

Date 19 January 2021

Dear parent/carers

We are writing to update families in East Sussex on our position regarding the programme of Covid testing in schools for staff and pupils. Representatives from East Sussex County Council's Public Health and Children's Services had a further meeting at the end of last week with school leaders to review the latest guidance and the Government's recent policy announcements.

Since we last wrote on 6th January, secondary schools and special schools will have received testing kits and some have chosen to start introducing tests for staff and pupils. Many others have chosen to wait. The government have also announced a programme of testing for staff in primary schools and the delivery of home testing kits is due to start this week. Please note that the kits being sent to primary schools are only for use with staff, and not pupils.

Our last letter set out two broad principles which would inform our stance on the safe introduction of testing in schools. These were:

- the evidence should clearly demonstrate a benefit to pupils and staff, in terms of health and learning. Whilst the social isolation protocols followed by schools so far are undoubtedly disruptive, we do not want to introduce a new system based on testing which ultimately does more harm than good
- schools should only adopt the testing programme if they have the resources and logistical support to do so safely

We have carefully considered the latest evidence available and our previous advice remains largely unchanged. Our view is that:

- schools should proceed with caution and carefully consider the use of lateral flow testing devices (LFDs)
- testing remains optional and each school will have different factors to weigh up; they should proceed at a pace that can be managed effectively
- schools should make use of LFDs for staff only at the present time
- schools should continue to use robust procedures for reducing transmission and adhere to close-contact tracing arrangements and isolation. This needs to remain at the core of every school's approach, regardless of their chosen testing regime

Last week the Government announced their ambition to rapidly introduce mass community testing for people who are unable to work from home. The responsibility for this locally lies with the County Council and we are working hard to make this happen. The first phase will target critical workers. Therefore, in the weeks ahead this may be the preferred option for some school staff requiring tests.

You may have seen some media reports claiming that the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) have not authorised the use of LFDs in schools. Our understanding is that this relates to their use in testing close contacts of cases, to allow them to attend school. Test and Trace have now clarified that approval is not required for daily testing, as long as people are assisted when processing the tests. As outlined above, the use of tests in this way is not something we support.

We would also like to take this opportunity to remind you that the regular 'PCR' testing is available across the County and is very effective in identifying Covid cases. There is plenty of capacity available at local testing sites, including at the weekends and the evenings until 8pm. We have included detail of all sites and how to access them below.

PCR testing should be your first point of call should you or anyone in your family display symptoms of COVID, however mild. Please note that individuals are eligible for a free test where 'you have been asked to get a test by a local council'. This option can be used if your school identifies your child as a close contact of a positive case even when they are asymptomatic. In these circumstances, the full 10-day isolation will still need to be observed if the test is negative, as positive cases can still develop within that period.

We have also included a brief 'explainer' regarding some of the evidence regarding LFDs, their benefits and limitations which we hope will be of use in understanding the current position. This remains a fast-changing situation and we will continue to review the available evidence and guidance from the government. We have a regular series of meetings in place with school leaders to ensure that we maintain a regular dialogue about testing. We wish you all the best in the coming weeks.

Yours sincerely



Stuart Gallimore
Director of Children's Services



Darrell Gale FFPH
Director of Public Health

LFD – Explainer

The Government proposes to use LFDs in 2 ways within schools

- 1) **Mass/Routine testing** - testing all secondary pupils on return to school and weekly testing of all staff
Main purpose - to find positive cases amongst those who have no signs of illness (asymptomatic) and prevent them infecting others through isolation
- 2) **Serial/Contact Testing** - testing close contacts of cases amongst staff and pupils for 7 days
Main purpose – an alternative to 10-day isolation, as it allows the pupil or staff member to attend school so long as they test negative

Current evidence suggests that the LFDs are not very good at identifying all those who have COVID (the test has a **low sensitivity**). In other words, they may miss a lot of cases. However, when community rates are high, if someone does test positive using an LFD they are likely to have COVID (the test has a **high specificity**).

LFD testing therefore does have some value in **Mass/Routine testing** because they are a way of identifying cases amongst those without symptoms who otherwise would not be picked up.

However, their **low sensitivity** is a severe limitation of **Serial/Contact Testing**. This is because it allows those who have been wrongly identified as negative (and have been in close proximity to a confirmed case) to continue mixing with fellow pupils and staff.

It is important to note that a **low sensitivity** is problematic for both **Mass/Routine testing** and **Serial Testing**, as it may lead to those who have wrongly tested negative infecting others. This is because,

- they won't be required to isolate
- may not have symptoms but still be infectious
- may discount/ignore symptoms thinking they are negative
- take fewer precautions around others, placing them at risk

It is vital therefore to continue with all the other measures we have become accustomed to in order to reduce spread, and not rely on the test to keep us all safe.