

Part of Education and childcare during coronavirus



Guidance Further education (FE) providers: return in January 2021 Updated 30 December 2020

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About this guidance

This guidance has been updated to reflect the announcement on 30 December to extend the phased return to face-to-face education. The key points are that:

- during week commencing 4 January, external exams will take place as planned
from week commencing 4 January, colleges should prepare to test as many staff and students as possible, provide on-site education to vulnerable young people and children of critical workers and prioritise remote education to those in exam years
from week commencing 11 January, colleges should continue to roll out their testing programme, prioritising exam year students
from week commencing 18 January, all students should return to on-site education

To manage the transmission of the virus and ensure education resumes in further education, we are supporting colleges to put in place asymptomatic testing, so that students and staff can access a test. All students should resume face to face education by week commencing 18 January.

We will keep this guidance under review and update as necessary.

Who this guidance is for

This guidance is for leaders and staff in:

- sixth form colleges
general FE colleges
special post-16 institutions

It also covers expectations for students with education, health and care (EHC) plans in mainstream FE settings, including special post-16 institutions. Special post-16 institutions should also read the guidance for special schools and other specialist settings. Apprenticeship providers should also read the guidance on providing apprenticeships during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

Main points

The main points for this guidance are:

- priorities for the return of students
asymptomatic testing for coronavirus (COVID-19)

Since the start of the academic year, the continuing efforts of leaders, teachers and staff across education and childcare have ensured that settings remain as safe and COVID-secure as possible.

To support public health efforts during the return to education in January 2021, colleges in England will be able to offer staff and students access to additional coronavirus (COVID-19) testing from the first week of January. This will help deliver the national priority of keeping as many students and teachers as possible in education beyond the start of term, minimising the spread of the virus and disruption caused by coronavirus (COVID-19) cases arising in education settings.

Younger students in colleges are being prioritised for testing, in response to the recent higher rates of coronavirus (COVID-19) infection.

All colleges will be offered the opportunity to test their students, with time to prepare from the week commencing 4 January 2021 and reaching as many as possible over the week of 11 January 2021. The government will encourage as many as possible to take up the offer.

This guidance sets out the exceptional measures to be put in place at the start of the new year.

Already, the implementation of safety measures and the system of controls in place in education settings creates an inherently safer environment for children, young people and staff, in which PHE and DHSC have confirmed the risk of transmission of infection is substantially reduced. Testing beginning week commencing 4 January will help to identify asymptomatic cases more quickly. This will avoid individuals carrying the infection unknowingly.

Rapidly identifying and containing any asymptomatic cases through this testing programme will align with the rapid coronavirus testing that the government is putting in place from the start of the spring term. Coronavirus (COVID-19) asymptomatic testing in schools and colleges guidance provides more detail.

To manage transmission of the virus we are:

- supporting colleges to set up a regular testing programme to test staff and the close contacts of staff and students who test positive for the virus
reducing the number of students in colleges for the week commencing 4 January, with vulnerable young people, those due to take public exams and assessments and other priority groups attending, with wider exam cohorts prioritised for remote learning
giving colleges access to help, support and facilities to test as many students as possible as they resume face-to-face education

Asymptomatic testing is strongly encouraged for all 16 to 19 year old students. From 18 January normal timetabled delivery should begin for all students, who will not need to have had a test in order to return.

Priorities for return from 4 January 2021

Support and on-site teaching and attendance should begin on 4 January for priority groups.

These groups include:

- those who are due to take public exams and assessments in January 2021
vulnerable young people
all students in post-16 specialist institutions, but there is some limited flexibility to stagger returns in these settings where it is necessary to allow specialist post-16 institutions to prepare for testing
children of critical workers

Priorities for the week commencing 11 January 2021

From 11 January, colleges should roll out their testing programme prioritising:

- those who are not able to access remote education, for example, because of the practical nature of study (that cannot be undertaken at a later point)
those preparing for upcoming assessments or exams, for example vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs), GCSEs and A levels during this academic year
those on technical programmes who need to access specialised equipment

During the week commencing 4 January 2021, you should plan for a phased start back to on-site provision to allow for preparation of and student testing ahead of normal education resuming from 18 January 2021.

