Part of
Education and childcare during coronavirus

Department for Education

Guidance

Coronavirus (COVID-19) workforce fund to support colleges and special post-16 institutions

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On 23 November the Prime Minister confirmed that all education settings would remain open across all local authorities tiers. This guidance sets out the financial support we will put in place to help colleges fulfill their duty to provide safe and functioning education.

There is separate guidance available for the coronavirus (COVID-19) workforce fund for schools.

This guidance sets out details of the fund, including the eligibility criteria and claims system. The fund offers support for colleges meeting the criteria to help meet the cost of covering workforce absences experienced from November 2020 to 31 December 2020 inclusive.

Colleges can backdate claims to 1 November 2020 where they met the eligibility criteria.

The government will continue to review the pressures colleges are facing as they move into next term and what further action might be needed.

Types of settings eligible for this funding

Funding is available for:

- general FE colleges
- sixth form colleges
- specialist FE institutions

Throughout the guidance when referring to 'colleges' we are referring to these settings.

Costs covered by the fund

Where staff absences are no longer manageable using existing staff and resources, colleges meet all other criteria, colleges can claim for the cost of the period of this fund and as per the permissible expenditure listed below.

To cover teacher absences colleges can claim for the cost of:

- employing, either through agencies or directly contracting, supply teachers, or supply support staff where that role is to cover teacher absences
- increasing hours of part-time teaching staff where the additional hours are being used to cover teacher absences and where a full-time equivalent support staff where that role is to cover teacher absences, colleges should make sure staff are happy to temporarily increase their hours and consider their workload and wellbeing
- making necessary amendments to support staff terms and conditions to enable them to take on additional responsibilities - this will be for the principals or their executive to determine in discussions with the employee

To cover support staff absences, colleges can claim for the cost of:

- employing supply education and non-education support staff either through agencies or directly contracting
- increasing the hours of part-time education and non-education support staff - colleges should make sure staff are happy to temporarily increase their hours and consider their workload and wellbeing

Colleges cannot claim for:

- training for other incidental staff-related costs
- increasing private pay, unless there is a commercial rule increase in responsibilities associated with undertaking the work
- cover for absence where the teaching or training delivery is undertaken on a fully commercial basis
- capital costs to support staff delivering education remotely

They cannot claim for temporary staff.

When referring to support staff absences we expect this to include both educational and non-educational support staff.

Educational support staff

This may include specialist support staff where they are necessary to avoid full or partial closure or fulfilling a legal duty.

Non-education support staff

This may include, for example, cleaning, catering staff, transport, IT or estates staff where these are necessary to avoid full or partial closure or fulfilling a legal duty.

This may also include therapists and other support staff in health-related roles in special post-16 institutions or special provision units within mainstream colleges.

Conditions for accessing this funding

The criteria set out for this fund are designed to target these colleges experiencing high absence rates and significant funding pressures. It covers the costs of staff absence in colleges over the thresholds specified.

Essential criteria

There are 2 main criteria or thresholds that colleges must meet to be eligible:

- a financial threshold
- a workforce absence threshold

In addition to this, colleges must be able to show that they:

- were open for on-site delivery on the days in question
- can certify that staffing absences claimed for through this fund are attributable to the impact of Covid-19 during the relevant period of delivery. This includes assessing their need for additional staff funding, for example whether staff cover is needed if a teacher is providing remote education while isolating
- can evidence claims as set out in the section on evidence for claims and the assurance process
- are not claiming for costs from an existing insurance policy, for example a supply teacher or staff absence insurance policy
- have met alternative conditions that before claiming for the funding colleges should only apply for this fund once these options have been used

Example

If a college meets the absence threshold but there remains scope to manage their staff absences using existing staff and resources, these should be used in the first instance.

Where relevant, colleges will be asked to self-certify that they meet these requirements on the claim form.

Financial threshold

Sixth form and general FE colleges will be eligible if the data submitted for the November financial return demonstrates an end of month cash position of 45 days or less for the composite of any point over the period from 2020 to March 2021.

Special post-16 institutions will be eligible for this additional funding if their reserves at the end of March 2021 are no more than 4% of their annual income. Through the assurance process, funding can be clawed back where this criterion is not met at the period.

Workforce absence threshold

Colleges must meet or exceed either of the absence thresholds for their setting to be eligible. Once they each either threshold, they are eligible for claim for costs incurred covering absences since this date.

Where absences cannot meet the short-term threshold, because long-term, colleges must no longer count this towards their short-term absence rate. They must exclude claims for the same absences. The expectation must meet the list of permitted spend set out in this guidance.

Colleges should calculate their teacher absence rate at a whole cooperation level rather than the individual teacher level. For example, they may have a sustained absence rate of 15% for 4 weeks, but with different staff members absent throughout that period.

Where a college cooperation delivers to provision in multiple campus sites, where possible, cooperations are expected to consider options to use staff across campuses to cover absences, for example, by redeploying or considering additional staffing cover. Where the movement of staff between individual sites is not viable, the absence threshold can (as an alternative) be applied at a campus level. However, this should only apply where it can be demonstrated that respective sites are not within a reasonable travel time of each other, for example, more than an hour apart by car.

