

Date: 12 July 2021

Your Ref:

Our ref: 210712/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](mailto:nasuwt@mail.nasuwt.org.uk) Website: [www.nasuwt.org.uk](http://www.nasuwt.org.uk)

**By email:** [Sec-OF-STATE.PS@education.gov.uk](mailto:Sec-OF-STATE.PS@education.gov.uk)

Dear Gavin,

### **Schools Covid-19 Operational Guidance from Step 4**

I am writing to you regarding two very important matters raised by our members following the publication of the new Operational Guidance effective from Step 4 of the Government's roadmap.

#### ***Tracing close contacts and isolation***

We understand that the Schools Operational Guidance to be applied from Step 4 (19 July) confirms that schools and other education settings will no longer need to undertake contact tracing and that close contacts will be identified via NHS Test and Trace.

The NASUWT welcomes the belated decision that contact tracing should be remitted to the NHS in the case of school and college pupils as for the rest of the population. We further welcome your insistence that mass asymptomatic ATS onsite testing of pupils in secondary schools should be undertaken at the start of the autumn term. This will provide greater confidence to staff and parents as pupils return following an increased period of social mixing during the summer holiday. Nevertheless, we remain of the view that further action to ensure effective take-up of asymptomatic testing amongst pupils, staff and visitors to schools and colleges is also needed, as part of longer term Covid safety measures in all educational settings.

Linked to the requirement for testing, the NASUWT has serious concerns about your Guidance and the potential impact it could have on schools' ongoing efforts to maintain Covid safety.

Your Guidance confirms that NHS Test and Trace will work with the positive case to identify close contacts and that contacts from a school setting will only be traced by NHS Test and Trace where the positive case specifically identifies the individual as being a close contact. However, from 16 August 2021, it is now envisaged that *'children under the age of 18 years old will no longer be required to self-isolate if they are contacted by NHS Test and Trace as a close contact of a positive COVID-19*

*case. Instead, children will be contacted by NHS Test and Trace, informed they have been in close contact with a positive case and advised to take a PCR test'.*

At our meeting with the Schools Minister on 6 July, the NASUWT was advised that whilst close contacts identified by NHS Test and Trace would be encouraged to take a PCR test, they could not be required to do so, and, moreover, that such pupils could not be required to self-isolate in the event that they refuse to take a PCR test.

The effect of this interpretation of your Guidance, whether intended or otherwise, would be to remove the ability of schools to manage and mitigate effectively health and safety risks where they have been notified that a pupil may present a risk to others. It would seriously compromise Covid safety and no doubt contribute to increased transmission in schools.

We note that your Guidance also states that *"if a parent or carer insists on a pupil attending your school, [schools] can take the decision to refuse the pupil if, in [their] reasonable judgement, it is necessary to protect other pupils and staff from possible infection with COVID-19"*.

I must, therefore, request your urgent clarification as to whether it will remain the case under Step 4 and from the start of the new academic year for a school to continue to send home pupils who have Covid-19 symptoms, to require pupils who have tested positive to self-isolate for the required period, and to insist on self-isolation for pupils who are asymptomatic but who have been notified as being a close contact with any other pupil or any other person, within or outside the school, who has tested positive for Covid-19.

### **Face coverings**

We understand that from Step 4, the use of face coverings will be no longer required or advised for pupils, staff and visitors either in classrooms or in communal areas. However, your Guidance also states that there may be circumstances where face coverings are recommended, such as where a school has an outbreak and where a local director of public health advises that face coverings should temporarily be worn in communal areas or classrooms. We understand that schools have been asked to ensure that their outbreak management plans cover this possibility.

However, the latest guidance is at variance with the advice given on 24 June by your officials on the revised Contingency Framework for Education and Childcare Settings, where it was made clear that headteachers would be permitted scope to determine whether, in their view, there may be circumstances where the use of face coverings may be required within a school, without the need to obtain the consent of the local director of public health. We would welcome your assurance that this remains the case and that schools can move forward more confidently in the continued management of covid risks in their individual settings.

Furthermore, the NASUWT is extremely concerned to note the apparent mixed messages from the Government on the use of face coverings in public areas. On 11 July, the Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment and the Health Secretary both made public statements indicating that there would still be an expectation for members of the public to continue to wear face coverings in indoor settings after 19 July. We understand from statements made to the BBC that the Government's position is that wearing masks "will help the whole country", is "both a personal responsibility and a

corporate responsibility" and that the Government is "moving from 'you must' to 'you are expected' to wear a mask in indoor spaces." We understand that the Health Secretary has also stated that anyone who does not wear a mask in an enclosed space was "just being irresponsible".

Given that a school constitutes an enclosed public space, and in light of the evidence that the number of Covid-19 cases amongst young people are continuing to increase rapidly, can you now explain the scientific basis on which the decision in relation to face coverings in schools has been taken, which now appears contrary to the Government's general position on the use of face coverings in non-educational settings?

The NASUWT must insist that the Government's guidance does not present any further risk to safety within educational settings or otherwise undermine the efforts of headteachers and the workforce to minimise further disruption to children's education and to keep schools and colleges open safely.

I look forward to hearing from you as a matter of urgency on these important matters for our members.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Patrick Roach', written in a cursive style.

Dr Patrick Roach  
**General Secretary**