Department for Education

Guidance

Coronavirus (COVID-19) workforce fund to support schools with costs of staff absences from 1 November 2020 to 31 December 2020

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On 23 November the Prime Minister confirmed that all education settings would remain open across all local restriction tiers. This guidance sets out the financial support we will put in place to help schools facing the greatest staffing and funding pressures. There is separate guidance available for the Coronavirus (COVID-19) workforce fund to support further education and sixth form colleges.

This guidance sets out details of the fund, including the eligibility criteria and the claims system. The fund covers support for schools meeting the criteria to help them meet the cost of covering workforce absences experienced from 1 November 2020 until the end of the autumn 2020 term. Schools can backdate claims to 1 November 2020 where they met the eligibility criteria.

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

Schools eligible for this funding

Funding is available for all state-funded mainstream and special schools, and alternative provision (AP) that provide education to all pupils who are required to be in compulsory education, including:

- primary, secondary and all through maintained schools, academies and free schools
- 16 to 19 academies and maintained schools
- maintained special schools, and special academies and free schools
- non-maintained special schools
- pupil referral units
- AP academies and free schools
- maintained and academy hospital schools

Registered independent special schools and independent schools delivering AP are also eligible to claim for staff they employ to support pupils whose placements are funded from local authorities' high needs budgets.

Costs covered by the fund

Schools are already taking a number of steps to manage absences using their existing staff and resources, as in our Guidance for full opening: schools.

These include:

- altering the way in which schools deploy their staff and using existing staff more flexibly
- making best use of teaching assistants
- hosting initial teacher training (ITT) trainees
- using volunteers
- engaging supply staff using in-year allocated budget
- seeking support from the local authority or trust

These steps remain critical in how schools should continue to manage staffing absences and all schools should continue to use these in the first instance. As set out in the conditions for accessing this funding, only once these options have been used, as far as is possible, should schools apply for this fund.

Where staff absences are no longer manageable using existing staff and resources, and schools meet all other criteria set out, schools can claim for funding to help meet additional staffing costs as a result of coronavirus (COVID-19), for the period of this fund and as per the permitted expenditure listed below.

Teacher absences

To cover teacher absences schools can claim for the following expenditure:

- employing, either through agencies or directly contracting, supply teachers, or supply support staff where that role is to cover teacher absences - for example in the case of teaching supply staff being unavailable
- increasing hours of part-time teaching staff where the additional hours are being used to cover teacher absences, or increasing hours of part-time education support staff where that role is to cover teacher absences - schools should seek to ensure staff are happy to temporarily increase their hours and full consideration is given to 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 headteacher and the employer to determine in discussions with the employee

To cover teacher absences schools cannot claim for the following expenditure:

- training or other incidental staff-related costs
- increasing pro-rata pay, unless there is a commensurate increase in responsibilities associated with undertaking the work

Support staff absences

To cover support staff absences, schools can claim for the following expenditure:

- employing supply education and non-education support staff either through agencies or directly contracting
- increasing hours of part-time education and non-education support staff - schools should seek to ensure staff are happy to temporarily increase their hours and full consideration is given to their workload and wellbeing

To cover support staff absences, schools cannot claim for the following expenditure:

- training or other incidental staff-related costs
- increasing pro-rata pay, unless there is a commensurate increase in responsibilities associated with undertaking the work

The following expenditure is also not permitted within the scope of this fund:

- enabling schools to maintain their reserves above the 4% of annual limit set out in the financial reserves criteria below
- capital costs to support staff delivering education remotely

When seeking additional external capacity, schools could consider sourcing staff through temporary direct hire, their local authority or trust, or recruitment and employment agencies.

Schools should exercise financial prudence when taking on additional staff and should seek the best rates they can to make the most of this additional funding. Where costs are particularly high relative to the absent rates reported, we may review these claims to judge whether such costs were incurred reasonably.

We recommend that, where schools are using recruitment and employment agencies, they consider using the DfE and Crown Commercial Service agency supply deal when hiring agency workers. This offers a list of preferred suppliers that must be transparent about the rates they charge. The deal allows schools to look for the best rate in their area. It also limits temporary to permanent fees for assignments of less than 12 weeks and eliminates these fees entirely for assignments lasting 12 weeks or more. To learn more about the deal, schools can contact the Supply Desk at Crown Commercial Services by emailing: supplyteachers@crowncommercial.gov.uk.

