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Your Ref:

Our ref: 200915/Gibb N/PR/FC

Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP
Minister of State for School Standards
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
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NASUWT

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Dear Nick,

TEST AND TRACE

The NASUWT is in receipt of reports across the country from school and academy employers and from our members who are expressing serious concerns about the failure of the Covid-19 testing system and the impact of this on schools.

In particular, areas where additional local restrictions have been introduced due to the increase in the R-number are now unable to cope with demand for tests. Teachers, support staff and children and young people are unable to access tests where they have Covid-19 symptoms. Employers are struggling to deal with the implications and consequences.

For example, in Salford, the Local Authority had in place a dedicated testing site for schools' staff and pupils. However, the number of symptomatic pupils and staff has increased to such levels that the testing site has been unable to cope with demand and has stopped taking referrals from schools.

In Bury, the Local Authority and our members are reporting to us that the current systems are not working. There are some 600 pupils who are self-isolating and the number is growing. Whilst the local authority and health protection agency has sought to increase capacity to cope with local demand, they have been inundated by demands from the national Test and Trace system which is seeking to access the local test system.

We have numerous other related examples from across the country.

The risk assessments that schools have relied upon are predicated on access to Covid-19 testing and the capacity to effectively and appropriately isolate suspected and confirmed cases. Pupils sent home with symptoms are facing uncertainty about when or where they will be able to access a test. With the delay in testing, pupils and staff who are part of a 'bubble' within a school are not being isolated even where there are multiple suspected cases and/or where multiple pupils displaying symptoms have already been sent home. This is putting at risk the health and safety of others within the school and within the local community.

Schools appear to be seeking to do their utmost to carry on. However, we have reports that schools are unable to cope with a situation that is becoming increasingly out of control.

There is clearly a need for further advice from the Government to all school and academy employers reiterating the essential steps they must follow in these circumstances and where pupils or staff are unable to obtain a test.

We therefore ask that, as a matter of urgency, the Department confirm to schools that:

- (i) it remains essential that school/academy employers ensure that where a pupil or member of staff is confirmed with Covid-19 or has symptoms of the same, they must be sent home/stay at home immediately and seek a test;
- (ii) individuals who live in a household with someone who has Covid-19 should self-isolate for the prescribed period;
- (iii) employers must not put at risk the health and safety of the school community and must have regard to the Government's guidance;
- (iv) schools must not expect or require pupils or staff with Covid-19 symptoms to remain in school and they should direct pupils and staff who have symptoms to stay at home;
- (v) where schools are unable to maintain appropriate staffing levels due to staff absences, they should send groups of pupils home in order that they can continue to maintain safe working practices.

Finally, given the current challenges regarding the availability and demand for Covid tests, we are seeking commitment from the Government that the education sector will be prioritised for the allocation of tests while the current situation continues.

I await your reply to these very urgent and pressing matters.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Patrick Roach
General Secretary