

Our position statement on supporting pupils and learners during national lockdown from 22nd February 2021

Ambitious about Autism, and our Schools Trust, run TreeHouse School, The Rise School and Ambitious College serving around 300 children and young people across London and the Home Counties.

Since the first lockdown in March 2020, we have been guided by our values, mission and by information, advice and guidance for education providers issued by the Government, Public Health England (PHE), Health and Safety Executive and other key bodies. When taking account of this guidance, our first consideration is the safety and well-being of our pupils, learners and staff.

As a result of the new variant of Covid-19, rapidly rising infection rates and the increased pressure it has put on the NHS, on 6 January 2021 England moved into another national lockdown, as such we updated our Position Statement. We will keep it under review as the Government makes decisions about the country coming out of lockdown.

Over Christmas and New Year there was much debate about schools and colleges in relation to the new strain of the Covid-19 virus and mass asymptomatic testing; further new strains have also been identified. [Guidance relating to special schools](#) was last updated on 3 February 2021. [Guidance on critical workers and vulnerable children who can access education settings](#) was last updated on 8 January 2021. Both pieces of guidance are continually updated by Government and we take account of these updates. The links will always take you to the most up to date version of the guidance.

All education settings need to continue to follow Government and PHE guidance and control measures to minimise the risk of Covid-19 transmission.

As a specialist setting for vulnerable children the Government has asked that we remain open to all of our children and young people. However, we must ensure we can operate safe settings. Our criteria for decision-making is set out below.

Our key principles

Since the end of March 2020 our schools' and college's decision making has been guided by a set of principles. We have adapted these principles¹ as the situation and Government guidance has changed. This update is based on the latest Government guidance. Our key principles are:

- We will continue to put the safety of our pupils, learners and staff at the forefront of all we do;
- We will continue to follow Government guidance and keep our position under review;
- We will continue to ensure that each pupil/learner has an individualised, updated, Covid-19 Risk Assessment which takes into account the risks of the new variants of Covid-19;
- Pupils and learners will learn in 'bubbles' with the same staff assigned to these bubbles, where possible;
- Pupils/learners and staff will not always be able to social distance within bubbles because of the support needs of our pupils and learners;
- Staff with peripatetic roles (e.g. Speech and Language Therapist, Occupational Therapist) will need to work in a few bubbles. We will ensure we minimise the number of contacts these staff have;
- When outside of these bubbles, staff will practise social distancing of 1m plus;

¹ Version 2 was published on 12 May, Version 3 on 8 July, and Version 4 on 19 August, Version 5 on 5 November and Version 6 on 14 December 2020, Version 7 on 4 January, Version 8 on 3 February 2021

- We will work in partnership with placing Local Authorities and parents and carers on an ongoing basis.

Running a ‘Covid Secure’ and safe school or college

The Government’s guidance is clear that:

“While coronavirus (COVID-19) remains in the community, this means making judgements at a setting level about how to balance and minimise any risks from coronavirus (COVID-19) with providing a full educational experience for children and young people.”

It is critical that our schools and college are ‘Covid Secure’ which includes:

- Having risk assessments in place for pupil/learners, staff and buildings, all reviewed regularly. Site specific risk assessments have been updated in light of the new variants of Covid-19 and are published on our school and college websites;
- Having the correct levels of trained staff in place to meet pupils/learners’ needs safely;
- Ensuring pupils, learners and staff who have Coronavirus symptoms (or someone in their household that does) stay at home and follow Government guidance;
- Having robust hand-washing and respiratory hygiene in place;
- Enhanced cleaning arrangements;
- Engagement with the NHS track and trace system. This means that if a person has tested positive for Coronavirus within a ‘bubble’, pupils, learners and staff in that ‘bubble’ may be asked to self-isolate;
- Practising social distancing when possible;
- Having the correct personal protective equipment (PPE) in place as needed;
- In line with Government [guidance](#), from 16 October face coverings will be worn by all staff in communal areas such as corridors and toilets;
- In line with Government guidance, from January 2021 implementing an asymptomatic testing programme.

It is critical that any service we deliver must be a safe service. In addition to being ‘Covid-secure’, being safe in the Covid crisis includes having the correct levels of trained staff in place to meet children and young people’s needs safely and being continuously mindful of online safety as we deliver learning through virtual learning environments.

Our schools and college, like all others, may face staffing challenges going forward for several reasons. These include staff continuing to self-isolating due to being deemed Extremely Clinically Vulnerable, staff isolating awaiting a Covid-19 test because they are symptomatic, staff having to self-isolate through the track and trace system, normal winter sickness and our own staff having to take dependency leave due to their child’s school/college/childcare being shut as a result of lockdown. We will do everything in our power to ensure continuity of service for our pupils and learners. However, we must also risk assess daily to ensure we can operate safely.

The children and young people who attend our settings are some of the most vulnerable in society. They thrive in settings where there is a predictable timetable, they have developed a rapport with their staff teams, have staff trained in working with them around medication and behaviour that challenges, and understand what works/doesn’t work for that child or young person. They also need staff who can communicate effectively with them as not all our children and young people communicate verbally, and their expressive skills are not as highly developed as their receptive skills. We must take all of this into consideration as we plan for the educational needs of every child and young person in our settings.

Education in our settings and learning from home

As a specialist setting for vulnerable children the Government has asked that we remain open to all of our children and young people. From January 2021 to February mid-term we reverted to the approach we used in the first lockdown period in March 2020. This allowed us to offer a sustainable model moving forward and some certainty in uncertain times.