What staff are included

Schools can only claim for covering the absences of permanent staff who are on their payroll or those employed on a long-term contract (for example maternity cover, long-term sick cover) and not temporary staff.

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

- For 'educational support staff' we expect this may include teaching assistants or specialist support staff where they are necessary in remaining open to all pupils or fulfilling a legal duty.
- For 'non-education support staff' this may include, for example, cleaning, catering, transport or caretaking staff where these are necessary in remaining open to all pupils or fulfilling a legal duty.
- In special schools or AP settings this may also include therapists and other support staff in health-related roles.

Conditions for accessing this funding

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

Prerequisite criteria

Schools can only apply in the following circumstances - where relevant, they will be asked to self-certify that they meet these criteria on the claims form:

- they were open to all pupils (except where pupils are not physically in school, complying with clinical or public health advice) on the days in question
- they have tried alternative options, as in our Guidance for full opening: schools, before claiming for the funding – for example, if a school meets the teacher absence threshold but can still manage this using existing staff and resources (including at trust level), these alternative options should be used rather than claim on the fund
- they are able to certify that the staffing absences claimed for via this fund are necessary spend to remain open to all pupils – this includes assessing their need for additional staff funding, for example whether cover is not needed if a teacher is providing remote education while isolating with their whole class/bubble
- they are able to evidence claims as set out in the section on evidence for claims and the assurance process
- costs are not already covered by an existing insurance policy (for example, a supply teacher or staff absence insurance policy)

Financial reserves criteria

Before claiming, schools will first need to use any existing financial reserves, as we would typically expect when facing unforeseen costs. For academies we will consider the financial reserves at trust level (either single academy trust or multi-academy trust as appropriate).

Schools and academy trusts should consider their level of reserves based on their expected financial position at the end of the current funding year (this ends in March 2021 for maintained schools and August 2021 for trusts).

Schools will be eligible for this additional funding if their reserves at the end of the funding year are down to a level of no more than 4% of their annual income. Trusts will be eligible to claim for any of their academies once their level of reserves is down to 4% of total trust income. Schools and trusts should be aware that through the assurance process funding can be clawed back where this criterion is not met at the year end.

We define schools' financial reserves as follows:

- for maintained schools - all revenue balances are as defined by consistent financial reporting framework
- for academy trusts - we define revenue reserves as the balance of the General Annual Grant (GAG) restricted income fund plus the balance of unrestricted funds
- for non-maintained special schools, independent special schools and independent schools making AP - we will expect to see the school's latest financial statements, and management accounts showing performance against budget for its current accounting year including the period November to December 2020

Workforce absence rate criteria

Schools must meet or exceed either of the absence thresholds set out in the tables below to be eligible. This means either an initial threshold of 20%, or a lower threshold of 10%, should absence levels be long-term. Once they reach either threshold, they are eligible to claim for costs incurred covering absences above this threshold (and cannot claim for costs up to the threshold).

In calculating whether they meet the absence thresholds set, schools should note:

- once the long-term threshold is reached, this overrides the higher 20% short-term threshold – in this circumstance, schools can be funded for absences above the long-term threshold, until they are no longer meeting the criteria
- teacher absence rates are to be calculated at a whole school level rather than individual teacher level. For example, a school may have a sustained absence rate of 15% for 4 weeks, but with different staff members absent throughout that period. Schools within a trust can calculate their absence rate at individual school level rather than a total level across the trust. They will, however, only be eligible for funding once the trust has met the financial reserves criterion
- 'School days' are days which the school is open for core, statutory provision with pupils in school (it does not include days where the school is open for other purposes such as building hire, or on INSET days) – we expect this is typically Monday-Friday for mainstream schools, though may also include weekend days for residential special schools
- absence rates experienced in October count towards meeting the long-term criteria on any day from 1 November, but claims can only be made for costs incurred since this date – for example, if a school experienced an absence rate of 12% from 13 October until 3 November inclusive, they could claim for up to 2% for 2 and 3 November

For mainstream schools

	Schools must be experiencing:
Teachers	A total teacher and leader absence rate at or above 20% on a given day **OR** a lower total teacher and leader absence rate of 10% or above but have been experiencing this for 15 or more consecutive school days.
Education and non-education support staff	Schools can claim for education and non-education support staff absences on an exceptional only basis. This means only where they certify that providing cover for that role is necessary in remaining open to all pupils or meeting legal duties. For example, a teaching assistant required to fulfil support required by an Education Health and Care (EHC) plan, where this support cannot otherwise be covered by other staff in the school. Or, for example, staff delivering catering provision, where they are employed directly by the school. Schools must certify that they have tried alternative mitigations to manage these absences.

