Part of
Education, universities and childcare during coronavirus

Guidance
Department:
The Education

Schools COVID-19 operational guidance

Updated 27 August 2021

Contents

Summary
Overview
Risk assessment
Mixing and 'bubbles'
Tracing close contacts and isolation
Face coverings
Stepping measures up and down
Control measures
Ventilation
Education
Pupil wellbeing and support
Secondary schools
Schools
Educational visits
Extracurricular activities and clubs
Independent schools
Inspection
Supporting documentations

Print this page

Summary

This guidance supports the actions school leaders should take to reduce the risk of transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19) in their school setting. This includes public health advice issued by Public Health England (PHE).

It is for leaders and staff:

- in schools
- secondary schools (including sixth forms)
- special schools, special post-16 providers and alternative provision
- 16 to 19 academies
- infant, junior, middle, upper schools
- boarding schools

We expect independent schools to follow the control measures set out in this guidance as far as reasonably practicable, and to discuss health and safety adaptations quickly and sensibly if independent schools need to.

Where this guidance refers to schools, that does not include maintained nursery schools or children's homes.

Separate guidance is available for:

- early years and childcare settings
- further education colleges and providers

Additional sector-specific guidance is also available for special schools, special post-16 providers and alternative provision.

We have worked closely with parents and carers (Ofsted referees to parents should be read as including carers), staff and unions when agreeing the best approaches for their circumstances.

We use the terms 'must' and 'should' throughout the guidance. We use the term 'must' when the person in question is legally required to do something and 'should' when the advice set out should be followed unless there is good reason not to.

Overview

The government continues to manage the risk of serious illness from the spread of the virus. Step 4 remains a new phase in the government's response to the pandemic, moving away from stringent restrictions on everyone's day-to-day lives, towards managing the risk of COVID-19 transmission in a way that is proportionate, sustainable and cautious to minimise risk. As COVID-19 becomes a virus that we learn to live with, there is now an imperative to reduce the disruption to children and young people's education, and to their wellbeing, as far as we can. We want children and young people and adults to feel confident that it is safe and the opportunity for it to take place. September

Our priority is for you to deliver face-to-face, high-quality education to all pupils. The evidence is clear that being out of education causes significant harm to educational attainment, mental health and wellbeing and future life chances.

We have worked closely with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and Public Health England (PHE) to review this guidance.

Changes to the previous version

Changes to the guidance since 31 July 2021 publication include:

- update to make clear who is more vulnerable to covid-19 and that is a clinical contact, including clarifying that this includes young people up to the age of 18 years, and those who are immunosuppressed (paragraph 19)
- added additional advice on close contacts (should do which exactly their PCR test results
- added information on contingency planning in schools, with link to outline contingency framework
- updated information on boarding school pupils attending from abroad, as quarantine rules have changed

Risk assessment

You must comply with health and safety law and put in place proportionate control measures. You should do this in a way that adapts your risk assessments, taking them as 'living documents', as the circumstances in your school and the public health advice evolve. You should review your risk assessments regularly and update them when circumstances are affected and working as planned. For more information on the application of school leaders' in relation to health and safety risk assessments and management risks, see the health and safety guidance for schools.

Mixing and 'bubbles'

We no longer recommend that it is necessary to keep children in consistent groups (sometimes called 'bubbles') or that it is necessary to keep to used for any supervision (for example, summer schools) or schools from the autumn term.

As well as enabling flexibility in curriculum delivery, this means that close contact rules resume, and you no longer need to make alternative arrangements to avoid mixing at lunch.

You should make sure your contingency plans (sometimes called outbreak management plans) are ready to be implemented, including how you would be necessary to reintroduce 'bubbles' for a temporary period, to reduce disruptions to learning.

We continue to recommend the reintroduction of 'bubbles' would not be taken lightly and would need to take account of the detrimental impact they can have on the delivery of education.

Tracing close contacts and isolation

Settings only needed to do contact tracing up to and including 16 July. Close contacts will now be identified via NHS Test and Trace and education settings will no longer need to do contact tracing.

Close contact cases is also using similar, NHS Test and Trace will work with the another case and/or their parents/carers to identify close contacts. Contacts from a school setting will only be traced by NHS Test and Trace where the positive case and/or their parents/carers do not provide the information to NHS Test and Trace. This will ensure a small number of individuals who would have been identified as close contacts in the past, due the nature of the close contact. You may be contacted but exceptional cases to help with identifying close contacts, or to identify hospitals in managing other infection risks.

