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Guidance

# Cluster and hub provision: coronavirus (COVID-19)

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## Overview

This guidance is for those considering introducing a cluster or hub model, and for those where such a model is already operating.

With significantly reduced pupil and student numbers, the Department for Education (DfE) understands that shared provision through multi-school or provider cluster or hub arrangements may be considered. In some areas, local clusters or more widely geographically spread hubs are already in place and operating. In other areas, such arrangements are being considered.

We understand that for early years in particular, where there are areas with limited availability of provision, a cluster or hub model could support necessary provision for the children of critical workers and vulnerable children.

For those considering introducing a cluster or hub model, this guidance will help inform decision making. For settings already operating such a model, this guidance will provide a framework to reflect on decisions taken and to refine risk management of any organisational model.

The Department for Education (DfE) is clear that public health should be a priority for all at this time and you should be alert to the fact that clusters and hubs may increase the public health risk. Moving staff, children and young people around may increase the risk of spreading the coronavirus (COVID-19) and significantly increasing the number of people in a setting will impact the practicality of social distancing.

Any arrangements for provision should also take account of the needs of vulnerable children and young people and any effect there may be on their access to provision. Any model which might make it less likely that vulnerable children and young people attend schools or settings, or impacts their welfare, should be considered particularly carefully.

Provision through individual schools and settings, where possible, means fewer people in a single setting, less social contact and therefore a reduced risk of spreading the virus. It will also mean children and young people being supported by familiar staff in familiar settings at this unsettled time.

Where schools and settings have no alternative but to close, for example due to staff shortages, agreement to combine resources and 'pair up' with a neighbouring school or setting (or within a geographically close multi-academy trust) should be explored in the first instance. This has been done already in some areas and these might be considered as small-scale clusters. Beyond that it might be that larger and more geographically dispersed hubs are the only practical alternative or are being considered as a contingency should provision become widely unavailable.

Schools and other settings should not close to all pupils until arrangements for continued provision has been made. Early years settings that have no option but to close should liaise with their local authority to ensure other arrangements are made for their children.

## Considering a cluster or hub model

There are complex factors to balance when deciding if cluster or hubs are appropriate. This guidance lays out a number of these which you will want to consider.

First and foremost, if a cluster or hub arrangement is deemed necessary, public health should remain a priority. Any arrangement for provision should enable staff, children and young people to follow guidance on social distancing in schools and other settings (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-implementing-social-distancing-in-education-and-childcare-settings/coronavirus-covid-19-implementing-social-distancing-in-education-and-childcare-settings>).

This includes ensuring children, young people and staff who have previously been based at separate settings adhere to social distancing and limit contact. For example, by taking separate break and lunch times. We are aware that implementing social distancing may be more difficult in some settings, including early years. Staff should implement measures as far as possible, whilst ensuring children are kept safe and well cared for.

The maximum number of staff, children and young people a single setting may be able to accommodate will vary depending on site size. To note, for settings with early years children, the indoor space requirements set out in the early years foundation stage statutory framework still apply.

## **Workforce**

We appreciate the dedication and flexibility teachers and staff throughout the sector have already shown. We expect school, early years settings, college and other education provider leaders to continue to consider the wellbeing, workload and individual circumstances of staff when considering moving to a cluster or hub model.

Extra consideration should be given in circumstances where staff are expected to care for or supervise children and young people from a different phase of education, such as primary school teachers supervising secondary age children, or take on different or unfamiliar activities.

Teachers and staff should continue to be paid by their employer as normal, regardless of where they are working.

It remains essential that people who are unsuitable to work in education or care settings are not allowed to enter the children's workforce or gain access to children. Guidance on safeguarding in schools and other settings (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-safeguarding-in-schools-colleges-and-other-providers/coronavirus-covid-19-safeguarding-in-schools-colleges-and-other-providers>) includes advice on staffing and the use of volunteers which clusters and hubs should continue to follow.

## **Safeguarding**

The guidance on safeguarding also explains that where schools and other settings collaborate through hubs, the principles in Keeping Children Safe in Education and the requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage for younger children continue to apply. This means that clusters and hubs should provide a safe environment, keep children safe and ensure staff and volunteers have been appropriately checked and risk assessments carried out as required.