For special and alternative provision schools – including registered independent special schools and independent schools delivering alternative provision

	Schools must be experiencing:
Teachers	A total teacher and leader absence rate at or above 15% on a given day **OR** a lower total teacher and leader absence rate of 10% or above but have been experiencing this for 15 or more consecutive school days.
Education and non-education support staff	A total support staff absence rate (teaching assistants and other support staff) at or above 15% on a given day **OR** a lower total support staff absence rate of 10% or above but have been experiencing this for 15 or more consecutive school days. Once these thresholds are reached, claims can be made for roles which claimants deem to be necessary in maintaining critical provision for pupils in these schools. They must also certify that they have tried alternative mitigations to manage these absences. Claims can also be made on an exceptional basis, as per mainstream schools, where cover for support staff (below these thresholds) is necessary in remaining open to all pupils or fulfilling legal duties. They must again certify that they have tried alternative mitigations to manage these absences.

The examples below use the teacher absence thresholds for mainstream schools.

- **Example 1:** a school experiencing 15% for 4 school weeks (20 days), which then reduces to 8% - they could claim for up to 5% for 6 days (for working days 15-20).
- **Example 2:** a school experiencing 8% for 4 school weeks (20 days), which then spikes to 28% for a week – they could claim for up to 8% for 5 days (for working days 21-25 when they are at 28%).
- **Example 3:** a school experiencing 12% teacher absence for 4 school weeks (20 days), but then sees a spike in cases and for one week after that month has an absence rate of 23% - they could claim for up to 2% for 6 days (for working days 15-20), plus up to 13% for 5 days (for working days 21-25).
- **Example 4:** a school experiencing 23% for one school week, but then sees absence rates drop to 18% for another 3 weeks – they could claim for up to 3% for the first 5 days (for the week where they are experiencing 23%), and then up to 8% for the final 6 days (for working days 15-20).
- **Example 5:** a school experiencing 23% for one school week, 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.

How schools can access funding

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

Schools and trusts should note that we will only reimburse costs relating to the list of costs covered by the fund and where the school is eligible and meets the conditions for accessing this funding. We expect schools to be financially prudent when sourcing cover.

Evidence for claims and the assurance process

Schools will need to provide assurance that costs are legitimate additional workforce costs incurred due to staff absence. The annex at the end of this guidance outlines the evidence required at point of claim, but before submitting schools should:

- consider the prerequisite criteria set out in this guidance and that they can certify that they meet it when claiming
- consider whether they meet the financial reserves and workforce absence rate criteria set out in this guidance
- ensure they have retained evidence to demonstrate that the absence rate criteria has been met for each day claimed. We strongly encourage schools to regularly submit data via the DfE coronavirus (COVID-19) daily collection form. This will make the claims process less burdensome for schools and enable easier processing. On the funding claim form we will ask schools to give consent for us to use data from the daily collection form to provide assurance on the absence rates submitted with their claim. Where we use this data, we will request that schools make sure it is complete and accurate. Where we are not able to use this data, schools will need to indicate this on the claim form and retain evidence for checking. Non-maintained special schools, independent special schools and independent schools delivering AP do not use the DfE coronavirus (COVID-19) daily collection form. They will need to indicate this on the claim form and retain evidence for checking. Data provided in either format will be used as the initial basis upon which claims will be managed, though we reserve the right for post assurance checks to validate these returns
- ensure that they have kept records to evidence the eligibility of support staff claims
- ensure that they have kept records of all expenditure relating to staff absence and these should be available promptly upon request – as is usual with all spend, these records will be necessary for local audit arrangements
- confirm that the headteacher or school business manager who submits the claim has given due consideration to their financial duties when doing so, including signing their name against any claim, to certify the claim is fraud and error free
- be able to identify this income, and the related expenditure, and confirm it was appropriately used, when reporting their accounts

Schools can submit one claim overall but will need to itemise each period of absence claimed. We will not be asking for evidence of the individual items to be submitted on a claim. However, schools should hold a record of what has been covered, in case of individual enquiries.