Individuals are not required to self-isolate if they live in the same household as someone who has tested positive for coronavirus (COVID-19) and one of the following apply:

- they are fully vaccinated
- they are below the age of 18 years and 6 months
- they have been given or are currently part of an approved COVID-19 vaccine trial
- they are not able to get vaccinated for medical reasons

Instead, they will be contacted by NHS Test and Trace, informed they have been in close contact with someone who has tested positive for COVID-19 and advised on the steps individuals to take to PCR test if advised to do so.

Staff who do not need to isolate, and children and young people aged under 18 years 6 months, should be encouraged to take a PCR test, particularly if they are a close contact (unless they attend school as normal. They do not need to stay at home or self-isolate while the school, but it is expected and recommended that these are worn when travelling on public or dedicated transport.

18 years old will be treated in the same way as children until 6 months after their 18th birthday. This means that they will not be required to self-isolate, but will still need to be subject to the same rules as adults and so if they choose not to get vaccinated, they will need to self-isolate if they are a close contact.

Children who are under 18 years 6 months will not be required to self-isolate. Instead, they will be encouraged to take a PCR test. If they test positive, they will be required to self-isolate. Children who are under 18 years 6 months will be subject to the same rules as adults and so if they choose not to get vaccinated, they will need to self-isolate if they are a close contact.

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Face coverings

Face coverings are no longer advised for pupils, staff and visitors either in classrooms or in communal areas.

The government has removed the requirement to wear face coverings in law. We expects and recommends that they are worn in enclosed and crowded spaces where people may come into close contact with people they do not usually meet. This includes public transport and dedicated transport to school or college.

In circumstances where face coverings are recommended

If you have a substantiated review or the number of positive cases in your school/college (Stepping measures up and down section for more information), a director of public health may advise that face coverings should be worn in communal areas and classrooms (including staff and visitors, unless exempt). You should make sure your contingency plans cover this possibility.

Face coverings should not be worn by Nursery settings, which may avoid communication with someone who relies on lip-reading, clear mouth or facial expressions to communicate, or for children who are deaf or have a hearing impairment, or who is relying the spread of COVID-19. However, the evidence is capacity for children and young people to socialise and develop their communication is important and that the face to cover the nose and mouth and be made with a breathable material capable of filtering airborne particles.

The main benefit from a transparent face covering is that they can aid communication, particularly for people who lip read or see a speaker's mouth to understand speech, but this should be considered alongside the comfort and breathability of the material that contains plastic, which may mean that the face covering is less breathable than fabric or cloth.

Face visors or shields can be worn by those exempt from wearing a face covering but they are not a substitute for face coverings in the circumstances in which face coverings are advised. They do not protect others as much as face coverings, because droplets can escape from the sides, bottom and top of the visor. They should not be used alone because they do not protect the wearer from airborne droplets. They should only be used alongside a face covering if the risk assessment for the specific situation and school deems no clinical exemption.

The use of face coverings may have a particular impact on those who rely on visual cues to communicate, for example, those who are deaf or have a hearing impairment, or those who do, are exempt from wearing accommodation to wear face coverings in school or childcare settings.

You may wish to make reasonable adjustments for disabled pupils to support them to access education successfully. Where appropriate, you should discuss with pupils and their parents, what reasonable adjustments that are being considered for each individual.

No pupil or student should be denied education on the grounds of whether they are or not, wearing a face covering.

Stepping measures up and down

You should have contingency plans (sometimes called outbreak management plans) outlining what you would do if children, pupils, students or staff test positive for COVID-19. This should include how you would take action if there is a significant increase in the chains of transmission. Ofsted and the inspectorate impact that restrictions or education can have on children, young people and their families, and will take this into account when considered as a last resort, leads to the minimum number of schools or groups provides, and for the shortest amount of time possible.

Central government may offer local areas of particular concern an enhanced response package to help control transmission.

For most settings it will make sense to think about taking extra action if the number of cases in a school/college is higher than the local area or if there is a cluster of cases that is not responding to usual infection control action, and the steps you should work through, can be found in the contingency framework.

