



Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State

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31 December 2020

Dear Leader and Chief Executive,

Firstly, let me thank you for the tireless work that local authorities have been doing to support communities right across the country during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The virus has affected so many in our communities, and local authorities have been at the vanguard of our efforts to ensure that young people remain safe and healthy and are able to continue accessing education.

As you will be aware, the path of the epidemic is changing rapidly, with increases in infection rates across the country. How this virus spreads through January and February will be key for the nation in controlling the spread of the virus. I am writing to you today to set out some of the changes we have announced to the start of the Spring term for schools and colleges, and to explain those. In particular, I am writing to seek your support in helping secondary schools and colleges to deliver the new programme of rapid testing this term.

The government had already announced that secondary schools and colleges would stagger the start of term for students and pupils, with a full return from 11 January to allow for a programme of rapid testing for staff, pupils and students. Being at school is vital for children's education and for their wellbeing. Time spent out of school is detrimental for children's cognitive and academic development, particularly for disadvantaged children. This impact affects both current levels of education and children's future ability to learn. The damage caused by not being in education to children's education, development and mental health has been consistently highlighted by the Chief and Deputy Chief Medical officers.

There is clear evidence of the negative educational impact of missing school particularly for younger children, as investments in children's learning education tend to accumulate and consolidate over time. There is evidence that the pandemic has negatively impacted the mental health of children and young people, and that school closures cause impairment to the physical and mental health of children. Evidence suggests that the mental health of adolescents is particularly affected.

However, in light of the growth in rates we are seeing as a result of the newly-identified strain of the virus, we are now further staggering the full return to secondary schools and colleges until 18 January. This will allow more time for secondary schools and colleges to prepare for the roll out of the rapid testing programme, making the full return as safe as possible, and will also provide for a longer break to help reduce transmission. It is important to note that, while the new strain of the virus is more transmissible than the old, including among children, there is no evidence that it causes more serious illness in either children or adults.

Vulnerable children and the children of critical workers in secondary schools and colleges will be provided with face-to-face education as normal from 4 January. Exam years will receive remote education for the first week of term and return to face-to-face education during the week commencing 11 January, being prioritised to receive tests on their return. All externally-marked vocational exams scheduled for January will go ahead as planned. All students will then return to face-to-face education on 18 January.

All children and young people can return to face-to-face education in special schools, alternative provision settings and special post-16 settings from 4 January - though some staggering of return can be agreed with parents to allow some special settings roll out rapid testing.

Following rise in prevalence of the virus through December, particularly in London, parts of the South East and East of England, a decision was taken through collaboration across government to go even further in introducing measures affecting education. Please be assured that the decision to invoke the contingency framework in some areas was only made as a last resort. We work closely with PHE, the NHS, with DHSC and across government to monitor the number of new infections, positivity rates, and pressures on the NHS. Decisions have been made by Ministers on this basis whilst balancing a desire to keep as many children as possible in school. The contingency framework has been applied to address local areas with high rates of infection and with significant increases in 7-day case rates, and pressure on the NHS.

The areas affected are listed in the annex to this letter and guidance can be found here: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) contingency framework for education and childcare settings - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-contingency-framework-for-education-and-childcare-settings).

In these areas primary schools move to remote education for the first two weeks of term, except for vulnerable children and children of critical workers. We will keep these areas under review, taking steps to return to face-to-face education for all as soon as possible. Early years settings (including nurseries and childminders) should continue to allow all children/pupils to attend as normal. School-based nurseries in primary schools have discretion to follow arrangements for the primary school.

Where local areas are concerned that they have or have not been included in the list of affected areas (especially where neighbouring authorities are in a different position), please be assured that whilst we recognise the challenges, decisions were not taken arbitrarily and we considered the overall balance of risk for each area.

I hope that these measures will be for the shortest period possible to enable all children to get back to school, and they will be kept under constant review. The expectation is that all pupils will be able to return to face-to-face teaching from 18 January unless further action is required in the worst affected areas.

