



**Vicky Ford MP**

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families

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18<sup>th</sup> January 2021

Dear DCS

**Early Years Testing**

First of all I want to thank you for your commitment and for all the hard work you continue to do to support vital services for people and organisations in your areas during this extremely challenging time. I don't underestimate the difficulties faced by many of you in keeping these vital services going, and to a high standard for the many people who are reliant on these, especially some of our most vulnerable children.

The main purpose of writing to you all now is to provide a very important update on asymptomatic testing for coronavirus (COVID-19) for early years staff; children's social care workers and; frontline staff and volunteers in children and young people's charities who are working outside of the home or in local bases. It is fundamental to reassure these staff (and volunteers), parents and carers that we are working to protect our vital frontline services and the people who use them.

You will be aware that the Secretary of State for Health recently committed that all critical workers who cannot work from home will be prioritised for rapid, regular asymptomatic testing. This expansion of asymptomatic testing will identify more positive cases of coronavirus (COVID-19) and ensure those infected self-isolate, protecting the wider community. This is crucial given that about 1 in 3 people have coronavirus without displaying any symptoms.

The Department for Education is working closely with the Department for Health and Social Care and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure rapid asymptomatic testing for our critical workers such as all early years staff and children's social care workers. This is crucial to support the Prime Minister's announcement for early years settings to remain fully open during this national lockdown. Early years staff across the country have worked incredibly hard to keep settings open through the pandemic so that young children can be educated, and parents can work. These tests will also help to protect placement capacity for children entering care and ensure availability of the critical workforces who have been working throughout the pandemic to keep our most vulnerable children and young people safe and well.

Staff in schools-based nurseries and maintained nursery schools will be receiving home test kits for asymptomatic testing as part of the rollout of asymptomatic testing to primary schools (details are being communicated separately to all Directors of Public Health).

Secondary schools as well as special schools, alternative provision (AP) academies, pupil referral units (PRUs) and independent registered AP with secondary aged pupils have already received testing kits as part of the secondary schools and colleges rollout. In recognition of the distinct issues specialist settings face in delivering asymptomatic testing,

we have produced guidance for them which can be found here - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-for-full-opening-special-schools-and-other-specialist-settings/mass-asymptomatic-testing-in-specialist-settings>

In relation to staff in private, voluntary and independent nurseries (PVI), childminders, children's social care workers, and frontline staff and volunteers in children and young people charities who are working outside of the home or in local bases, it is for local authorities to implement the most appropriate route for these staff to access asymptomatic tests. This has to be done in a way that works best for these vital sectors, recognising that for some staff such as childminders it will be impractical for them to travel to a local test centre during working hours. I strongly encourage that you ensure that these staff are highly prioritised because of their crucial frontline roles, often involving intimate care. I know that many areas have already begun prioritising asymptomatic testing for these sectors and I am grateful for that.

Schools or local authorities commissioning unregistered AP (by which we mean any AP setting that is not: a pupil referral unit, an AP academy, an AP free school, or a registered independent school) should ensure pupils accessing this provision are offered testing (for example via the mainstream school who commissioned the place or via community testing programmes if the local authority commissioned the place). They should assure themselves that any unregistered AP they commission have taken appropriate steps to ensure their institutions are following suitable coronavirus (COVID-19) protective measures.

I can also confirm that we will be going ahead with this year's Early Years Census which will take place this week. The Department for Education has issued a Q&A document to all local authorities which will help them to interpret existing, published census guidance in light of the unique circumstances imposed by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. In summary, we have taken the view that where a child is reasonably expected to attend early years provision, and that provision is made available to them by the provider, their expected hours should be recorded in the Early Years Census.

I hope that this is helpful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vicky Ford". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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