Local Authorities (LA) will lead on the principles of managing local outbreaks of COVID-19 in education and childcare settings. Public Health England (PHE) and Public Health protection teams (PHTs) can recommend measures to control the spread of COVID-19 in education and childcare settings. Ofsted's role in managing is a small cluster of settings - as part of their outbreak management responsibilities.

Control measures

You should:

- Ensure good hygiene for everyone
- Maintain appropriate cleaning regimes.
- Keep occupied spaces well ventilated.
- Follow public health advice on testing, self-isolation and managing confirmed cases of COVID-19.

1. Ensure good hygiene for everyone

Hand hygiene

Frequent and thoroughly hand cleaning should now be regular practice. You should encourage your staff and students to wash their hands regularly. This can be done with soap and water or hand sanitiser.

Respiratory hygiene

The 'catch it, bin it, kill it' approach continues to be very important.

The e-Bug COVID-19 website contains free resources for you, including materials to promote hand hygiene and respiratory hygiene.

Use of personal protective equipment (PPE)

Most staff in schools and other non-PPE hygiene and they will need to wear normally for their work. The guidance on the use of PPE in education, childcare and children's social care settings provides more information on the use of PPE for COVID-19.

2. Maintain appropriate cleaning regimes, using standard products such as detergents

You should put in place and maintain an appropriate cleaning schedule. This should include regular cleaning of areas and equipment (for example, twice per day), with a particular focus on frequently touched surfaces.

PHE has published guidance on the cleaning of non-healthcare settings.

3. Keep occupied spaces well ventilated

When your schools in operation, it is important to ensure it is well ventilated and that a comfortable teaching environment is maintained.

You should identify any poorly ventilated spaces as part of your risk assessment and take action to improve ventilation. Opening windows is a simple measure that helps reduce the risk of transmission in these areas and on a fine, temperate day will usually be sufficient to ventilate a room.

Mechanical ventilation is a system that uses a fan to draw fresh air in and out of a room. This can be a simple ventilation system, such as an extractor fan, or more complex, and is intended to confirm that normal operation (when current guidance and restrictions have ceased) will be sufficient to ensure that sufficient ventilation needs to be improved. Further information and advice on ventilation are rolled out.

The government has also launched a trial of purifiers in 30 schools in Blackpool, which will inform the use of mobile air filtration/purification settings and whether they could reduce the risk of transmission.

4. Follow public health advice on testing, self-isolation and managing confirmed cases of COVID-19

When an individual develops COVID-19 symptoms or has a positive test

Public, staff and other adult students public health advice is to stay at home and book a test if they have a fever, a new, continuous cough or a loss of taste or smell or other reasons requiring them to stay at home due to the risk of transmission of COVID-19 to other people, or testing positive.

If anyone in your school develops COVID-19 symptoms, however mild, you should send them home and they should follow public health advice.

Pupils in a boarding school (these symptoms), they should usually self-isolate in their boarding accommodation. If their symptoms continue, children in the boarding school will usually stay in their boarding house.

For everyone with symptoms, they should avoid using public transport and, wherever possible, be collected by a member of their family or household.

If pupil's travelling collection, they should be left in a room on their own if possible and should be kept at a distance from others if they cannot be left alone.

Staff who do not need to self-isolate, and children and young people aged under 18 years, on this can be found in the use of PPE in education, childcare and children's social care settings guidance, they may wish to be encouraged to take a PCR test.

The household (including any siblings) should follow the PHE stay at home guidance for household with possible or confirmed coronavirus (COVID-19) infection.

Asymptomatic testing

Regular testing is an important way to the risk of transmission of infection within schools. That is why, alongside other measures we have introduced, offer and, if necessary, in response to the latest epidemiological data, we at least to be prepared to take measures up to and than a fortnight before the start of the term.

Over the summer, staff and secondary pupils should continue to test regularly if they are not fully vaccinated, or if they are not able to take part in the vaccine trial or activities based in school/college. Schools will only provide tests for those who are asymptomatic testing for pupils and staff over the summer period if they are attending school/college or if they are part of a local testing pilot. Staff should not test if they are isolating because of a positive test from your local authority or antigen centre.

As pupils will potentially mix with lots of other people during the summer holidays, all secondary school pupils should be encouraged to take home flow tests, twice a week, 3 days apart, on their return to school in September.

Settings may commence testing from 2 working days before the start of term and can continue to test pupils across the first week to manage this. Pupils will be able to continue to test twice weekly at home until the end of September, when this will be reviewed.

