



Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP
Minister of State for School Standards

Sanctuary Buildings, 20 Great Smith Street, Westminster, London, SW1P 3BT
tel: 0370 000 2288 www.education.gov.uk/help/contactus

Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP
Chair, Education Select Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

19 April 2021

Dear Robert,

Following my appearance before the committee on 9 March 2021, I am writing to provide the additional information the committee requested.

Testing

You asked about the need to obtain a confirmatory Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test following a positive lateral flow device (LFD) test. Since my appearance before the ESC, on 31 March, NHS Test and Trace reintroduced confirmatory PCR testing for positive LFD tests conducted at an assisted testing site, such as a school or college. This means that all staff, pupils and students who get a positive LFD test, whether at home or supervised at their school or college, should get a confirmatory PCR.

In January, when the prevalence of the virus in England increased, NHS Test and Trace temporarily paused the requirement for confirmatory PCR tests for positive LFD that were conducted at an assisted testing site. This followed advice from Public Health England that, when COVID-19 prevalence rates are high, the performance of LFD tests and PCRs are broadly comparable when used under supervision at test sites. Public Health England and Test and Trace have kept this pause under review. The prevalence of the virus in England has now dropped below 1% which also means confirmatory PCR testing will help to minimise the chances of false positives.

You also asked about children who tested positive in the previous 90 days and if they will miss school because of a false positive result. Staff, pupils and

students who recently tested positive for COVID-19 through a PCR test are likely to have developed some immunity. Therefore, they are exempt from testing by both PCR and LFD unless they develop new symptoms. As a result, there is no impact on the attendance of individuals in these scenarios. If an individual is identified by Test and Trace as a close contact of a positive case within the 90-day exemption period, they are still required to self-isolate.

Face coverings

You asked about the impact of wearing face coverings in the classroom. The Department recognises that wearing face coverings may impact communication. Schools have done an excellent job adapting to Covid secure guidance and are working hard to make sure it doesn't impact the education of pupils. We aim to get back to facemask-free classrooms and we will do this in line with the latest scientific data while balancing the interests of students, teachers and the wider community.

The decision to continue the current policy is a cautious approach that will help limit the risk of transmission. It takes into account of polling data from parents and students, as well as intelligence from schools and colleges across the country. Based on the current state of the pandemic and the positive progress being made, we expect that face coverings in classrooms, and in all communal areas for pupils and students, will no longer be necessary at step 3.

Some individuals are exempt from wearing face coverings, for example, people who cannot put on, wear or remove a face covering because of a physical or mental illness or impairment, or disability. In addition, if someone is speaking to or providing assistance to someone who relies on lip reading, clear sound or facial expression to communicate, they are exempt from wearing a face covering. The same exemptions should be applied in schools, and we would expect teachers and other staff to be sensitive to those needs.

Behaviour

You asked about the £10 million behaviour hubs programme and the proportion of this funding that will be used to fund the time of teachers and school leaders to spread excellent practice and improve behaviour in schools.

As I described, behaviour hubs will enable schools and MATs with exemplary behaviour cultures and practices to work with schools that want and need to improve behaviour in their school. They will work together to identify how and where they want to improve, diagnosing issues and developing new approaches to address poor behaviour. The programme is due to begin shortly. I can confirm that around 70% of the funding will be used to fund teachers' and senior leaders' time to engage with the programme and implement action plans, with the remainder being used to contract behaviour and programme delivery experts to develop and deliver specialist training and resources for schools.

With best wishes.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nick', written on a light blue rectangular background.

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