

Covid-19 and Schools Update

18 December 2020

Introduction

1. The NASUWT - The Teachers' Union, in addition to the support we are providing to our members across the UK, is committed to ensuring that parliamentarians remain informed of developing challenges in schools and colleges as the country responds to the Covid-19 crisis.

Lateral Flow Testing in Schools and Colleges

2. On the afternoon of 17 December 2020 the Government announced a 'staggered' return to secondary schools and colleges from the start of the spring term 2021.
3. The Government also announced that all secondary schools and colleges would be offered the opportunity to carry out lateral flow tests for pupils and staff during the week beginning 4th January ahead of a 'full return' from the week beginning the 11th January.
4. The NASUWT, along with ASCL, NAHT, NEU, NGA, the Church of England Education Office and AoC, are supportive of the concept of the use of lateral flow tests in schools. However, it is our view that due to the chaotic and rushed nature of this announcement, the lack of proper guidance, and an absence of appropriate support, the Government's plan in its current form will be inoperable for most schools and colleges. Schools and colleges simply do not have the staffing capacity to carry this out themselves. As

such, most will not be in a position to carry this out in a safe and effective manner.

5. It is our understanding that the mass testing pilots government has run in schools and colleges to date have involved members of the armed forces or other external trained staff setting up and running the tests. This appears not to be the case for the latest proposals. The suggestion that schools can safely recruit, train and organise a team of suitable volunteers to staff and run testing stations on their premises by the start of the new term is simply not realistic.
6. All our organisations agree that educational staff have once again been put in an impossible position as a result of this latest announcement. We note that the Government, in their own advice, accept that it may not be possible for schools and colleges to implement this for the beginning of the spring term.
7. Their guidance states: “we are offering secondary schools in England access to additional coronavirus (COVID-19) testing from the first week of January.” It is clear this is an offer, not a requirement. They go on to acknowledge that not all schools will take up this offer when they state: “Schools choosing not to take up this offer of asymptomatic testing should provide onsite provision for vulnerable children, the children of critical workers and pupils in years 11 and 13 in the week commencing 4 January and provide remote education for all other pupils.”
8. Given that the Government’s own guidance makes it clear this is an optional offer, no school or college should come under pressure if they are unable to implement these plans, or if they believe it would be unsafe to do so. If a school or college decides it is unable to set up such testing systems, based on the current plans, you will receive the full support of our respective organisations. Any of our members who come under unreasonable pressure are advised to contact us immediately.

9. In any event, given the lack of detailed guidance or a coherent plan, we do not believe schools or colleges will be able to begin working on this before the start of next term.
10. Schools and colleges stand ready to support the national effort to roll out mass testing. Throughout the crisis school and college staff have more than played their part. Schools and colleges have stepped into the space of public health and even taken responsibility for tracking and tracing across their communities. However, we cannot reasonably expect them to organise, run and staff COVID-19 testing centres, whilst also providing education and vital pastoral support.
11. Pupils, staff and parents will rightly expect that this is done by those with appropriate expertise and experience. We invite Government to engage with us to discuss what support will be needed for the roll-out of lateral flow testing in schools and colleges to make it a success.

For further information, please contact:

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