Staff should continue to test twice weekly twice whenever they are on site until end of September, when this will also be reviewed.

Secondary schools should also ensure that secondary school students (aged 18 and over) until further notice so they can offer testing to pupils who are unable to test themselves at home.

There is no need for a primary age pupils (those in year 6 and below) to test over the summer period, or when they return in September. Primary age children should not autonomy test when they start of their secondary school as a new year 7. Schools may choose, however, to start testing pupils at such earlier, including in summer schools, depending on their local circumstances.

Confirmed PCR tests

If a PCR test is a positive result (PCR test result should self-isolate in line with the stay at home guidance for households with possible or confirmed coronavirus (COVID-19) infection. They will also need to sign up free PCR tests to check if they have COVID-19.

Without awaiting the PCR result, the individual should continue to self-isolate.

If the PCR test is taken within 2 days of the positive lateral flow test, and is negative, the individual should take a PCR test as soon as they can to check, as long as the individual doesn't have COVID-19 symptoms.

Additional information on PCR tests kits for schools and further education providers is available.

Other considerations

Actively encouraging vulnerable (CEV) children and young people shielded attend their education setting unless they are one of the very small number of children and young people for whom it is not clinically safe or who have been advised by their clinician or other specialist not to attend.

Further information is available in the guidance on supporting pupils at school with medical conditions.

You should ensure that key contractors are aware of the school's control measures and ways of working.

Admitting children into school

In most cases, parents and carers will agree that a pupil with symptoms should not attend the school, given the potential risk to others.

If a parent or carer insists on a pupil attending your school, you can take the decision to refuse the pupil if it is proportionate and reasonable. It is necessary to protect other pupils and staff from possible infection with COVID-19. Your decision would need to be carefully considered in light of all the circumstances and current public health advice.

Attendance

School attendance is mandatory for all pupils of compulsory school age and it is a priority to ensure that as many children as possible regularly attend school.

Where a child is required to self-isolate or quarantine because of COVID-19 in accordance with relevant legislation or guidance published by the DHSC they should be recorded as code D (not attending in circumstances related to coronavirus). Code D should be used for those who have been confirmed as COVID-19 positive or should be recorded as code I (illness).

For pupils abroad who are unable to return, code X is unlikely to apply. In some specific circumstances, it may be appropriate to use other attendance codes, for example, guidance about the use of codes in the School attendance guidance.

Travel and quarantine

Where pupils travel from abroad to attend a boarding school, you will need to isolate for 10 days on their arrival in the UK. Pupils from abroad, which are not on a quarantine list, England must adhere to travel guidance, details of which are set out in quarantine and travel restrictions.

Boarding school pupils who are ordinarily resident in the UK, including those who are unaccompanied and who are returning from abroad and those aged 18 or over who are shielded, may have travelled from or through amber list countries (and have not been in red list countries in the 10 days before their arrival in England) and are required to quarantine and take a PCR test.

These aged 18 to 17 need proof of a negative COVID-19 test to travel to England (taken aged 18 and under and aged 18 and over) and those aged 18 to 17 need a COVID-19 test (taken on or before day 2. Where information is provided in the quarantine and travel restrictions.

Additional guidance from based on the quarantine requirements for international school pupils travelling from red list countries to attend a boarding school in England.

Parents travelling abroad should be aware of the impact on their children's education which may result from any requirement to quarantine or isolate upon return.

Remote education

Not all pupils with COVID-19 have symptoms. Where appropriate, you should support pupils who are self-isolating to continue their education remotely, as long as they are able to. Ofsted if they are well enough to be able. Subject to the Ofsted guidance on Ofsted's remote education expectations, schools are required to provide remote education to pupils who are self-isolating, and the Ofsted inspectorate would be contacted by government guidance or legislation around COVID-19.

You should maintain your capacity to deliver high-quality remote education for the most academic year, including for pupils who are self-isolating or unable to attend school due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, for the period they are abroad.

Independent Schools (including academies) are only covered by the remote education requirements in the Ofsted inspection framework for independent schools. However, they are still expected to meet the Independent School Standards in full at all times.

The remote education provided should be equivalent in length to the core teaching pupils would receive in school.

You should work collaboratively with families and put in place reasonable adjustments so that pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) can fully participate in access remote education.

Full expectations for remote education, support and resources can be found on the get help with remote education series.

