

14.01.20

Dear headteacher

I am aware of the ongoing concern in some schools regarding the programme of lateral flow testing which was proposed by the government before the Christmas break, in particular in relation to the serial testing of students. I am writing to clarify the WSCC public health view on the issues that have been raised.

In essence this is as follows:

- We believe there is a case for testing staff to find asymptomatic people; schools should consider this according to the local situation and what is achievable/acceptable
- We do not recommend serial lateral flow tests for students at this point. We will keep this under review and inform you of any change
- Symptomatic people should access PCR testing

We are aware that some schools have already started testing both staff and students using the lateral flow tests (LFTs) that were supplied to all secondary schools. The approach we have recommended in West Sussex to date has been to 'proceed with caution', given the fact that data and evidence was still emerging on the effectiveness of the proposed plans for testing in schools when it was announced, and given the many logistical and practical issues associated with its implementation. However, we would like to communicate the following:

There may well be a case for using the tests for **staff** as a way of identifying some of those without symptoms who are positive and otherwise would not be picked up, and we would be supportive of any school that wishes to work to achieve this where this is achievable.

It is however the view of our local public health team that we **do not currently recommend the use of LFTs for serial testing of students** as an alternative to isolating students for ten days. We know that isolation is hard. It is hard for pupils, teachers, schools and the wider communities. Evidence shows the LFTs are not anything like as reliable as the usual 'PCR' tests. There is also a growing body of evidence showing LFTs miss a high percentage of positive cases.

Therefore the notion of allowing children who have been in close contact with positive cases to continue to attend school as long as they test negative on a daily basis cannot be a sensible one in the face of a more transmissible strain of the virus, which we know is dominant in the South East and now many other parts of the country.

It is important to be clear that **those testing 'negative' with a LFT are not necessary 'truly' negative**, given the number of cases missed by this test. We do not believe that this has been well communicated, but it is essential for any school implementing the serial testing to understand this. We are aware that the resources originally supplied to schools from the DfE included a draft letter

which stated that the LFTs were as accurate as the PCR test. This is not correct, and the letters have been withdrawn and should not be used. The pilot studies that have taken place suggest that the tests are providing false reassurance, with those testing negative citing their relief that they can now assume they are 'safe' and potentially adapting their behaviour. This has the potential to increase, rather than reduce transmission in your schools and communities.

On this basis, we believe that there remain too many unanswered questions and serial testing in schools is not something that we would recommend taking forward at this point in time. We are aware of some confusion around how the DfE intend schools to test its pupils. We have asked for clarity but understand testing with the LFTs schools have been provided with is intended for asymptomatic pupils as they return to school, rather than on a weekly basis.

We would recommend that all secondary schools continue to do everything in their power to minimise the number of close contacts that each individual has, using public health advice previously issued in webinars and communications from Paul Wagstaff, and continue to use the robust procedures for tracing close-contacts as quickly as possible, whilst taking steps where possible to introduce testing for staff only.

I take this opportunity to remind you that the regular 'PCR' testing is available across the county for those with symptoms and is a reliable way of identifying Covid cases.

This is a fast-changing situation and we will continue to review the available evidence and guidance from the government.

I would like to extend my thanks, from myself and the public health team in West Sussex, for the incredible contribution you and your teams make to the wellbeing of our children and hope that you are taking steps to keep yourselves well during this extremely challenging time.

Yours sincerely,

Tony Hill

Interim Director of Public Health