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Robin Walker MP

Minister of State for School Standards

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Mr Iain Stewart MP

By email: iain.stewart.mp@parliament.uk

14 November 2021

Dear Iain,

Thank you for your email of 22 October, on behalf of a number of your constituents, regarding self-isolation guidance for schools.

We understand that parents and carers want their children to remain in face to face education, which is why safety measures such as the asymptomatic testing programme and self-isolation guidance have been in place in schools to help minimise the risk of community transmission. We recognise that this has been an enormously challenging time for families, who have faced many pressures over the past 18 months. Their support in helping us fight the virus is vital.

We have worked closely with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and Public Health England (PHE) to develop the system of controls that is specific to schools. The PHE and DHSC endorsed system sets out the measures that head teachers and all school staff should follow. Our guidance is available at: tinyurl.com/1ht2Yclx. Information for parents and carers about all pupils attending schools, nurseries and colleges is available at: tinyurl.com/7zPdJdeo.

The Department no longer recommends that it is necessary to keep children in consistent groups or bubbles. This means that bubbles will not need to be used in schools from the autumn term. Close contacts will be identified via NHS Test and Trace, not by schools themselves via year or class bubbles.

Testing will remain important in reducing the risk of transmission of infection within schools. For the rest of the autumn term, pupils should continue to test twice weekly at home and staff should undertake twice weekly home tests whenever they are on site.

Secondary schools should also retain a small asymptomatic testing site (ATS) until further notice so they can offer testing to pupils who are unable to test themselves at home. Staff and pupils with a positive lateral flow device (LFD) test result will need to self-isolate. Everyone must continue to follow public health advice on when to self-isolate and what to do. This advice is available at: tinyurl.com/7e5fawmw. They should not attend school if they have symptoms, have had a positive test result, or in any of the other scenarios listed in the NHS advice above, all of which require them to stay at home.

All positive results from LFD tests, whether conducted at home or at a school or college, will then need to be confirmed with a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test within two days of receiving the positive result. There is no requirement to self-isolate whilst awaiting PCR test results unless the individual is symptomatic.

If the PCR test is negative, the individual can return to school. If the test is positive, they must self-isolate for 10 days from the date when their symptoms started or, if they do not have any symptoms, from when the PCR test was taken. Pupils will be able to participate in remote education from home until they can return to the classroom.

As of 16 August, unvaccinated young people up to the age of 18 years and 6 months and fully vaccinated adults are no longer required to self-isolate if they live in the same household as someone with COVID-19 or are a close contact of someone with COVID-19. Further information regarding exemptions from self-isolation as a contact is available at: tinyurl.com/23k7cnt8. Further information regarding exemptions as a household member is available at: tinyurl.com/nrJwsauh.

Those identified as a close contact will be informed by NHS Test and Trace that they have been in close contact with a positive case. Contacts from a school will only be traced by NHS Test and Trace where the positive case specifically identifies the individual as being a close contact. This is likely to be a small number of individuals who would be most at risk of contracting COVID-19 due to the nature of the close contact.

Close contacts and household members who are exempt will be advised to take a PCR test. We strongly encourage all individuals to take a PCR test if advised to do so. They may wish to minimise social contact whilst waiting for the results of their test but will not be required to self-isolate unless they are symptomatic.

The guidance for households with possible or confirmed COVID-19 infection is available at: tinyurl.com/u25Puaa. The guidance for non-household contacts is available at: tinyurl.com/s8hteZnu.

Pupils who are 18 years old will be treated in the same way as children until four months after their eighteenth birthday, to allow them the opportunity to be fully vaccinated. At that point, they will be subject to the same rules as adults and so if they choose not to get vaccinated, they will need to self-isolate if identified as a close contact.

Schools may be required, in response to the latest epidemiological data, to step measures up or down in future depending on local circumstances. We are keeping all these arrangements under constant review and will make changes when it is necessary.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Julie Waller', is written in a cursive style.