

Mass testing for secondary pupils as all schools and colleges fully reopen from 8 March

The government has today (Monday 22 February) set out its plan for the return of all pupils to schools and colleges as part of the roadmap for leaving lockdown, published this afternoon on gov.uk.

The government has been clear that the return to face-to-face education is the national priority and that two weeks' notice would be given ahead of any change. The return to school for all pupils is being prioritised due to the significant and proven impact caused by being out of school to the health and wellbeing of children and young people.

All students will begin to return to face-to-face education on 8 March with the following testing measures in place:

- All primary school children will return on Monday 8 March. Primary school staff will continue to take two rapid COVID-19 tests each week at home.
- All secondary school and college students will take three COVID-19 tests as they return to the classroom from the 8 March at existing school testing facilities. Schools and colleges will have discretion on how to test students over that week to enable their return to the classroom. After the initial programme of three tests in school or college, students will be provided with two rapid tests to use each week at home.
- Secondary school and college staff will also be provided with two tests to use each week at home.
- University students on practical courses who need to access specialist facilities and equipment can return to in-person teaching and learning from Monday 8 March. Twice weekly testing will continue to be available for all on campus.

Wraparound childcare for primary and secondary pupils will resume from Monday 8 March where necessary to enable parents to access work, education or medical care.

Staff and students in secondary schools and colleges are advised to wear face coverings in all areas, including classrooms, where social distancing cannot be maintained and as a temporary extra measure.

For the remaining university students, the government will review, by the end of the Easter holidays, the options for timing of their return. This will take account of the latest data and will then be a key part of the wider roadmap steps. Students and institutions will be given a week's notice ahead of any return.

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.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

I know this is a moment that students and parents up and down the country have been waiting for, and I would like to take this opportunity to give my thanks to all education and childcare staff and parents who have worked so hard to make sure students have continued to receive a high-quality education throughout this lockdown.

The testing of staff and students ahead of their return to secondary schools and colleges, alongside strengthened safety measures, should reassure families and education staff that extra measures are in place alongside the existing bubble system, enhanced hygiene and COVID secure precautions.

We are all well aware that being back in school or college brings huge benefits to young people's education, development and wellbeing. The classroom is the very best place for education and the return of face-to-face teaching for all pupils will be a welcome move for pupils and parents across the country.

Testing in education settings is already well-established, as recent figures showed four million tests had been conducted across schools, colleges and universities.

Public Health England continues to advise that the existing range of safety measures in place in education settings remains appropriate – including bubble groups, staggering start and finish times, increasing ventilation and hygiene, regular testing and maintaining distance between adults where possible.

Extending the use of face coverings to classrooms is a temporary measure until Easter, and as with all measures the government will keep it under review.

Teachers should continue to be sensitive to the additional needs of their students, such as deafness, in deciding whether it is appropriate to wear a face covering.

Health and Social Care Secretary Matt Hancock said:

We have rolled out rapid testing to schools and universities at great pace to help drive down transmission rates among school age children, college and university students. I am very pleased that regular testing is now supporting the reopening of schools and face-to-face education.

Around one in three people who have coronavirus have no symptoms and will be spreading it without realising it, so rapid regular testing offers a reliable and effective additional tool to help keep schools safe.

Professor Viv Bennett, Chief Nurse and Director of Maternity and Early Years, at Public Health England said:

We have always advised that schools should be the last to close and first to open. It is vital for children's wellbeing that we get schools open again.

Staff, parents and pupils can feel reassured by scientific evidence that shows transmission in schools is low and that children are not drivers of infection in schools or the wider community.

The system of controls and the introduction of rapid testing programmes in place in schools offer further reassurance in the measures taken to maximise the safety of the school environment.

Most importantly, we know that infection rates in schools are driven by transmission in the wider community. It remains essential that we all continue to keep our contacts to a minimum and follow restrictions outside the school gates so that schools can re-open and stay open.

The consensus view from SAGE continues to be that missing out on classroom-based education has severe impacts for children and young people, with clear evidence that further time out of schools and colleges is detrimental for cognitive and academic development, learning, health and wellbeing.

Evidence from the Public Health England-led Schools Infection Study continues to show that infection rates in schools mirror infection rates in the wider community, suggesting schools are not the main driver of infections.

Testing sites already set up in secondary schools and colleges should remain operational for students who find it difficult to test themselves at home.