testing under review to capture any lessons and to inform future use of serial testing.

It is vital everyone understands that testing alone cannot eradicate the risks associated with contracting and transmitting Covid-19. Testing helps to mitigate the risk but it needs to be taken alongside other infection prevention control measures, including appropriate social distancing and hand hygiene measures. We are grateful to everyone in the sector who has worked hard to make sure these measures are in place.

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