

Message to education leaders from the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson

I would like to thank you for the huge effort that you have put in to provide remote and on-site education for pupils and students during these national restrictions, and indeed all of your hard work throughout the pandemic. I would particularly pay tribute to those leaders of special and alternative provision schools, and special post-16 providers, which have remained fully open to vulnerable children and young people throughout the latest lockdown. I recognise that this has been a very challenging time. I am continually impressed with, and immensely grateful for, the tremendous work in ensuring that schools and colleges have been able to ensure children and young people continue to receive the best education possible.

I am writing to set out in greater detail the easing of restrictions on face-to-face teaching announced today.

When the Prime Minister announced this lockdown, he was clear he would review the situation in mid-February and that the outcome of this review would be dependent upon the most vulnerable people being offered the first dose of the vaccine by 15 February, meaning they should have developed some immunity from the virus by about three weeks later, that is by 8 March.

I am pleased to say that, thanks to the efforts of the NHS, volunteers and scientists, the Government has achieved this target and, following an in-depth analysis of the virus prevalence data, and the data on NHS capacity, both suggest that infection

rates have fallen across all ages, including in children and young people.

Today, the Prime Minister set out the next phase of the [Government's response to coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#), including where restrictions on attendance at education settings can be lifted. The decision to ease restrictions is made on the balance of risk to public health and educational considerations.

Return

All schools, colleges and further education settings should allow full attendance from 8 March. Wraparound childcare, including childminders should also allow attendance for eligible children. School attendance will be mandatory for all pupils, with secondary schools and colleges able to phase return over the week of 8 March to allow students to be offered testing on return.

The usual rules and duties around school attendance are in place from 8 March (including mandatory attendance). All schools should communicate expectations about regular attendance to pupils and parents. Schools should identify pupils at risk of disengagement and develop plans to re-engage them.

Early years settings will continue to be open to all children, as they have throughout the period of national restrictions.

In further education settings, we expect that every 16 to 19 student (or 19 to 25 with an EHCP) will undertake the majority of their planned hours on site. For adults, as is best practice, further education providers should determine the appropriate balance of on-site and remote education and training, based on the type of programme and the student's ability to engage with the programme remotely.

Higher education providers should recommence in-person teaching and learning from 8 March for students on practical or practice-based (including creative arts) courses who need access

to specialist equipment and facilities. The Government will review, by the end of the Easter holidays, the options for timing of the return of remaining students. This review will take account of the latest data and will be a key part of the wider roadmap steps. Students and providers will be given a week's notice ahead of any further return.

Based on the recent ONS data, the risks to education, childcare and HE staff are similar to those for most other occupations. Although the public health picture is improving, it remains crucial that steps are taken to reduce and mitigate any risks within education and childcare settings. DfE has worked closely with PHE to develop and refresh the system of controls to reduce the risk of transmission in education and childcare settings, based on scientific rationale.

Rapid testing

Since January, education leaders across schools, colleges and universities have been involved in a fantastic national effort to test their staff and students. Over 4 million tests have already been completed under your collective leadership and I would like to thank you for all the work you have done to set up the programme so far.

Rapid testing will continue to remain a vital part of the Government's plan to suppress this virus, in education and childcare settings and across society. This sort of testing means that asymptomatic people who might otherwise continue to attend educational settings are identified and self-isolate.

Twice-weekly asymptomatic testing is already available for secondary school, most college, primary school, special school, special post-16, school-based nursery and maintained nursery school workforce, including support staff such as teaching assistants and those supporting with wraparound childcare. Secondary schools and colleges have also been able to offer

testing on return for their students, and we are now asking those leaders to put this in place for all students across the week of the 8 March as they return.

Today, we have also announced the further expansion of this asymptomatic testing programme to include offering regular twice weekly testing of secondary school and college students at home, home based testing for secondary staff. Home testing will also be available for Independent Training Providers and Adult and Community Learning Providers by the end of March.

Rapid testing is already in place for those arriving or staying at university. We ask HE providers to offer two tests to all students eligible to attend their university or HE institution upon their return, and twice weekly asymptomatic testing to all students eligible to attend on-site, as well as providing testing for staff.

All staff at private, voluntary and independent nurseries will have access to tests to use twice weekly at home, building on the testing already available to maintained nursery schools and school-based nurseries. Childminders can continue to access community testing, and the Department continues to work with colleagues across Government to review the testing approach available for childminders.

Safety measures

The return to on-site provision for all education, childcare and children's social care settings will be supported by a range of actions designed to minimise the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19). I know how hard you have all worked to implement these measures and this continues to be vital.

We have worked closely with PHE to develop and refresh the system of controls to reduce the risk of transmission in education and childcare settings, based on scientific rationale. The system of controls supports you to assess risk and implement measures to mitigate risk, including ventilating occupied spaces, introducing

enhanced cleaning and retaining bubbles of students. We ask pupils, students and staff to continue to do everything they can to adhere to these measures, because it is vital that they are implemented well and consistently.

In addition to the system of controls, where pupils in year 7 and above are educated, we recommend that face coverings should be worn by staff and pupils where social distancing cannot easily be maintained when moving around the premises outside of classrooms or teaching spaces, such as in corridors and communal areas. In the same settings for a limited period, we recommend the use of face coverings in classrooms and other teaching spaces, unless wearing a face covering would impact on the ability to take part in exercise or strenuous activity, for example in PE lessons, or for those who are exempt from wearing a face covering as set out in Government guidance.

In primary schools and early years settings, face coverings should be worn by staff and adult visitors where social distancing between adults is not possible. Children in primary schools do not need to wear a face covering.

Education recovery and qualifications

I know you are completely aware that missing face-to-face education has severe impacts for children and young people, with clear evidence that time out of face-to-face education is detrimental for cognitive and academic development, learning, health and wellbeing. That's why the Government has been clear that restricting attendance in education settings was a last resort, and why education is being prioritised as we begin to ease restrictions.

We will be setting out further measures for immediate support to children, early years settings, schools, colleges and local authorities later this week.

I and Ofqual will also be setting out very soon further details of the alternative arrangements to exams. This follows the consultation which received over 100,000 responses, including from so many of you and your students.

I am very pleased that we are able to return children and young people across England to their classrooms and colleges, to allow them to spend time with their friends and teachers and get back into the rhythms of the school or college year. I would like to thank you again for all the hard work you have done and continue to do to ensure that children and young people can return to face-to-face learning as smoothly as possible.

The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP

Secretary of State for Education