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Dear Parent/Carer,

Covid-19 Update and steps being taken in schools

We are sending this communication to update parents and families on the current Covid-19 situation in Tameside, to explain the steps that schools are taking to reduce the risks of transmission in school, and to ask that you all continue to support the hard work that our schools are doing to minimise disruption to your children.

We are currently experiencing the highest rates of Covid-19 infection across Tameside that we have ever seen throughout the entire pandemic. This is the same situation across much of the country. In recent weeks we have had over 5,000 people per week testing positive across the borough. This is driven by the new Omicron variant of Covid-19 which spreads much more easily than previous variants. This is causing pressure in health, social care and other public services, particularly due to staff absence.

National Measures

Some key measures have been put in place by the government in response to the current situation.

- **Vaccination** – all adults are encouraged to get the booster vaccination. Evidence shows that having the booster dose does provide good protection against this new variant. In Tameside over 76% of eligible adults have now had their booster and we are encouraging anyone who has not yet had their first, second or booster dose to come forward to get this so they and those around them are as well protected as possible. The vaccination programme continues for young people as well with children aged 12 to 15 now able to get their second dose if it's been more than 12 weeks since their first.
- **The national 'Plan B' remains in place.** Face coverings are required in many indoor settings, people are asked to work from home if they can, and vaccine passports are mandatory in certain settings.
- **Testing** - The government is increasing the number of lateral flow tests available across the country. We've had feedback that some residents have struggled to access these recently



but more tests are being made available for people to take regularly twice a week and before going in to high risk situations, if they don't have any Covid-19 symptoms. These tests are also available for people who are asked to test if they have had close contact with a confirmed case. People can continue to access lateral flow tests by ordering them online for home delivery or by collecting at local sites such as pharmacies, libraries or Active Tameside facilities. For all the latest information visit www.tameside.gov.uk/rapidtesting.

Measures in Schools

There has once again been a huge amount of work across our schools to encourage staff and families to test before returning to school after the Christmas break. Particularly in secondary schools where on-site testing has been taking place. This testing as young people return to school is crucial to find as many unknown cases of Covid-19 as possible, to try to break the chains of transmission early. It continues to be extremely helpful and an important defence where parents, families, staff and secondary school pupils take regular lateral flow tests, twice a week, to find those infections we would otherwise miss.

- **Do regular lateral flow tests even if you've recently had Covid-19.** Previously we have advised people who have tested positive in the last 90 days not to do regular lateral flow tests, however due to the increased prevalence of infection and the growing evidence of effectiveness of the tests, we are now encouraging people to carry out lateral flow tests regularly even if they have tested positive in the last 90 days. Evidence suggests that lateral flow tests being positive mean it's very likely you have the virus.
- **Confirmatory PCR tests suspended.** The requirement to get a confirmatory PCR test when someone has a positive lateral flow test has been suspended from 11th January. It is still important that anyone with Covid-19 symptoms isolates and books a PCR test though, rather than relying on a lateral flow test. When you take a lateral flow test, remember to report whatever the result is – positive, negative or void. Reporting your result is a great way to help reduce the spread of the virus.
- **People who are positive can end isolation if negative on day 5 and 6.** From Monday 17th January, people with Covid-19 who are isolating can take a lateral flow test on day 5 and 6 and end isolation early if they are both negative. For further information on these changes, please see Appendix 1 at the end of this letter.
- **Face Coverings.** Given the level of transmission we saw in schools over the autumn term, we introduced face coverings in schools for staff in all schools and secondary-aged pupils. This has since been introduced nationally, including for pupils in classrooms in secondary schools. While we recognise this may be disruptive at times, there is good evidence that masks reduce the risk of transmission. Face coverings are not required in situations where pupils are taking part in exercise such as PE lessons, but they are required when pupils are travelling on public transport or school transport. This is a temporary measure and is due to be reviewed nationally on 26th January, in line with the rest of the 'Plan B' measures.

Schools continue to follow public health advice on testing, self-isolation and managing confirmed cases and have robust risk assessments in place. This includes the basics such as regular cleaning, hand hygiene and ventilating indoor spaces. CO2 monitors are already being used across schools to monitor ventilation but nationally there are new air cleaning units available for areas in schools where it is difficult to improve ventilation.

We appreciate this is a difficult time for families but we must stress that school leaders are doing an exceptional job in extremely tough circumstances. School leaders, teachers and support staff continue to do everything they can to reduce the risk of transmission while also prioritising learning and development. These measures have our full support.

Finally, we will continue to update our parents and carers, over the coming weeks of any further information. It is essential that we approach this in a safe and sensible way as this has served us well over the past two years. I want to reassure all parents and carers again, that the education and safety of our pupils and staff are paramount in our planning, as well as the need to provide continuity in our educational offer.

Yours Sincerely



Debbie Watson
Interim Director of Population Health



Tim Bowman
Director of Education

Appendix 1: Testing Guidance Updates

There have been some recent changes to advice around testing.

- People who are close contacts of someone with Covid-19 are now asked to do daily lateral flow tests for 7 days (if they are a double vaccinated adult or under 18 years and 6 months) rather than doing a single PCR test. Any adults who are not double vaccinated still need to isolate for 10 days if they are a close contact. Children under the age of 5 are not recommended to do the daily tests.
- Anyone who tests positive on a lateral flow test now no longer needs to go for a confirmatory PCR test as well. If you have a positive lateral flow test, you must upload the result online. This will trigger NHS Test and Trace making contact with you. You must isolate from that point and inform school but there is then no need to also go for a PCR test.
- People who test positive for Covid-19 can now potentially end their isolation early if they have negative lateral flow tests. People who are positive can take a lateral flow test on day 5 and 6 and if both of these are negative, they can end their isolation on day 6. For pupils and staff this means they can come back in to school. The tests must both be negative and must be taken on day 5 and 6 at least 24 hours apart. If they are still positive, you can carry on taking tests on the following days to still end isolation early if further tests on day 7, 8, 9 etc. are negative. If people continue to test positive up to day 10 they should continue to isolate and on day 11 can stop testing and end isolation as normal.