Part of
Education, universities and childcare during coronavirus

Department for Education

Guidance

Public health guidance to support exams from January 2021

Updated 18 March 2021

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Updates to this guidance include:

- setting out that schools and colleges were able to continue with the vocational and technical exams that were due to take place in January, where they judged it right to do so
- setting out that scheduled assessments from 1 February should only go ahead where they examine occupational or professional competency, or where they are for smaller qualifications that are used to progress to further education (FE) or employment but are not like GCSEs or A levels in their structure, such as Functional Skills qualifications (FSQs) and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)

This guidance is for:

- school and college senior leaders
- heads of other types of exam centre offering vocational and technical qualification (VTQ) exams from January 2021
- exams officers and other staff involved in exam delivery
- local authorities and multi-academy trusts (MATs)

It applies to all types of exam centre, including:

- state-funded schools
- further education, sixth form and specialist colleges
- independent training providers
- independent schools
- adult and community learning providers
- private exam centres

The term ‘schools and colleges’ in this guidance is used to refer to all types of exam centre.

This guidance:

- applies specifically to the conduct of exams from January 2021
- supplements and clarifies other existing guidance

This guidance sets out arrangements that schools, colleges and other exam centres should implement if they continue to deliver exams from January 2021 to enable them to progress in a way which significantly reduces the risk of coronavirus (COVID-19). You should read this alongside:

- guidance on schools and colleges' responsibilities for the exams from January 2021
- guidance for households with possible or confirmed coronavirus (COVID-19) infections
- actions for schools during the coronavirus outbreak
- actions for FE colleges and providers during the coronavirus outbreak
- guidance for full opening for special schools and other specialist settings
- safe working in education, childcare and children's social care settings, including the use of personal protective equipment (PPE)

Spring term 2021 exam contingencies

When exams will run and the impact of national lockdown restrictions

The spring term VTQ exam series started on Monday 4 January 2021.

Schools and colleges continued with the vocational and technical exams that were due to take place in January, where they judged it right to do so.

Written exams scheduled from 1 February will not go ahead. These include qualifications that are taken instead of, or alongside, GCSEs and AS or A levels for the primary purpose of progression to FE or higher education (HE), where the primary method of assessment is written exams.

Exams or assessments that enable a student to demonstrate proficiency or occupational competence can continue from 1 February. They include those that may involve practical assessment of performance or written assessment of underpinning knowledge, or both. These will include those occupational and professional qualifications required to enter directly into, or progress within, employment, or are needed to complete an apprenticeship, as well as other qualifications, including those linked to the performing arts.

For students who are ready to take them, these can continue to proceed with protective measures in place to ensure they are conducted in line with PHE measures, including remotely.

Exams or assessments that are available on demand such as for Functional Skills qualifications, or for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) should continue to proceed with protective measures put in place to ensure they are conducted in line with PHE measures, including remotely, for students who are ready to take them.

Where examinations and assessments are cancelled, awarding organisations are putting in place arrangements to ensure that students are not disadvantaged, as set out in the response to the consultation. These arrangements can be found on the individual awarding organisations' websites. Where candidates are travelling to take exams, this is for the purposes for education and training and they should refer to the guidance on the national lockdown restrictions.

Alternative sites and invigilation support

The Department for Education (DfE) exam support service will continue to help schools and colleges to book sites and invigilators where required for exams in scope. We expect schools and colleges to pay fees for all students who were due to sit exams in summer 2020, rather than passing the cost on to students or their families.

VTQs, and other general qualifications at level 1/2, level 2 and level 3, where students received grades in summer 2020, and there has been a scheduled assessment opportunity for the qualification in either the autumn 2020 or the spring term 2021 exam series, where they are still being offered, are in scope of the exam support service. Support can also be claimed for Functional Skills qualifications in apprenticeships where the apprenticeship training provider usually delivers the exams to the apprentice in their workplace. Other VTQs are not in scope.

Information on how to make claims for exams is available. Funding for the Exams Support Service is only available to 31 March 2021.

Schools and colleges can also use the DfE service to book sites and invigilators for other exams and assessments, but these will not be funded by DfE.

Read the DfE exam support service guidance.

Some schools and colleges can book alternative sites, sometimes at short notice, so that exams can run. Schools and colleges can contact the DfE exam support service to try to find an additional venue.

