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Dear Headteacher,

Letter to Headteachers from the Director of Public Health, Waltham Forest

I am writing to you in light of the [changes in national COVID-19 guidance](#) that have been made this week, and to summarise our public health advice.

On Tuesday, the government announced that all remaining COVID-19 regulations ended on 24 February and free mass testing will stop on 1 April.

Although legal requirements have been removed, **public health guidance for people with COVID-19 will stay the same until 1 April. Getting a test if you have symptoms and self-isolating if you get a positive test result remain the most effective way to stop the spread of the virus.** Whilst case rates have reduced in recent weeks, the overall number of cases remains high.

What this means, effectively, is that the next 5 weeks or so up to 1 April are an interim period, where some of the structure of tackling COVID has been removed, but some parts remain in place, to buy more time for overall rates to reduce ahead of fully removing measures. We ask for your support and patience in this interim period, and will aim to maintain a proportionate response ahead of the changes from 1 April; from which point on, the national expectation is of schools operating much more closely to pre-COVID.

Positive test results

Staff and pupils who test positive for COVID-19 should self-isolate and should not come into school. They can take an LFD test from 5 days after their symptoms started (or from the day their test was taken if they did not have symptoms) followed by another LFD test the next day. If both these test results are negative, they should return to their educational setting, as long as they feel well enough to do so and do not have a temperature.

Page 10 of the updated [COVID-19 Schools Operational Guidance](#) states that *"If a parent or carer insists on a pupil attending your school where they have a confirmed or suspected case of COVID-19, you can take the decision to refuse the pupil if, in your reasonable judgement, it is necessary to protect other pupils and staff from possible infection with COVID-19."* In Waltham Forest during this interim period we encourage Heads to prioritise this protection of other pupils and staff. We will also be producing a letter for parents and carers, which clearly outlines the Waltham Forest Director of Public Health's expectation that anyone with symptoms or a positive test self-isolates; we hope this will support you with any discussions.

The position on recording school attendance in the register has not changed. Where a pupil has a confirmed case of COVID-19 they should be recorded as code I (illness).

Symptoms

The guidance to get a PCR test if you experience symptoms of COVID-19 is still in place until 1 April. If a staff member or pupils has symptoms of COVID-19 they should arrange to get a PCR test at one of

Waltham Forest's [local PCR testing sites](#), or [order a PCR test](#) online. They are advised to stay at home and avoid contact with other people while they are waiting for the test result.

Where a pupil is following advice to self-isolate prior to a confirmed case of COVID-19 they should be recorded as code X (not attending in circumstances related to coronavirus).

Contacts

The national contact tracing service is no longer in operation, and there is now different guidance in place for contacts: unvaccinated close contacts of COVID-19 cases no longer have to self-isolate; and vaccinated close contacts are no longer advised to do daily LFD tests.

However, people who live in the same household as someone with COVID-19 are at the highest risk of becoming infected because they are most likely to have prolonged close contact. All household contacts should try to minimise contact with the person who has COVID-19; work from home if they are able to do so; avoid contact with anyone who is at higher risk of becoming severely unwell if they are infected with COVID-19, especially those with a severely weakened immune system; limit close contact with other people outside their household; wear a face covering in crowded, enclosed or poorly ventilated spaces; be vigilant for symptoms of COVID-19 and get a PCR test if they experience any symptoms.

Children and young people who usually attend an education or childcare setting and who live with someone who has COVID-19 should continue to attend the setting as normal. However, if a child or staff member who lives in the same household as an active case of COVID-19 also has symptoms (including broader symptoms such as fatigue, sore throat or headache), they should stay at home until they have a negative PCR test.

Testing

Twice weekly asymptomatic LFD testing is no longer recommended for staff and pupils of most educational settings. Asymptomatic testing is still recommended for staff, students and pupils in SEND and AP settings (see below).

Until 1 April, LFD and PCR tests are available for everyone via the same routes as previously:

- LFD test kits can be [ordered online](#), [picked up at pharmacies using a Collect Code](#), or collected from one of Waltham Forest's [local LFD testing sites](#).
- If a staff member or pupils has symptoms of COVID-19 they should arrange to get a PCR test at one of Waltham Forest's [local PCR testing sites](#), or [order a PCR test](#) online. They are advised to stay at home and avoid contact with other people while they are waiting for the test result.

You may still have a supply of LFD tests, and we encourage you to use these to support pupils and staff members to follow the guidance e.g. to enable pupils and staff to start testing from Day 5 in order to end self-isolation.

The government has confirmed that education testing delivery channels will remain open so that staff and students of secondary age and above can access tests if needed to respond to local public health advice, in particular in relation to outbreaks.

Testing in SEND settings

The [guidance](#) continues to recommend asymptomatic twice-weekly testing for staff, students and pupils of secondary school age and above in SEND and AP settings (including SEND units in mainstream settings and equivalent identifiable cohorts in FE colleges). There is no need for primary age pupils (those in year 6 and below) to test.

The guidance recommends that settings should maintain an on-site asymptomatic testing site (ATS) where possible. Even if it is appropriate for the majority of pupils or students to test at home, they recommend settings retain a small ATS so that they can offer testing to pupils or students unable to test at home.

Notifying cases to Waltham Forest Public Health

Please continue to notify all new COVID-19 cases to Waltham Forest Public Health (public.health@walthamforest.gov.uk) using the [notification form](#); and please continue to send 'warn and inform' letters to parents of other pupils in the class (and other close contacts identified e.g. in extra-curricular activities, after-school clubs, breakfast clubs, etc.). The updated letter can be found on the [Hub](#). There is no need to resend letters to the same groups if you have more cases that week.

Waltham Forest will continue to provide advice and support on additional measures when settings reach the outbreak threshold. We also remain available for all schools that wish to discuss any concerns or seek additional advice. Please request a call on the notification form and return this to public.health@walthamforest.gov.uk.

We will be reviewing these measures ahead of the changes to be made from 1 April, based on upcoming decisions around support to educational settings being made at the London level.

Infection prevention and control

We expect schools to continue to follow the baseline infection prevention and control advice:

- Improving indoor ventilation
- Considering moving activities outdoors where possible e.g. exercise, assemblies and classes
- Implementing enhanced cleaning, focusing on touch points and cleaning shared equipment after use
- Reviewing and reinforcing hygiene measures
- Strong messaging to school community about signs, symptoms, isolation advice and testing to support prompt isolation of suspected cases
- Promoting vaccination uptake for eligible students and staff

Please note, face coverings are not routinely required for staff or pupils in schools (though we continue to support schools that wish to maintain this); but may be advised as part of temporary measures to support schools that have reached the appropriate threshold of cases.

Risk assessments

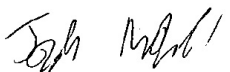
Until 1 April, employers must continue to explicitly consider COVID-19 in their risk assessments. We will provide advice and guidance on risk assessments after 1 April in the coming weeks.

Next steps

Early next week I will send you a letter to share with parents and carers, to summarise the public health advice that is in place until 1 April. I will write to all headteachers again once there has been guidance published relating to plans for April onwards.

I want to take this opportunity to say thank you again for your cooperation and support, and most importantly for keeping pupils and staff safe. As ever, please do reach out to us if you have any questions or concerns: public.health@walthamforest.gov.uk.

Yours faithfully,



Joe McDonnell
Director of Public Health