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**22 DECEMBER 2020**

**COVID-19 OPERATIONS**

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**DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION**

**JANUARY OPTIONS FOR EDUCATION SETTINGS**

1. Following rising cases of coronavirus (COVID-19) across parts of England, early and concerning evidence on a new variant and the introduction of a new Tier 4, we need to consider whether there is a need to take further steps to reduce transmission in education settings. This paper sets out proposed options across early years, schools, further education and universities.
2. We must protect and maximise on-site attendance for as many pupils and students as possible. This is especially the case for those sitting exams this year, final year university students, those on practical courses, vulnerable children and young people and the children of critical workers. Early Years and primary settings are currently out of scope. Any decisions must be taken considering all available evidence and clearly communicated to the sectors in good time, also allowing time for delivery and implementation of any changes to the testing regime.
3. Given evidence is still preliminary on the effects of the new variant in children and young people, and that Tier 4 restrictions will be reviewed on 30 December, we are not recommending any options considered in this paper are enacted nor communicated to the sector until we have a clearer understanding of the scientific evidence.

**Context**

4. We understand there is now high confidence that the new COVID variant can spread faster than other variants, with estimates that it is between 50-70% more transmissible. A NERVTAG/SPI-M meeting on 21 December considered preliminary analysis by Imperial College suggesting that in children under 15

there may be an increase in transmission of the new variant compared with other variants. Modelling by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine suggested that, with this variant, even in a lockdown situation, school closures may be needed to keep R below 1. **However, these data are preliminary, and more work is required before any firm conclusions can be reached**

5. Given this we should ensure that decisions are based on the evidence and understanding of transmission and hence **we should wait until after Christmas to ensure the decision taken is fully informed by the evidence on the new variant of Covid-19.**

#### **Keeping education settings open remains a top priority**

6. There is clear, conclusive evidence on the damage to children and young people's learning, development, mental health and wellbeing of missing education, as well as the serious detrimental economic impacts, both primary impacts and secondary impacts on parents' ability to work. Therefore we have previously agreed we must only consider closing education settings, or restricting attendance, as a last resort. Decisions to restrict access to other sectors of society and the economy must come first.

#### **Recommendations**

7. That the Committee approve the following:
  - A. **That we keep all education settings open with no restrictions to attendance.**

**That we consider further the following options below:**

- **B. Supplement our existing staggered return to university with testing for students** moving from Tier 4 areas, before they leave their non-term time accommodation; and offer regular and serial testing to students in addition to testing on return. Students should also be asked to 'self-isolate' for 10 days upon returning to university unless they take a test;
- **C. Wait until after Christmas to consider the latest evidence on the new variant of Covid-19**, to ensure that any further actions are based on the latest evidence and understanding of transmission.

- **D. If after Christmas, the latest science tells us that children and young people play a key role in the transmission of the new variant, we consider the following:**
    - i) **If we know that increased testing will reduce transmission rates in education settings, we could look to prioritise testing over remote education in the w/c 4<sup>th</sup> January.** We could relax the requirement for schools to deliver remote education in that week, with clear expectations that schools will use the time to establish testing (although take-up of the testing programme remains optional).
    - ii) **Alternatively, we could look to extend the staggered return of secondary schools and colleges by a further week to 18 January, but with remote education from w/c 4<sup>th</sup> Jan.** This would enable testing in secondary schools and colleges to be set up in a more robust way, as well as an additional week of remote education for most pupils that avoids the contacts and mixing associated with attendance. This would give more time to schools and colleges to establish testing on return. As previously agreed, this would be followed by continuous weekly testing of the workforce and serial testing of staff and pupils. We believe this should be undertaken by use of the recently approved self-administered Lateral Flow Tests, which would remove the cost and workforce burden of carrying out these test, as well as being accompanied by ongoing weekly testing of pupils. We would support prioritisation of the use of the self-administered test kits for schools and colleges.
    - iii) **Consider extended options on the delay of university students in the first cohort, the movement of students from Tier 4 areas and/or tightening the definition of practical students returning in the first cohort** (we already have a review point scheduled for w/c 18<sup>th</sup> Jan to decide on the movement of the second cohort of students).
8. These options should only be explored if scientific evidence tells us that we need to go even further and if they can be shown to make an appreciable impact on R

above the existing mitigations in place (and balanced with the additional risks and challenges they entail).

