

Military to support the testing of thousands of secondary school and college students in England

The personnel are on standby to support secondary schools and colleges across England to roll out COVID-19 testing to students and staff as the new term begins in January.

The armed forces deployment across England builds on successful school testing pilots conducted in November and December. Personnel supported thousands of tests being carried out at pilot schools, demonstrating the value of lateral flow devices rapidly testing students in a school environment.

1,500 UK Armed Forces personnel are being made available to support the Department for Education and Department for Health and Social Care to ensure that students and staff can return as safely as possible to secondary schools and colleges across England.

The majority of personnel will form local response teams, providing support and phone advice to institutions needing guidance on the testing process and set-up of the testing facilities.

This will be done predominantly through webinars and individual meetings, but teams will also be on standby to deploy at short notice to provide in-person support to resolve any issues in the situations where testing would otherwise not be able to go ahead. Schools and colleges will shortly be provided with further information on how to request additional support if needed.

A small team of planners is embedded in the Department for Health and Social care who are supporting the Department for Education to help coordinate the support. The majority of personnel will be on task from this week as they start to conduct training.

Defence Secretary Ben Wallace said:

The UK Armed Forces are stepping up once again this holiday. This week I have authorised over a thousand Armed Forces personnel to assist schools returning after the Christmas break.

They'll share considerable experience of testing across the country and the successful school pilots conducted this autumn.

We are grateful for the professionalism and commitment they and our

colleagues in teaching are showing to get students back into the classroom and on with their education.

Every secondary school and college in England is being offered testing, with £78 million funding for schools and colleges to support this offer.

As well as additional funding, the government will provide schools and colleges with the kit they need and have introduced a staggered return at the start of term.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

It is a true cross-government effort to make sure secondary schools and colleges have the support, guidance, materials and funding they need to offer rapid testing to their staff and students from the start of term.

I am grateful to the armed forces personnel, and all the school and college staff, leaders and volunteers working to put testing in place. This will help break chains of transmission, fight the virus, and help deliver the national priority of keeping education open for all.

Students will be expected to swab themselves in the vast majority of cases, under the supervision of a school staff member or volunteer who has been trained for the role. Teachers are not expected to take a role in the testing process.

This support is being provided through the Military Aid to Civil Authorities (MACA) process. There are currently around 2914 personnel committed to 55 tasks to support other government departments and civil authorities with the response to coronavirus. This includes support with community testing across the UK, the provision of ambulance drivers in Wales and testing support for hauliers in Kent.