Absence threshold for sixth form and general FE colleges

To meet the criteria for the fund sixth form and general FE colleges must be experiencing either:

- a teacher absence rate of or above 20% on a given day
- a teacher absence rate of 15% or above where that teacher has experienced for 15 or more consecutive days (not including weekends)

By 'day' we mean a weekday on which the college is fully open for onsite delivery, in line with the FE operational guidance.

Example 1
A college experiences an absence rate of 15% for 20 days, which then reduces to 8%.
The college could claim for up to 5% for 6 days (for days 15 to 20).

Example 2
A college experiences an absence rate of 8% for 20 days, which then spikes to 20% for 2 days.
The college could claim for up to 8% for 5 days (for the period during which they are at 20%).

Example 3
A college experiences an absence rate of 12% for 30 days but then sees an increase in cases and for 5 days has an absence rate of 22%.
The college could claim for up to 2% for 6 days (for days 15 to 20), plus up to 13% for 5 days (for days 21 to 25).

Example 4
A college experiences an absence rate of 23% for 5 days but then sees absence rates drop to 18% for another 15 days.
The college could claim for up to 3% for the first 5 days (for the period when they are experiencing 23%), and then up to 8% for the first 6 days (for days 15 to 20).

Example 5
A college experiences an absence rate of 22% for 5 days but then sees absence rates drop to 18% for another 9 days, and then to below 10% after that.
They could only claim for up to 3% for the first 5 days.

Claims for support staff absences can be made on an exceptional only basis, where colleges certify that providing cover for that role is necessary for maintaining onsite delivery or meeting legal duties.

Colleges must certify that they have tried alternative mitigations to manage these absences.

Absence threshold for special post-16 institutions

When claiming for teacher absence costs, specialist post-16 institutions must be experiencing either:

- a teacher absence rate of or above 15% on a given day
- a teacher absence rate of 10% or above where that has been experienced for 10 or more consecutive days (not including weekends)

In addition, when claiming for education and non-education support staff costs, special post-16 institutions must be experiencing either:

- a total support staff absence rate (teaching assistants and other staff) of 15% or above on a given day
- a lower total support staff absence rate (teaching assistants and other staff) of 10% or above where that has been experienced for 15 or more consecutive days (not including weekends)

Once these thresholds are reached, claims can be made for roles which are necessary for maintaining critical provision for students in special post-16 institutions, where the special post-16 institution certifies that these roles cannot otherwise be managed using existing staff and resources.

Claims can also be made on an exceptional basis where cover for support staff (below these thresholds) is necessary for avoiding closure or fulfilling legal duties.

Special post-16 institutions must certify that they have tried alternative mitigations to manage these absences.

How colleges can access funding

We are asking colleges to make the necessary payments from their existing budgets and record these in line with local finance policies.

Colleges will be able to make claims for costs eligible for reimbursement through this fund in spring 2021. We will publish detailed guidance about the claims process then.

We will only reimburse costs relating to the list of permitted spend covered in this guidance and where the college is eligible and meets the conditions outlined in this guidance. We expect colleges to be financially prudent when sourcing cover.

Evidence for claims and the assurance process

Colleges will need to provide assurance that costs are legitimate additional workforce costs incurred due to staff absence by taking necessary measures.

Before submitting claims, colleges should:

- make sure they have considered the criteria and can certify that they meet the criteria for claiming
- consider whether they meet the financial threshold and workforce absence threshold
- ensure that they retain evidence to demonstrate that the absence threshold has been met for each day claimed
- keep records of all expenditure relating to staff absence - as is usual with all spend, these records will be necessary for local audit arrangements
- make sure they keep records to evidence the eligibility of support staff
- confirm that the chief executive, principal, finance director or business manager (or equivalent) has approved the claim before submitting it
- ensure that they have a robust audit trail that the claim is fraud and error-free

Be able to identify the income, and the related expenditure, and confirm it was appropriately used, when reporting their accounts

To reduce the burden of duplicate data return, colleges can choose to provide consent on their claims form which allows us to access any data we hold on the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) funding settling data form. If consent is given, this data will be used as the initial basis upon which claims will be checked, though we reserve the right for post assurance checks to validate these claims.

Colleges can submit one claim overall but will need to itemise each period of absence claimed. We will not be asking for evidence of staff absence to be submitted on a claim. However, colleges should hold a record of what has been covered. In case of individual absences.

As usual, we reserve the right to audit the expenditure and claw back money if claims have not been made in accordance with the guidance, to protect public spending. We will be carrying out assurance checks on a sample of the claims.

The college must notify DfE immediately via the ESFA enquiry form where it becomes aware of any instance of error, suspected fraud or financial irregularity in the claim.

Wider funding context

Colleges will continue to receive their core funding allocations. This will happen regardless of any periods of partial or complete closure and will mean colleges can continue to pay staff and meet other regular financial commitments.

Colleges are also receiving funding through the 16 to 19 Catch-Up fund to support young people to catch up lost learning during the period of national restrictions. Colleges should continue to use this funding for specific activities to support their students to catch up for lost learning over the previous months. Colleges must not divert this funding to help meet with the costs of staff absence.

High needs funding

Local authorities will also continue to receive their high needs budgets and should continue to pay top-up and other high needs funding to colleges. This will ensure that the employment and payment of staff supporting students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) can continue.

The funding set out in this guidance is not intended to cover any additional costs that local authorities (LAs) and providers may incur in providing support for individuals in education and training people with education, health and care (EHC) plans.

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