Preparing for and running exams

Engagement with NHS Test and Trace

You must make sure that you understand the NHS Test and Trace process and that you've read the guidance on how schools should respond to any infections.

Your exam centre will need to collect and keep contact information for candidates and invigilators so that you can share it with NHS Test and Trace if needed. This is particularly important for any external visitors, including any non-school staff assisting with exams, and candidates not on roll at the exam centre. Every exam will have a seating plan, so you can add the names of the invigilators and cross reference them to the contact details you hold for candidates and invigilators.

Students taking exams from January 2021 should be encouraged to undertake a coronavirus (COVID-19) test prior to sitting their exam or assessment if available in their setting. However, as testing is not mandatory, they should not be refused access to their exam if they have not already been tested. Students and staff are being prioritised for testing in schools and colleges. The rapid asymptomatic coronavirus (COVID-19) testing programme will continue to be used to support testing in settings over the coming weeks. The household testing programme continues to support testing of other people connected with students, for example exam invigilators.

Anyone who displays symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19) (fever, new and continuous cough, alteration or loss of taste or similar) should not attend the exam centre. They should stay at home and order a test through the routine NHS testing programme. They should do so immediately and self-isolate. They should not wait to take one at the exam centre. Tests can be booked online through the NHS website or ordered by telephone via NHS 119 for those without access to the internet. Essential workers, which includes anyone involved in education or childcare, have priority access to testing.

Arrival and departure of candidates

Candidates should read the safer travel guidance before planning their journey to their exam, especially where the exam is being held in a location to which the candidate does not normally travel.

As candidates arrive before the scheduled start time of exams, you will need to keep them separate from other students arriving at the exam centre.

You should identify a location where candidates will wait before the exam that can support social distancing between group 'bubbles' as well as between on-roll and off-roll candidates.

You should also make sure that any candidates who arrive late for the exam follow social distancing measures.

You will need to make sure that there is a plan to manage safely candidates leaving the exam room and site, particularly as exams may finish at different times. As part of this, you will need to take into account any candidates who need extra time in exams.

These considerations apply wherever the exams are taking place - whether in a school, college, private exam centre or another venue booked specifically for the purpose of taking exams. Where alternative locations are used to run exams, you will still need to manage safely the arrival and departure of candidates to make sure they maintain social distancing as they wait for exams, including from other members of the public who may be present in entry lobbies.

Cleaning

Exam rooms or other spaces used for external assessments (such as workshops or IT suites) should be kept clean. Frequently touched surfaces (for example, door handles, individual desks, any shared equipment) should be cleaned after every exam with the usual cleaning products, including the backs of chairs where candidates may pull chairs out to sit. Equipment used for practical assessments must be cleaned after every usage with the appropriate cleaning products.

Rooms do not need to be left empty between exams, provided they are cleaned properly each time.

The guidance for cleaning non-healthcare settings sets out advice on general cleaning and on cleaning settings when there has been a suspected case of coronavirus (COVID-19).

Set up of the exam room

Because of the practical nature of some assessments, not all external assessments will use an exam room. Where an exam room is used, desks should not be set up face to face. All candidates should be seated 2 metres apart from each other. These candidates can be seated in the same room.

Each setting will differ in its layout and build. There is, therefore, no specific overall limit that can be provided in this guidance on the number of candidates who can sit in a room, but desks must be correctly spaced and there should be adequate ventilation. The upper limit to the number of candidates who can take an exam in a room together will depend broadly on the desk spacing requirements.

The importance of adequate ventilation should be carefully considered when selecting the room for exams. Good ventilation is important and you should maximise this wherever possible, for example, opening windows and propping open doors (not fire doors) where safe to do so (bearing in mind safeguarding in particular). For more advice, read the Health and Safety Executive guidance on air conditioning and ventilation during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

Invigilators may walk up and down aisles between desks, but there must also be points in the room where an invigilator can stand at least 2 metres from the nearest desks and see all the candidates in the room.

Face coverings

Candidates and invigilators do not need to wear face coverings during exams where social distancing can be maintained, but they may wear them if they wish to. Where social distancing cannot be maintained, for example, in some practical assessment situations, candidates and invigilators should wear face coverings.

Under national lockdown restrictions, candidates and invigilators should wear face coverings in communal areas where social distancing cannot easily be maintained, or if the exam centre has chosen to require the use of face coverings in communal areas. For more information, read the guidance on face coverings in education.

