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Guidance

Guidance for schools about temporarily closing

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We have asked parents to keep their children at home, wherever possible, and for schools to remain open only for those children who absolutely need to attend.

It is important to underline that schools, all childcare settings (including early years settings, childminders and providers of childcare for school-age children), colleges and other educational establishments, remain safe places for children. But the fewer children making the journey to school, and the fewer children in educational settings, the lower the risk that the virus can spread and infect vulnerable individuals in wider society.

Schools, and all childcare providers, are therefore being asked to continue to provide care for a limited number of children - children who are vulnerable, and children whose parents are critical to the COVID-19 response and cannot be safely cared for at home.

While as many schools as possible should try to stay open for eligible pupils, this will not be possible for all settings and the local authority should coordinate pooling of resources so pupils are able to access provision elsewhere.

The following Q&A should be read alongside the:

- guidance on critical workers (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision/guidance-for-schools-colleges-and-local-authorities-on-maintaining-educational-provision>)
- guidance on COVID-19 for vulnerable children and young people (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-vulnerable-children-and-young-people>)

Vital role of schools

Those who work in and with our schools rightly take their place next to our NHS staff and other critical workers as central to our efforts in battling this virus.

School leaders around the country are taking the lead in supporting families through this difficult time, and we are keenly aware that the extraordinary measures that have been taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 present an unprecedented challenge for schools, trusts, and local authorities as well as the communities they serve.

We appreciate the selfless dedication that school, trust and local authority staff demonstrate in their work every single day. During this difficult time, we are asking you to go further still so that we can collectively address the challenges we face. You are vital to the country's response to this crisis, and we offer our full support and gratitude during this difficult time. As this crisis progresses, we will aim to provide you with as much certainty and flexibility as possible and will do all we can to support the vital service you are providing.

We expect schools and local authorities should work together to ensure that different settings are supported to stay open wherever possible, taking into account their circumstances and cohort (for example, special settings and alternative provision). And, we want local authorities to help coordinate

what this means, working with education settings to deliver the services required. That includes academies, the independent sector, and boarding schools. Throughout this document, we define ‘school’ as either maintained by the local authority or a single (or part of a multi) academy trust.

Responsibilities

What are schools responsible for?

Schools are responsible for providing places to vulnerable children, and children of workers critical to the COVID-19 response. It may be that not all schools can remain open. Schools should work with local authorities to agree the provision needed locally to support the needs identified.

What are local authorities responsible for?

Local authorities are responsible for coordinating a response to the new arrangements. Working with education settings (including academies and the independent sector), they should use the critical worker list and the definition of vulnerable children to support schools and trusts to ensure that there is sufficiency of places for children of critical workers and vulnerable children.

Local authorities are also responsible for monitoring demand and capacity. This may involve working with schools to provide places in alternative settings if necessary, and supporting residential special schools, alternative provision and other special settings to remain open, wherever possible.

They are also responsible for supporting trusts and schools to assess the risks for children and young people whose education, health and care (EHC) plans they maintain and ensuring those children are safely cared for whether at school/college or at home.

Are schools expected to share resources?

If some schools are experiencing high demand for places or severe staff shortages, local authorities will coordinate support from other schools in the area. Schools are expected to be flexible and work together where required.

Can provision be shared across local authority areas?

If a school is unable to open, local authorities should try to coordinate provision for pupils in other schools in their area. If this is not possible, local authorities should consider working with neighboring local authorities while keeping in mind the impact on children. Regional school commissioners (RSCs) can support conversations between local authorities where necessary.

Some multi-academy trusts operate across different local authorities and can assist in making arrangements between their schools if appropriate.

Prioritising pupils

Why do we have to prioritise children?

The first aim of the partial school closure measures set out by the Secretary of State for Education is to reduce the overall population of children moving around local areas as far as possible, in order to further reduce the number of social interactions and thus flatten the upward curve of the COVID-19 outbreak.

However, the second aim is to continue to care for children who are vulnerable, or whose parents are critical to the COVID-19 response, so that they can continue to work where alternative childcare arrangements cannot be made.

