

Children's Services

Gail Hopper,

Director

Children's Services

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Our ref: GH/JC

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Date: 18th December 2020

Dear Parents and Carers,

You may have seen an announcement last night in the media from the Department of Education. This was that the return of Secondary school students will be delayed by a week in January, to allow schools to introduce Lateral Flow (rapid) COVID testing in schools. This is not compulsory, but we are concerned that it may have added confusion for parents, coming at the end of term.

We have been working closely with our secondary schools and colleges to examine how we can introduce testing for those willing to take it up in the New Year. We do not believe that what was suggested last night by government is achievable. Not least of all, because the government guidance identifies nine different new jobs that would be needed in addition to large areas of protected space to undertake testing that is simply not available in our schools and academies. It would not be possible for this to be set up between now and 11 January when the schools should now return. The government expects that children of key workers, year 11 and vulnerable children should still return on 4 January. Others will be offered remote learning.

However, it is our very firm belief that in the best interest of our children our schools and colleges must continue to concentrate on their role in educating your sons and daughters to help them catch up with the education they have missed during the last nine months of the coronavirus pandemic. We do not think this important work should be distracted by this and have advised them not to consider setting up testing centres, but to continue working with us on a borough wide plan.

It is important to stress that Children's Services and our Public Health team are recruiting staff to support a programme that will put Lateral Flow testing into four areas of the borough, targeted at those at highest risk. We are planning a testing hub at the two colleges in Rochdale and will offer testing to all secondary school staff. We also hope to offer testing to year 11 students and to schools where there is a major outbreak. We expect this to be operational during January, but there is much to do to make it happen.

We know parents will want to take all opportunities to reduce the possibility of children being absent from school. We do too. We have talked in detail with our colleagues in Liverpool who found this very challenging and they had the support of 2,000 armed forces personnel, which we don't. We are developing something that we believe is achievable, without further affecting our children's education.

It's really important that our colleagues in schools and colleges recharge their batteries over Christmas, after what has been a very difficult year. We ask for your support in this, recognising that what has been suggested in the last couple of days is a huge logistical and costly task that is not possible to implement at such short notice.

We know that this is also an incredibly challenging time for all of you and you will have questions about when your children should return to school after the Christmas holiday. Your child's schools will advise you of the details of when children should return separately.

We would like to wish you and your family well over the holidays. Stay safe.



Gail Hopper
Director of Children's Services



Andrea Fallon
Director of Public Health