For the first half of the term we offered places to the children and young people of key workers and those children and young people who were deemed to be most vulnerable. Some parents chose not to send their child or young person to school/college and we respected that decision. After mid-term break we will endeavour to bring more children and young people into our settings. This will look different for each setting and the Head of School/College will have been in touch with parents/carers about the approach.

For those pupils and learners not accessing learning at school or college we will continue to support them to learn at home. This can be through home learning packs and/or through our virtual learning platform. As per Government guidance, we will work with local authorities to monitor the welfare of vulnerable children who are not attending school and will keep in touch with other pupils and learners for safeguarding purposes.

We recognise that this pandemic has turned the world upside down for many of our pupils/learners and families and routines and arrangements have been disrupted significantly which will have caused anxiety and distress. Being in a national lockdown may be causing further anxiety. Our schools and college will listen to concerns and work in partnership with pupils/learners and their families to put in place strategies to support their education.

Mass testing

The latest guidance sets out that lateral flow tests (with results in around 30 minutes) can be conducted for pupils, learners and staff on their first return to school/college. This is via a self-administered nose and throat swab test or in the case of children and young people with SEND a double nose swab, followed 3-5 days later by a second test. Staff will then be tested twice weekly.

No pupil/learner will be denied access to our schools/college should they not wish to be tested.

It is not our intention to test the vast majority of our pupils/learners. There are a few reasons for this.

- Firstly, the test is very invasive – it requires a nose and throat swab (although the latest guidance allows for a double nose swab). This will be very distressing for many of our pupils/learners. The lateral flow test is also administered twice – a pupil/learner might tolerate the first test and then might not tolerate the second test – rendering the results of the first test unusable.
- Secondly, the guidance is that students should self-administer the test. This would not be possible for most of our pupils/learners. The guidance does allow that reasonable adjustments can be made for children and young people with SEND and a trusted individual can support the administration of a test. Our staff are not trained to do this.
- Thirdly, children and young people over the age of 16 would need to give informed consent. For many of our young people giving consent will require a Mental Capacity Assessment. This is a lengthy and time-consuming process.

Of course where we have a pupil/learner who is keen to have a test and feels they can tolerate it and parents agree (under 16 years) or the pupil/learner gives informed consent (over 16 years) we will support a test.

Unlike the PCR home test kits, lateral flow tests cannot be administered at home for those in special schools/colleges and secondary schools/colleges.

What will our approach be?

- We will continue to operate bubbles and work hard to ensure bubble ‘fidelity’.
- We will test staff twice a week
- If your child is sick for any reason, we ask that you do not send them into school or college
- If your child/young person is deemed to be Extremely Clinically Vulnerable (ECV) they must not come into school or college.
- If your child is symptomatic with any coronavirus symptoms² they must self-isolate and you must not send them into school. You might like to administer a PCR test at home³ and we can arrange for a test kit to be sent home to you. You can administer the test⁴, send it off and isolate your child until you get the test result. If the test comes back as negative, you can send your child back to school as long as they have been temperature free for 48 hours and are not required to self-isolate for any other reason.

Processes in our schools and college in relation to symptomatic staff, pupils and learners

The processes set out below might vary very slightly in our settings but the overall approach will remain the same.

Part A: Symptomatic Pupils/Learners

What we do when a child or young person presents as symptomatic in our schools or college:

- Immediately move the child or young person to the identified designated room in the building;
- Ask the member of staff accompanying the child or young person to wear a face mask, gloves and plastic apron;
- Ring the parents/carers and request that the child or young person is collected immediately;
- Inform the placing LA that the child or young person will be learning from home until a test is administered;
- Contact the families of those children/young people in the bubble to advise them to isolate should they become symptomatic.
- Ask the parents of the affected child/young person to have them tested and let the school/college know of the outcome. We recognise that not every child or young person will be able to have a test, and in these cases the pupil/learner will be asked to self-isolate;
- Should the test result come back positive (or a test is not taken) we will take advice from our local Public Health England, and send pupils/learners and staff in that bubble home to self-isolate and follow up with others who might have had peripheral contact to self-isolate.
- Be clear with parents/carers of the length of time for self-isolation;

² Persistent cough, temperature, loss of taste or smell.

³ It may be helpful to share the [visual story](#) developed by Ambitious about Autism to explain the home test.

⁴ Ambitious about Autism developed a [guide for parents on how to administer an at home test](#).

- Ensure the day cleaner cleans spaces the person has been in contact with;
- Designated room cleaned down once vacated;
- Deep clean areas used by affected staff, pupils and learners.

Part B: Symptomatic Staff

What we do when a staff member presents as symptomatic in our schools or college:

- Quarantine/ isolate them in the identified designated room in school/college until they can go home
- Check when their symptoms started;
- Check who they've had contact with within their bubble (staff and pupils/learners) over the past 3-5 days;
- Tell the affected staff member to take a test;
 - Should the result come back negative, we advise self-isolation is no longer needed (unless of course they show new symptoms or have been directed to self-isolate by NHS test and trace) and they return to work
 - Should the result come back positive we will send pupils/learners and staff in that bubble home to self-isolate and follow up with others who might have had peripheral contact to self-isolate.
 - We may check in with those self-isolating to monitor their symptoms and if needed, (ask them to) follow up with people they've had contact with.
- We will take advice from our local Public Health England representative;
- Ensure the day cleaner cleans spaces the person has been in contact with;
- Designated room cleaned down once vacated;
- Deep clean areas used by affected staff, pupils and learners.