## **Mental health and wellbeing**

Children and young people may be best served by familiar staff in familiar settings, particularly in the current challenging circumstances and particularly for younger and/or vulnerable children. Where this is not possible, settings should consider how changes to routine will have an impact on children and young people's mental health, wellbeing and behaviour, and what can be done to mitigate this.

## **SEND, special schools and alternative provision**

Certain behavioural needs or special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) may mean moving pupils to a new setting is challenging. For example, children with autism may find a change of environment or routine difficult. Educational settings and local authorities will carry out risk assessments on children with Education, Care and Health plans to determine whether individual children will be safer at home or in a school or other setting. Where children have been assessed to be safer in their education setting than at home, you should think carefully before adopting a cluster or hub model which may make their attendance more difficult or impact their safety and welfare.

## **Transport**

Children, parents and carers (which will include critical workers) and staff may need to change their usual journey if a cluster or hub is established. Some children may need transport to a central site and where schools or academy trusts organise themselves into clusters or hubs, they should consider how they might provide this from their own resources, for example a school minibus. If this is not possible, they should approach their local authority to see whether they can assist. Where a local authority has organised a cluster or hub model, they should provide the requisite transport, including for children who are not ordinarily eligible for free home to school transport but now need transport to a central site. There may be unused capacity on existing school transport which could be repurposed for new needs.

Consideration should also be given to how social distancing can be implemented on transport and to the particular needs some children with SEND may have, for example specialist vehicles or a passenger assistant. Everyone should continue to avoid using public transport wherever possible and settings should consider how a cluster or hub model will impact this.

## **Education provision**

We understand these are extraordinary times and the most important thing is that children of critical workers and vulnerable children and young people are supervised and properly cared for at education settings. We trust the judgement of teachers and staff on how to effectively teach and care for children and young people under difficult and changing circumstances.

## **Free school meals**

Where schools have no option but to close, they are expected to continue to provide free school meals support for pupils who are at home and ensure arrangements are made for any pupils now attending a cluster or hub school. Please see guidance for schools on free school meals

(<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance-for-schools>).

## Funding

Parties will need to agree, before a cluster or hub arrangement is set up, how they intend to share resources to staff it. This will mean understanding the level of staffing available across schools and settings involved and any considerations around workforce flexibility, explained above.

Schools will continue to receive their budgets for the coming year, as usual, regardless of any periods of partial or complete closure. This means that the central school in a cluster or hub should be able to meet their regular financial commitments.

Where the central school in a cluster or hub faces exceptional additional costs above what they would be able to afford from their core funding, there is financial support available. This is specifically for increased premises related costs of staying open during Easter and summer half term holidays; support for free school meals for eligible children not attending school; and additional cleaning. There is guidance on schools funding for exceptional costs associated with coronavirus (COVID-19 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-financial-support-for-schools/school-funding-exceptional-costs-associated-with-coronavirus-covid-19-for-the-period-march-to-july-2020>)).

For early years settings, we have committed to continuing to provide local authorities with funding for free early years entitlements and have set out a package of support, with more detail in our guidance for early years and childcare settings (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-early-years-and-childcare-closures/coronavirus-covid-19-early-years-and-childcare-closures>).

## Health & Safety

Staff moved into a cluster or hub model may be working in a new setting where they are not familiar with the layout and other health and safety information. Employers still need to undertake health and safety risk assessments to ensure staff and children are safe, reflecting new arrangements and recently published coronavirus (COVID-19) advice as appropriate.

## Communication

Where arrangements for provision change or a setting closes, it is important to communicate this clearly to parents and carers through the setting's website, by email and other channels. This communication should include the details of new arrangements that have been put in place and the contact details for the relevant local authority.

All local authorities should have a single point of contact which parents can use to seek advice on education and childcare changes and closures. Some local authorities already publish live lists of settings that remain open and where parents can send their children. We encourage local authorities to make this information available, in line with their responsibility to oversee arrangements, including those for early years.

If moving to a cluster or hub model, you will need to address any public health concerns parents may have to ensure they are comfortable with this arrangement.