Education recovery

We have announced a number of programmes and activities to support pupils to make up education missed as a result of the pandemic. Further information is available on: education recovery in schools.

- catch-up premium
- recovery premium
- summer school programme
- National Tutoring Programme and National Tutoring Programme and 16-19 Tuition Audit
- teacher training opportunities
- Curriculum resources
- Ofsted inspections
- wider continuous professional development resources, including to support teacher wellbeing and subject specific teaching

If running a summer school, you should follow the protective measures for holiday and after school clubs, and other out-of-school settings during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

Special schools and other specialist schools should refer to the additional operational guidance.

Pupil wellbeing and support

Some pupils may be experiencing a variety of emotions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as anxiety, stress or low mood. You can access guidance and resources of support on promoting and supporting mental health and wellbeing in schools.

School workforce

Secondary schools

Schools

Educational visits

Extracurricular activities and clubs

Independent schools

Inspection

Supporting documentations

School leaders are best placed to determine the workforce required to meet the needs of their pupils.

Clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) people are advised, as a minimum, to follow the same guidance as everyone else. It is important that everyone adheres to this guidance, but CEV people may wish to think particularly carefully about the additional precautions they can continue to take. Further information can be found in the guidance on protecting people who are CEV from COVID-19.

Social distancing measures have now ended in the workplace and it is no longer necessary for the government to instruct people to work from home. Employers should be able to explain the measures they have in place to keep CEV staff safe at work. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has published guidance on protecting vulnerable workers, including advice for employers and employees on how to talk about reducing risks in the workplace.

We welcome your support in encouraging vaccine take up and enabling staff who are eligible for a vaccination to attend booked vaccine appointments where possible even during term time.

School meals

You should continue to provide free school meal support to any pupils who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals and who are learning at home during term time.

More information on providing school meals during the COVID-19 pandemic is available.

Educational visits

Given the likely gap in COVID-19 related cancellation insurance, if you are considering booking a new visit, whether domestic or international, you are advised to ensure that any new bookings have adequate financial protection in place.

We continue to recommend you do not go on any international visits before the start of the autumn term. From the start of the new school term, you can go on international visits that have previously been deferred or postponed and organise new international visits for the future.

You should be aware that the travel list (and broader international travel policy) is subject to change and green list countries may be moved into amber or red. The travel lists may change during a visit and you must comply with international travel legislation and should have contingency plans in place to account for these changes.

You should speak to either your visit provider, commercial insurance company, or the risk protection arrangement (RPA) to assess the protection available. Independent advice on insurance cover and options can be sought from the British Insurance Brokers' Association (BIBA) or Association of British Insurers (ABI). Any school holding ATOL or ABTA refund credit notes may use these credit notes to rebook educational or international visits.

You should undertake full and thorough risk assessments in relation to all educational visits and ensure that any public health advice, such as hygiene and ventilation requirements, is included as part of that risk assessment. General guidance about educational visits is available and is supported by specialist advice from the Outdoor Education Advisory Panel (OEAP).

Wraparound provision and extra-curricular activity

More information on planning extra-curricular provision can be found in the guidance forproviders who run community activities, holiday clubs, after-school clubs, tuition and other out-of-school provision for children.

Inspection

For state-funded schools, it is intended that Ofsted will return to a full programme of routine inspections from September 2021 and will aim to inspect every state-funded school within the next 5 academic years. This will mean an extension of up to 6 terms in the inspection interval for those schools not inspected since the start of the pandemic. Regulations will give effect to these arrangements. Within the 5-year period, Ofsted will continue to prioritise schools most in need of inspection, particularly those with the lowest Ofsted grades. It will also prioritise outstanding schools that were previously exempt from routine inspection that have gone the longest without a visit.

For independent schools (other than academies), it is intended that both inspectorates will return to a full programme of routine inspections from September 2021 and they will complete the current cycle of standard inspections – which was delayed by the pandemic – in 2022.

Accountability expectations

We will not publish data based on exam and assessment results from summer 2021 in performance tables and you will not be held to account for this data. We will publish Key Stage 4 and 16 to 18 subject entries and destinations data at school and college level in performance tables in autumn 2021. For further information, see COVID-19: school and college accountability.

We will confirm the position on accountability for the academic year 2021 to 2022 in due course.

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Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance and support

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Environment and countryside
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