

## Children's Services

**Stuart Gallimore**  
Director of Children's Services

PO Box 4  
County Hall  
St Anne's Crescent  
Lewes  
BN7 1UE  
Telephone 0345 60 80 192  
[www.eastsussex.gov.uk](http://www.eastsussex.gov.uk)  
CS.CustomerRelations@eastsussex.gov.uk



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Dear parent/carer

We are writing to update families in East Sussex on our position regarding the programme of testing for schools with secondary age pupils, which was proposed by the government to start this week. Since the announcement of a new national lockdown, schools remain open for vulnerable children and the children of critical workers only. All other children will learn remotely until February half term. Initial guidance from the government indicates that the testing programme should be continued in order to test staff and pupils attending school during the lockdown and to test pupils on their return.

Representatives from East Sussex County Council's Public Health and Children's Services had a further meeting this morning with school leaders to review guidance issued over the Christmas period on testing in schools and consider further the evidence available to us at the present time. Our aim is to ensure that schools are as safe as they can be for your children and that we minimise the disruption to their learning.

In considering the introduction of testing in schools, we are guided by two broad principles:

- The first is that the evidence should clearly demonstrate a benefit to pupils and staff, in terms of health and learning. Whilst the social isolation protocols followed by schools so far are undoubtedly disruptive, we do not want to introduce a new system based on testing which ultimately does more harm than good.
- The second principle is that schools should only adopt the testing programme if they have the resources and logistical support to do so safely.

On this basis, we believe that there remain too many unanswered questions and testing in schools is not something that we will be taking forward in the short term. In particular, we have concerns about the efficacy of the Lateral Flow testing devices and the appropriateness of their use in school settings. We have, therefore, advised our schools that they should proceed with caution and:

- Continue to use the robust procedures for close-contact tracing that they already have in place for staff and pupils attending during the lockdown.
- Make use of lateral flow tests for staff only at the present time.

Clearly, this is a fast-changing situation and we will continue to review the available evidence and guidance from the government. We have agreed to meet with school leaders every week during January and will write to families again when further information is available.

In the meantime, we will continue to lobby government and senior officials to prioritise vaccinations for school staff alongside staff working in the NHS and care homes. It remains our view that the vaccination programme represents the safest way of moving forward and that this is where resources should be focused.

For those pupils attending onsite learning, we are confident that the procedures that schools have already implemented are robust and should provide families with reassurance about their children's ongoing attendance at school. We will be providing schools with an update on the control measures set out by government that support the safe attendance of pupils this term. We strongly support the government's expectation that all vulnerable children should attend school full-time during the present lockdown.

Can we also take this opportunity to remind you that the regular 'PCR' testing is available across the County and provides a reliable response rate for identifying Covid cases. There is plenty of capacity available at local testing sites, including at the weekends and the evenings until 8pm. This should be your first point of call should you or anyone in your family display symptoms of COVID, however mild. Please note that individuals are eligible for a free test where 'you have been asked to get a test by a local council' and this option can be used if your school identifies your child as a close contact of a positive case even when they are asymptomatic. Please note that in these circumstances, the full 10-day isolation will still need to be observed if the test is negative as positive cases can develop within that period.

In the meantime, we wish you a Happy New Year and will be in touch again when there is a further update.

Yours sincerely



Stuart Gallimore  
Director of Children's Services



Darrell Gale FFPH  
Director of Public Health