

Date: 21 December 2020

Your Ref:

Our ref: 201221/Williamson G/PR/FC

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson, MP
Secretary of State
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

NASUWT

The Teachers' Union

Hillscourt Education Centre
Rose Hill
Rednal
Birmingham
B45 8RS

General Secretary
Dr Patrick Roach

Telephone: 0121 453 6150 Facsimile: 0121 457 6208

E-mail: nasuwt@mail.nasuwt.org.uk Website: www.nasuwt.org.uk

Dear Gavin,

Mass testing in secondary schools and colleges in England

Children's education has faced huge disruption throughout much of 2020. The NASUWT wishes to see everything done that is possible to minimise further disruption in schools and to ensure that schools can continue to open safely from January 2021.

We note the Prime Minister's statement regarding the new Covid-19 strain and our members are also deeply concerned about the potential impact of the Christmas holidays on Covid-19 transmission, despite the additional measures announced by the Prime Minister on 19 December. We also note the remarks made by the Prime Minister on 19 December and by the Secretary of State for Health on 20 December that the new variant of the virus may be up to 70% more transmissible and is "getting out of control". We understand that the Government intends to review the situation again on 30 December. However, given the increased risks, I must ask that you consider very carefully whether it continues to remain safe for schools and colleges to reopen fully as planned from 4 January 2021.

The NASUWT is seriously concerned that in the absence of a clear and practical plan for the sector, the prospect will be of yet more disruption to schools and colleges in January.

We note your announcement on 17 December on the introduction of mass testing in secondary schools and colleges. The NASUWT welcomes a commitment to increased use of Covid-19 tests as a means of controlling the spread of the virus, protecting public health and, where applied taken in conjunction with other essential measures, to help keep schools and colleges safe.

We would also advise you that, in addition to the risks in secondary schools and colleges, there is significant evidence of virus transmission in primary schools and in special schools/alternative provision settings which is also deeply worrying. Nevertheless, the NASUWT does believe that mass testing in January is a

potentially important step forward in ensuring that schools and colleges are as safe as possible.

As I made clear at your meeting with education stakeholders on 19 December, however, in the absence of a robust national plan for mass testing that is properly resourced and fully funded, widespread disruption in schools and colleges is set to continue into the new year.

We acknowledge your confirmation of additional funding and some online training for schools and colleges. However, time and logistical support is also needed to enable the planning, organisation and delivery of mass testing arrangements, including: providing physical space for tests to be conducted; making arrangements to recruit and vet any additional personnel; time to train personnel involved in administering the test arrangements; the need to obtain consent from parents and/or pupils; the need to ensure the process of analysis of swab tests is conducted appropriately and accurately; the need to establish systems to record and report test results to pupils, parents and other relevant bodies, and the need to manage personal data appropriately and securely.

The NASUWT has noted with concern that the Government does not have the capacity to deliver a system of mass testing of pupils in secondary schools and colleges. However, neither do schools. Indeed, it is not credible for the Government to rely on a system of mass testing that relies on thousands of individual schools and colleges to recruit an army of willing volunteers to deliver this vital and essential programme.

The NASUWT urges you, therefore, to take further steps to guarantee access to mass testing for all pupils/students.

We believe that there are a number of measures you should consider in order to overcome the logistical challenges that schools and colleges will face and to ensure that available testing capacity is administered where it is most needed, including:

- providing access to a national bank of volunteer personnel available to work to implement mass testing, including drawing on volunteers already identified across Government to support the NHS and social care;
- extending the period for remote education in order to facilitate mass testing to be organised;
- ensuring that armed forces or other appropriate personnel are deployed nationally in all Tier 4 areas to ensure that access to mass testing will be guaranteed in schools and colleges in the highest risk areas.

Parents and the public have a right to expect headteachers and teachers to focus their efforts on children's education in January, and not organising coronavirus testing facilities.

Given that a clinical solution will be available to enable mass testing in schools and colleges, we urge greater ambition from the Government to ensure that this solution will be guaranteed at this critical time.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Patrick Roach', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Dr Patrick Roach
General Secretary