In universities, students doing medical, clinical and healthcare related subjects, including nursing, social care, dentistry and veterinary studies can return as planned, along with those on teacher training courses. All other students should access learning online and remain at their vacation address wherever possible. Plans for the return of remaining students will be kept under review, with the first review point to take place in the week of 18 January.

To support schools and colleges in managing remote education during this time, we expect to deliver over 100,000 IT devices to schools across the country in the first week of term. We have already delivered a total of 560,000 IT devices, and will shortly have covered the whole of the planned allocation to the most vulnerable children. We are now ordering more devices to allow us to go beyond that, and aim to issue a total of one million devices. The Secretary of State's direction to schools to provide remote education to a similar threshold as class-based learning was issued last term and we have provided support for online resources, including £4.84 million to Oak National Academy, which has, so far, seen over 8 million lessons viewed. The IT device programme will also be extended to cover 16-19-year olds in schools and colleges.

Rapid testing in schools

The changes outlined above are some of the ways that the education sector is needing to flex to respond and to support public health efforts to control the virus.

To this end, our programme of rapid result coronavirus testing in secondary schools and FE colleges launches next week. This programme will help identify asymptomatic cases, break chains of transmission, and reducing the need for self-isolation where students and staff test negative for the virus.

As part of the programme, lateral flow device (LFD) tests will be delivered to secondary schools and FE colleges, including special schools and alternative provision, to provide them with the opportunity to carry out an initial round of two tests for students and staff. Following this, weekly testing will be available for all secondary and college staff and daily serial testing will be offered to staff and students in close contact of positive cases as an alternative to self-isolation. Although it is not mandatory for schools and colleges to take part in the programme, we will strongly encourage them to do so. Taking a test will not be a requirement for anyone before returning to face-to-face education.

Schools and colleges will be provided with support to deliver testing. Guidance has been provided via a testing handbook and online training, and a total of £78 million has been made available to support schools and colleges with costs of delivering the programme of testing, in particular those incurred for additional workforce.

Local Authority involvement

We recognise that delivering testing in schools and colleges will require a significant workforce and that many schools will be reliant on the assistance of external support and volunteers to carry out the required roles in their asymptomatic testing sites. We would therefore like to encourage local authorities to continue to support schools and colleges with the delivery of this programme, as they have supported them throughout the pandemic, recognising that this will need to be reflective of local need and resources.

Rapid testing in schools will operate alongside other test 'use cases' including the Community Testing Programme that is underway in many Tier 3 and 4 areas. Both programmes are designed to drive down prevalence for targeted groups and wherever possible should be delivered in parallel. Government officials will continue to engage with local authorities on the support needed to do this.

Support

Guidance is continuing to be updated on gov.uk and on the rapid testing [resource site](#). Local REACT teams are available to answer any questions from local authorities, and schools and colleges can direct any questions to the DfE helpline on: 0800 046 8687.

Thank you once again for your ongoing work and perseverance during this unprecedented period. Your support will remain critical in the weeks and months ahead.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gavin Williamson', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education

Annex A: List of local authorities where the contingency framework applies from 4 January:

Barking and Dagenham
Barnet
Bexley
Brent
Bromley
Croydon
Ealing
Enfield
Hammersmith and Fulham
Havering
Hillingdon
Hounslow
Kensington and Chelsea
Merton
Newham
Richmond-Upon-Thames
Southwark
Sutton
Tower Hamlets
Waltham Forest
Wandsworth
Westminster
Brentwood
Epping Forest
Castle Point
Basildon
Rochford
Harlow
Chelmsford
Braintree
Maldon
Southend on Sea
Thurrock
Dartford
Gravesham
Sevenoaks
Medway
Ashford
Maidstone
Tonbridge and Malling
Tunbridge Wells
Swale
Hastings
Rother
Milton Keynes
Watford
Broxbourne
Hertsmere
Three Rivers
Redbridge