Everyone who uses public transport to travel to exams should follow the requirements for wearing face coverings.

Invigilators

Your school or college will have protocols in place for visitors and temporary staff. Invigilators can move between different schools and colleges. They should minimise contact and maintain as much distance as possible from other staff. Further guidance about supply and peripatetic staff is in the school workforce section of the actions for schools during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

Before the exams, you will need to tell invigilators what they need to do to minimise contact and maintain as much distance as possible from other staff.

Invigilators do not need to wear gloves when collecting exam scripts from candidates but should wash their hands thoroughly and more frequently than usual and particularly after handling exam papers. The household testing programme continues to support testing of other people connected with students, for example exam invigilators.

Maintaining distance between staff and candidates

You should advise invigilators and other staff to stand alongside candidates when interacting with them, rather than face to face.

For all encounters, such as when scribes, readers or other individuals are supporting candidates, staff should maintain a 2 metre distance where possible, for example using a separate room from other candidates. If staff cannot maintain a 2 metre distance, they should wear a face covering, avoid close face to face contact and minimise time spent within 1 metre of others. These arrangements may not be possible when working with some candidates who have complex needs, in which case these candidates' educational support should be provided as normal during exams.

If candidates need to leave the exam room and need to be accompanied, staff should maintain a 2 metre distance where possible. If this is not possible, staff should take mitigating measures, such as standing alongside the candidate and use a face covering.

Candidate health

The guidance for households with possible or confirmed coronavirus (COVID-19) infections applies throughout.

School and college action

Schools and colleges must take swift action when they become aware that an exam candidate has tested positive for coronavirus (COVID-19). They must follow the guidance outlined in actions for schools during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. The guidance explains that schools and colleges can contact the dedicated advice service introduced by Public Health England (PHE) and delivered by the NHS Business Services Authority. This can be reached by calling the DfE helpline on 0800 046 8687 and selecting option 1 for advice on the action to take in response to a positive case.

Candidates with symptoms or who have tested positive

Candidates must not attend the exam centre if they have coronavirus (COVID-19) symptoms or have tested positive in the last 10 days. The most important symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19) are the recent onset of either a:

- new continuous cough
- high temperature
- loss of, or change in, their normal sense of taste or smell (anosmia)

Candidates should stay at home and arrange to have a test to see if they have coronavirus (COVID-19).

Candidates will be unable to attend exams during their period of isolation. With or without a positive test, a candidate with coronavirus (COVID-19) symptoms must isolate immediately and continue to do so for 10 full days counting from the day after the individual tested positive or first had symptoms.

Where candidates are isolating in line with public health advice

Where a member of the candidate's household or someone they have been in close contact with has tested positive for coronavirus (COVID-19), the candidate must isolate immediately for 10 full days counting from the day after the individual tested positive. They cannot attend exams during that period. Candidates who are defined as close contacts but are taking part in a formal serial testing programme should follow the guidance given within the programme to determine if they can attend exams.

This also applies if the candidate is asked to isolate following contact with someone with the virus. Candidates cannot attend exams during their period of isolation.

Schools and colleges should contact the awarding organisation on the candidate's behalf to determine the next available assessment opportunity.

Candidates in quarantine following certain foreign travel must not attend exams during their period of quarantine. See guidance on travel corridors for an up-to-date list of countries where quarantine is not required in England.

Where a candidate has a negative test

Candidates should follow guidance about their coronavirus (COVID-19) test result when they receive a negative test.

A candidate must self-isolate and not attend exams if their household has a confirmed case.

Those candidates who are part of a formal serial testing programme and test negative should follow the guidance given within the programme to determine if they can attend exams.

Candidates who are clinically extremely vulnerable from coronavirus (COVID-19)

Candidates who are clinically extremely vulnerable should refer to the specific guidance for the clinically extremely vulnerable.

Reasonable adjustments

Schools and colleges must, under their Equality Act obligations, continue to make reasonable adjustments for candidates with special educational needs and disabilities.

Each VTQ awarding organisation will have their own policy on reasonable adjustments, which we expect schools and colleges to be familiar with.

The special educational needs coordinator (SENCo) will need to ensure that the access arrangement is still appropriate, practicable and reasonable.

In the event of a candidate's circumstances changing, the SENCo may (where required) need to produce evidence and process an online application.

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There is something wrong with this page

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