**Option A – stick to existing plans for January school, college and university return**

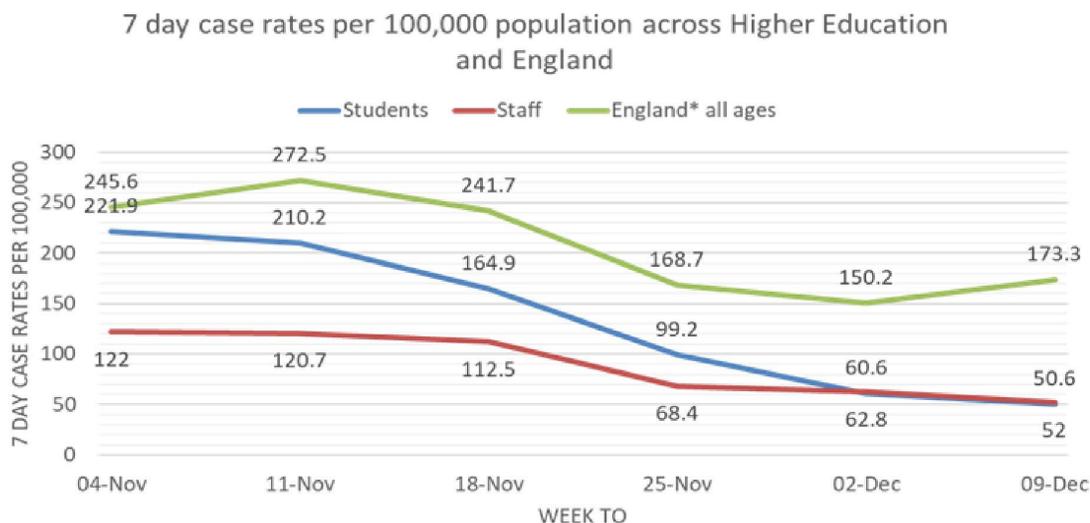
9. With the emergence of the new variant, it is right to reassess plans for January which were formed before this new evidence came to light. We should not rush to change plans announced only a few days ago until there is sufficient scientific evidence to justify new measures. Prior to the latest evidence on the new strain of the virus, we set out a plan for January to test university students, college and secondary staff and pupils to minimise numbers of asymptomatic individuals returning to settings. For secondary schools and colleges, this includes restricted attendance in the first week of term to priority groups, alongside the option of an additional inset day to prepare for delivery of the testing programme. For universities, this includes staggering returns over 5 weeks, prioritising practical subjects for early returns.
10. There is currently no rationale to change this position. We should continue with the already-announced plan for most children to be taught remotely in secondary schools and colleges for the first week of term, and to introduce testing rapidly; and that we do not further restrict school attendance unless or until clear scientific evidence demands it, given the good evidence for the importance to children of attending school.
11. To strengthen this approach, we could look to follow this one-off testing programme with weekly testing for secondary, college and university students. We would need a decision from Test and Trace on whether this would be possible, bringing forward the review point currently planned for mid-January in relation to testing in universities. Now that MHRA approval has been given for LFD test kits to be self-administered we must move as quickly as possible to a test at home rather than test at school/college/university model, to reduce costs and the burden on the respective workforces.

**Option B – build on our existing measures in universities**

12. In terms of universities, we believe the arrangements we already have in place provide the appropriate degree of risk management and mitigation given the a) very low prevalence of positive cases at the end of term according to LFD test data; b) indications of significant seroprevalence and immunity amongst students; c) mitigation of Tier 4 restrictions over the next 2-4 weeks for returning students; and d) Covid secure measures at university, including testing on arrival (and good compliance by students at university). There are options to strengthen this further through testing before travelling from Tier 4 areas and serial testing at university.
13. In terms of managing the mass movement of students, existing plans for universities returning for the spring term were already based on an extended staggered return and asymptomatic testing available for all students on return.
14. The staggered return manages the mass movement of students by spreading it out over a longer period than usual. It prioritises students on clinical and practical courses which have been judged to be “non-transferable” (those where a significant proportion of the courses content is not teachable at distance and where quality of provision is adversely affected by a transfer to online platforms). In addition, universities estimate a substantially greater proportion than usual have opted to stay at their term time accommodation. This includes a significant number of international students who have not been able to return home, or who will have already planned their arrival in time for the new term and will not have alternative accommodation in the UK. This is likely to reduce the numbers of students travelling at the beginning of term and further mitigates the risk.
15. Test sites have been successfully mobilised across the UK and, as of 18 December, all but 1,000 students in very small institutions have access to testing, with officials continuing to work to ensure 100% of HE providers are onboard for January testing. The testing data from December (294k as of 16 December), however, suggests more needs to be done to increase uptake in January. We have a range of measures in place designed to boost uptake of testing by students, in addition to measures being considered by universities (e.g. to restrict access to services until tested). ONS survey data tells us that the most frequently cited reason for not getting tested was that students “they did not think it was

useful for me” [41%]. We plan to issue strengthened guidance to say that students should self-isolate for 10 days on return unless they have been tested.