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, in order to protect public spending. We will be carrying out assurance checks on a sample of the claims.

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

Wider funding context

Schools will continue to receive their core funding allocations for the 2020 to 2021 funding year. This is April 2020 to March 2021 for maintained schools and September 2020 to August 2021 for academies and non-maintained special schools. This will either be through the local authority, for maintained schools, or through the general annual grant (GAG) for academies. This will ensure schools can continue to pay staff and meet other regular financial commitments.

In addition to the £350 million National Tutoring Programme, schools are also receiving funding through the £650 million catch up premium, to support children and young people to catch up lost time in school during the first period of national restrictions. Schools should continue to use this funding for specific activities which support their pupils to catch up for lost teaching over the previous months, in line with the curriculum expectations for this academic year.

High needs funding

Local authorities will also continue to receive their high needs budgets. Local Authorities should continue to pay top-up and other high needs funding to schools, colleges and early years settings, in respect of those pupils in attendance who have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and those who are in AP. Payments of high needs funding should continue, unless there are changes in SEND provision organised by local authorities for individual children and young people in accordance with changes to their Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans. This continuation of funding will ensure that the employment and payment of staff supporting pupils with SEND and pupils in AP can continue.

Similarly, where schools pay top-up or other funding for pupils attending AP, or pay for other AP or SEND services, we expect these payments to continue during temporary staff absences so that teachers and other staff can be paid in accordance with their existing employment contracts. Local authorities and schools should not be expected to pay more high needs top-up funding, or more for SEND and AP services, to cover extra workforce costs incurred by the schools due to staff absences.

Short-term support with costs

We recognise that some schools may be unable to make up-front payments to cover the additional costs because of cash flow issues. In these circumstances, schools should follow the normal process for seeking short-term advances to support their cash flow. This is by contacting the ESFA if they are an academy, or their local authority if they are a maintained school.

Any non-maintained special school with a cash flow difficulty should seek advice from the ESFA in the first instance.

Annex: evidence of meeting criteria

Criteria	Evidence (at point of claim)
The claim must relate to absences that occur during the period 1 November to 31 December 2020	Only claims entered for periods within this date range will be accepted
Only eligible settings may apply	Institutions that claim must fall under one of the categories listed in the Schools eligible for this funding
Only one claim per school (this includes schools that are part of a multi-academy trust)	Claim form only allows one claim per school (which can be updated if needed until the close of the claim window), with schools itemising each period of absence claimed
Only claim for expenditure against the list of permitted spend set out in this guidance.	The claim form contents
Staff are on a permanent or long-term contract (this can include maternity or long-term sick cover)	Self-certification via the claim form
Schools were open to all pupils (except where pupils are not physically in school, complying with clinical or public health advice) on the days in question	Self-certification via the claim form
Alternative mitigations explored/exhausted	Self-certification via the claim form
Absences risk ability to remain open to all pupils	Self-certification via the claim form
Costs must not already be covered by an existing insurance policy (for example, a supply teacher or staff absence insurance policy)	Self-certification via the claim form
Reserves for the institution meet the financial reserves criterion	The institution's forecast financial reserves picture, with self-certification via the claim form
Staff absence data for each day claimed in their claim form.	Internal school records that evidence absence rates each day claimed Data provided via the DfE coronavirus (COVID-19) Daily Collection form, where consent is given to use this data
Support staff claims are exceptional and necessary in avoiding closure or fulfilling legal duties	Self-certification via the claim form
Support staff claims above the threshold set for special/AP schools are deemed necessary in maintaining provision by the claimant	Self-certification via the claim form
Proof of expenditure – including costs relating exclusively to the costs covered by the fund section of this guidance	Hiring of staff to cover: Invoice detailing value of claim Increased hours or pro-rata pay of existing staff: evidence of the decision to increase pay – which will be set out in the claim form guidance

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