This will involve:

- priority on-site attendance for those taking assessments during the spring exam series (students taking exams in January 2021). These students should be prioritised for asymptomatic testing and encouraged to undertake a test prior to sitting their exam or assessment but if that is not possible they should not be refused access to their exam if they have not already been tested. If they are tested and receive a positive result they should self-isolate in accordance with the guidance and action should be taken to arrange a re-sit at a future point - you should contact the awarding organisation on the candidate's behalf to determine the next available assessment opportunity
usual timetabled on-site provision from the first day of term for vulnerable young people, and those other priority groups
remote education for those who are not attending whilst asymptomatic testing is being undertaken until week commencing 18 January, using best endeavours to meet remote education expectations for students, with priority given to exam cohorts
full timetabled delivery from 18 January for all students

You should continue to follow the system of controls including use of face coverings where social distancing is more difficult to maintain. You should ensure that all students understand the importance of following the relevant rules for the tier that they are in whilst on-site, at home and travelling to and from site. At all times you should ensure that the testing programme itself is managed in line with existing preventative control advice including use of social distancing, good hand and respiratory hygiene, increasing fresh air ventilation and more.

All colleges are expected to take up this offer of asymptomatic testing. Regardless, they should still only provide on-site provision for vulnerable young people and the other priority groups above in the week commencing 4 January. Full on-site provision should recommence on 18 January.

Vulnerable young people include those who:

- are assessed as being in need under section 17 of the Children Act 1989, including children and young people who have a child in care plan, a child protection plan or who are a looked-after child
have an education, health and care (EHC) plan
have been identified as otherwise vulnerable by educational providers or local authorities (including children's social care services), and who could therefore benefit from continued full-time attendance, this might include:
children and young people on the edge of receiving support from children's social care services or in the process of being referred to children's services
adopted children or children on a special guardianship order; those at risk of becoming 'not in employment, education or training' (NEET)
those living in temporary accommodation; those who are young carers; those who may have difficulty engaging with remote education at home (for example due to a lack of devices or quiet space to study)
care leavers
other children and young people at the provider and local authority's discretion, including students who need to attend to receive support or manage risks to their mental health

Residential providers

FE residential providers should similarly provide a staggered start back to on-site provision. However, in some cases, students will already have returned to their educational accommodation before the start of term. Where the students are already in their educational accommodation, you should provide remote education to the students in their accommodation, as if they were still at home, while arranging for tests, unless they meet any of the priority groups identified above or you have already made arrangements for testing residential students through local partnerships or the arrangements we communicated on 4 December.

Apprenticeships

Apprenticeship delivery and assessment (including the assessment of functional skills qualifications) is extremely flexible and should continue to take place in person where doing so remotely is not possible.

This includes training and assessment in the workplace (unless the workplace is required to close under local restriction tiers), in education and assessment settings and in community settings where a venue is being used for training or assessment.

Free college meals

You should continue to support students who are eligible for, and usually receive, free meals. This includes students in further education, who are newly eligible. You should provide support even if students are studying remotely due to coronavirus (COVID-19).

Read further guidance on free meals in FE funded institutions for 2020 to 2021.

The government have put in place a £170 million COVID Winter Grant Scheme.

This funding has been allocated to local authorities in order to support those in need with food and other essentials across the winter period.

Safeguarding expectations

Colleges must have regard to statutory guidance, keeping children safe in education. If staff have a concern they should act and act immediately. This will generally involve liaising with the designated safeguarding lead (all colleges should have a designated safeguarding lead (DSL)). The DSL will consider any case on its individual merits and if they think appropriate will make a referral to children's social care.

Approach to testing

Read the guidance on mass asymptomatic testing in schools and colleges.

Transport

The transport to school and other places of education guidance remains in place. Those involved in the provision of home to school or college transport must do all that is reasonably practicable to maximise social distancing where possible and minimise the risk of transmission. Local authorities are not required to uniformly apply the social distancing guidelines for public transport, on dedicated school or college transport. However, distancing should still be put in place within vehicles wherever possible.

This means that where fewer students are attending, particularly during the weeks of 4 and 11 January 2021, sufficient levels of capacity should be maintained to maximise social distancing, including through the use of vacant seats where possible.

In accordance with advice from PHE, students must also wear face coverings when travelling on dedicated transport to college. This does not apply to those who are exempt from wearing a face covering.

Transporting students attending for testing

Colleges face different circumstances and there is a need for arrangements to be sufficiently flexible to reflect this.

Where practical, students should arrive on-site or a community testing facility at a scheduled time for their test.

Where students are dependent on dedicated college transport, colleges and local transport authorities may wish to consider whether there is scope to run additional services, in order to enable young people to arrive during the course of the day.

For some students, it will not be possible to arrive and leave around scheduled test appointment times. Where necessary students may attend on-site provision on the day of their test, until such time as dedicated transport is available. Where those students test positive they should follow the stay at home guidance for households with possible or confirmed coronavirus (COVID-19) infection.

When using public transport, young people should plan ahead and avoid busy times and routes if possible. This will allow social distancing to be practised.