16. Unpublished data collected from the Office for Students daily data collection tool show that staff and student cases have fallen noticeably since early November and case rates per 100,000 for both are below England all age case rates. Furthermore, end of term LFD mass-testing of students (unpublished) data show a 0.32% positivity rate from tests taken (as of 16<sup>th</sup> December). Separately, two providers reported have high proportions of students testing positive for antibodies, suggesting previous exposure and possible immunity, particularly among those resident in halls where outbreaks occurred earlier in the year.



17. We are confident that our current arrangements already provide a high degree of risk management and mitigation. However, given the recent development of the new strain and its heightened transmissibility, we recommend going further and:

- a. To reduce the risk of student movement, introducing testing of students in Tier 4 areas before they return to higher education in January. Our recommendation is that students seek testing from community testing sites before travelling back to their universities (rather than wait for a test upon return to their university). However, further work is required to understand the impact of a significant uptick in student testing on community testing programmes.

- b. To mitigate the likelihood of outbreaks once at university, making a decision on ongoing testing of students in HEIs at the next review point (29 December). Furthermore, we should commit to rolling out serial testing of contacts of positive cases at HEIs in tier 4 areas, as has already been agreed for schools. These could act as a pilot for the approach before rolling out across the country.

### **Option C – We work up further options based on more robust testing**

18. Given evidence is expected to continue to evolve daily over the coming days and weeks, it is important we use the Christmas break to fully assess options in light of all available data. We will want to give the sector as much notice as possible of any changes before the start of term but need to balance this with the need to ensure decisions are taken based on clear evidence and further understanding of the transmission of the virus. On balance we would therefore recommend a final decision being taken after Christmas.
19. If the latest science is clear we need to take further action to reduce transmission in education settings, we recommend giving further consideration to the following three options (i – iii):
  - i) **Relax the requirement for schools and colleges to deliver remote education the w/c of 4<sup>th</sup> January.**
20. We understand that delivering mass testing will be a sizeable burden on school leaders and staff, and that it may not be possible to deliver testing and remote education for all pupils at the same time. Asking for both may risk less effective or less timely testing.
21. Pupils in exam years and those most at risk of lost learning are prioritised for the January return to schools. We could signal that, while schools should do as much as they can to put in place remote education, testing should be the priority and, subject to further legal advice, we will not be expecting schools to fulfil all the requirements of the continuity direction, where it is not reasonable for them to do so.

22. We would set clear expectations that schools must use the time to establish testing (although take-up of the testing programme would remain optional).

**ii) Consider extending the staggered start in schools and colleges**

23. We could extend the staggered return for secondary schools and colleges by a further week, either nationally or in Tier 4 areas only – from 11 January to 18 January – to enable additional time for more settings to establish a robust testing programme for the return of pupils and to give a longer ‘fire-break’ from contact. To ensure ongoing effectiveness of the testing programme, alongside the introduction of weekly testing for staff, and serial testing for staff and pupils, we should consider the introduction of weekly testing for pupils. To facilitate this we should move to use of self-administered tests in schools and colleges urgently.

24. This in practice means that during w/c 4 January and w/c 11 January, secondary schools (including middle schools with Years 7 and 8 and all-through schools) and colleges will provide remote education to most pupils. They would only provide face-to-face education for vulnerable children and young people, children of critical workers, and those sitting exams this year. Special schools and alternative provision provide for vulnerable cohorts and would therefore return as planned. Primary schools and early years provision would return as planned.

25. Schools and their caterers would be asked to provide food parcels to free school meal eligible children self-isolating and undertaking their learning at home, should this option be enacted. We anticipate there may be calls for more flexibility or funding given the increase in numbers of eligible children learning at home.

26. It is important to note that any changes to restrict on-site provision further are likely to damage parental confidence and negatively impact on attendance rates for the rest of the term. Children and young people may not return to settings until half term when the risks are better understood.

**iii) we could explore one or more of the following options to further delay the return to universities – we would want to**

explore these in more detail to determine if they would make an impact on R above the existing mitigations in place:

