FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER

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To: All Parents/Carers

This has been a challenging 18 months for all of us, and especially our children and young people. I want to start by taking this opportunity to, once again, pay tribute to the resilience and positive attitude that our children and young people and their families have shown throughout the pandemic. I hope that we can return to a more normal experience for our children and young people.

To help ensure that the new academic year is as safe, productive and enjoyable as possible for all concerned, my Department has revised its COVID-19 guidance to schools on 18 August available here. This revised guidance reflects the decisions made by the Executive in relation to the new term, in line with the more general relaxation of measures in wider society. As there is still a high level of underlying infection in the community, we cannot yet remove all of the protective measures that have been in place. However, the guidance will allow schools and education settings to develop local strategies that is best suited to them.

I would encourage all parents/carers to help us keep our children and young people and educational settings safe by following the guidance. You can do this by:

- Keeping any young person, with symptoms of COVID-19 at home until they can get a PCR test at a local testing centre;
- Encouraging those young people aged 16 and over to avail of the vaccination;
- Encouraging young people in post-primary schools to participate in regular asymptomatic testing;
- Encouraging those young people in post-primary schools to carry out a test before returning to school using the Lateral Flow Tests at home;

- Availing of the testing for Special Schools (using LAMP testing) which will resume in the new term;
- Arranging for children and young people to isolate if they have been a close contact and to take a PCR test. If the test is negative, there is no longer a need to self-isolate for ten days and they can return to school; and
- Ensuring that post-primary aged young people continue to wear face coverings. The Executive has agreed that this mitigation should remain in place until 8 October, when the position will be reviewed. However, even after that date, face-coverings will still be required in corridors and congested areas, and on transport to schools or other education settings.

If your child is willing to take a test before school returns, test kits can be obtained using one of the following methods (this is for the initial return to school only):

- Collect from one of the Local collection sites operated as part of the National testing Programme or local government, using the Link Find where to get rapid lateral flow tests - NHS (test-and-trace.nhs.uk) to identify the closest location;
- Order using **LFD Direct.** Order coronavirus (COVID-19) rapid lateral flow tests - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk).

Subsequent supplies of LFDs, where required, would then be issued via the school.

The changes for the new term are an important and careful first step in what I hope will be a safe and sustainable return to school for our children.

I wish all pupils, their parents and carers, and all education staff well in the new academic year.

Michelle McIlveen

MICHELLE MCILVEEN MLA

Minister of Education