27. Further delay the return of students on non-practical courses (currently from 25 January). We already have a review point scheduled in for w/c 18<sup>th</sup> Jan to decide on this option. There would be a number of significant implications including on teaching outcomes, logistical challenges, the student experience, mental health and calls for tuition and accommodation refunds. These will be considered in the round at the January review point.
28. Tighten our definition of 'practical courses' to reduce the number of students returning in the first part of January (e.g. prioritising those in Cost centre A (clinical and veterinary) plus courses with key public sector pipelines e.g. nursing and subjects allied to healthcare; Initial Teacher Training). A decision would have to be made imminently to have a material impact on the number of students who are returning (returns are from 4 January). The implications listed under a above still stand. In addition, there are likely to be a substantial number of students (e.g. international students and those who chose not to return home for Christmas based on previously stated planned start dates) who would still be at the university and more likely to socialise in unmanaged environments if they have no formal (and COVID-secure) teaching planned. DHSC would want to be involved in any reclassification of the definition of what is defined as a 'practical student'. Healthcare students on placement are classed as essential workers for the purposes of testing, travel and access to key workers schools and childcare places.
29. Ask providers to delay the return of students living in or moving to providers in Tier 4. This would mean that students on the same courses (and potentially in the same institution) in different parts of the country would have different access to their studies. This would be particularly problematic for students on practical courses and would give rise to delivery issues for HEPs required to deliver both online and in-person. It would also be logistically difficult to deliver with enough flex in the system – regions around the country are likely to be moving in and out of Tier 4 every few days/weeks, making it very difficult to give notice and manage student movement with a rapidly changing regional status. Any expansion of Tier 4 may undermine the efficacy of this option.

30. Ask providers to delay the return of practical students from 4th January. As above, a decision would have to be made very soon in order to have a material impact on student's planned return. These courses cannot easily be delivered online without impacting teaching outcomes. Delays to in-person teaching may impact on the ability of students to graduate on time/gain professional accreditation. Universities have already had to compress practical elements of teaching this term (because of the student travel window) so any significant extension of this will severely impact planned assessment and practical elements, particularly for clinical, lab and placement-based courses, including medicine. This is particularly acute for students in later years, who also lost significant practical time in the final term of AY 19/20. DHSC officials also have concerns around a blanket delay to healthcare students' clinical placements, due to the impact on both education and to the health service because healthcare students on placement provide service support to the employed NHS workforce. Finally, this would put pressure on the £20m of hardship funding that HMG announced in December as there would be a case for more students to be brought in scope
31. All of these options would need to be considered in light of the counterfactual scenario of students remaining at home and the likelihood of them socialising and spreading the virus at their home location where they are more likely to be in contact with older and potentially more vulnerable family and members of the public. The experience for students at university (including pastoral and mental health support) and the testing and behavioural protocols in place will also need to be factored into the assessment of the options.

**Other – consider implementing the contingency framework in Tier 4**

32. As a response to the introduction of Tier 4, **we could examine proposals to implement the contingency framework education restrictions in all Tier 4 areas.**
33. DfE's contingency framework was designed as a flexible fallback position for restricting on-site education provision of education in the rare circumstances that other restrictions in an area have failed to mitigate community transmission, or if

there is clear evidence that education settings are driving transmission. It is intended be implemented in the fewest number of settings required for the shortest time possible.

34. The contingency framework prioritises face-to-face education in schools, colleges and wraparound childcare settings for certain groups, with two positions depending on the severity of the circumstances:

- a. On-site attendance for vulnerable children, children of critical workers and young people in exam cohorts at secondary school or college (with remote learning for all other pupils); on-site attendance for all primary school pupils and early years settings.
- b. In extreme circumstances: on-site attendance for vulnerable children, children of critical workers and young people in exam cohorts only across all settings, with remote learning for all other pupils and students. NB the contingency framework does not apply to universities.

35. Where the contingency framework is implemented, vulnerable children includes children who do not have access to a device to enable access to remote education. We would continue to rollout devices to all secondary schools as well as primary schools where face-to-face education is disrupted.

36. Decisions on implementing the contingency framework are taken centrally by DfE with input from JBC, PHE and other governmental departments and scrutinised via the bronze, silver, gold weekly meetings. As part of the process, decision makers would consider whether circumstances in each region were so extreme as to warrant extending the restrictions to primary school pupils (including in wraparound childcare settings) and early years settings. We would always need to consider carefully the detrimental impact this would have on children's health and wellbeing, the financial impacts of doing so for the wider economy, as well as both the early years and wraparound childcare sector, and the longer-term impacts on childcare sufficiency where we are already seeing emerging issues.

37. The Christmas break allows time to consider any restrictions carefully and in light of the emerging data.

### **Comms handling**

38. Any change in policy regarding the January return would likely be met with a mixed reaction, and we would not make any announcements until consideration has been given to the options in light of further public health advice. It is also likely the Government would be criticised for making another late change in policy, but as necessary we can be clear that any change in policy is linked to the wider Tier 4/new Covid strain information. This will help to explain why the position has changed, and we can make the case that we are acting on the new information available to us.

### **Legal implications**

39. Full legal advice relating to the recommendations will be provided in due course if, after further consideration, those measures are to be pursued.
40. Clearly, if evidence emerges that school and college students play a greater risk in transmission of the new variant or are more likely to become ill, it would be hard to justify not taking additional measures as quickly as possible (Recommendation A). In particular proposals for a full return to face to face education for all secondary school and college students would be vulnerable to challenge.