How are critical workers defined?

Children with a parent or carer who is listed on the government's critical worker list (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision/guidance-for-schools-colleges-and-local-authorities-on-maintaining-educational-provision>) should be considered for a school place, so long as their job cannot be done from home.

Many parents working in these sectors will be able to ensure their child is kept at home. And every child who can be safely cared for at home should be, to limit the chance of the virus spreading.

We will monitor closely the experience of schools in identifying critical workers and their capacity to respond to the needs of critical workers. Government is working with representatives of school leaders to ensure they have the clarity they need in identifying critical workers. We will publish updates to this guidance should it prove necessary to provide further points of clarification over the identification of critical workers.

How are vulnerable children defined?

Vulnerable children (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-vulnerable-children-and-young-people>) include those who have a social worker and those children and young people up to the age of 25 with education, health and care (EHC) plans.

Those who have a social worker include children who have a child protection plan and those who are looked after by the local authority. A child may also be deemed to be vulnerable if they have been assessed as being in need or otherwise meet the definition in section 17 of the Children Act 1989.

Those with an EHC plan should be risk-assessed by their school/college in consultation with the local authority and parents, to decide whether they need to continue to be offered a school/college place in order to meet their needs, or whether they can safely have their needs met at home. This could include, if necessary, carers therapists or clinicians visiting the home to provide any essential services. Many children and young people with EHC plans can safely remain at home.

We know that schools may also want to support other children who are vulnerable where they are able to do so. Eligibility for free school meals in and of itself should not be the determining factor in assessing vulnerability. We are also asking local authorities and schools to maintain provision for children in alternative provision settings wherever possible, since many of these settings have a high proportion of children who have a social worker and EHC plans.

We will work with schools, colleges and local authorities to help identify the children who most need support at this time. Looking after these children will enable schools to support the country during challenging times.

Is it compulsory for critical workers to accept their place offer?

No.

Many parents working in these critical sectors will be able to ensure their child is kept at home. Every child who can be safely cared for at home should be, to limit the chance of the virus spreading.

When making alternative arrangements, parents should not rely for childcare upon those who are advised to be in the stringent social distancing category (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-social-distancing-and-for-vulnerable-people/guidance-on-social-distancing-for-everyone-in-the-uk-and-protecting-older-people-and-vulnerable-adults>) such as grandparents, or friends or family members with underlying conditions.

Is it compulsory for parents of vulnerable children to accept their place offer?

There is an expectation that vulnerable children who have a social worker will attend school, so long as it is safe for them to do so. In circumstances where a parent does not want to bring their child to school, and their child is considered vulnerable, the social worker and schools should explore the reasons for this, directly with the parent, and help to resolve any concerns or difficulties wherever possible. Where parents are concerned about the risk of the child contracting the virus, the school should talk through these anxieties with the parent following the advice set out by Public Health England (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-educational-settings-about-covid-19>).

Providers may also want to consider how to encourage children and young people to attend provision. Social workers will remain in contact with vulnerable children and families, including remotely if needed.

Those with an EHC plan should be risk-assessed by their school in consultation with the local authority and parents, to decide whether they need to continue to be offered a school/college place in order to meet their needs, or whether they can safely have their needs met at home. This could include, if necessary, carers therapists or clinicians visiting the home to provide any essential services. Many children and young people with EHC plans can safely remain at home.

How do we identify pupils who are the children of critical workers?

We know many schools will have already spoken with parents/carers to identify who requires a school place.

If it proves necessary, schools can ask for simple evidence that the parent in question is a critical worker, such as their work ID badge or pay slip.

Should schools only offer places to children of single-parent critical workers and children where both their parents are critical workers?

Children with at least one parent/carer who is critical to the COVID-19 response can go to school if required.

However, many families with parents working in critical sectors will be able to ensure their child is kept at home. And every child who can be safely cared for at home should be, to limit the chance of the virus spreading.

Can support and teaching staff send their children to school?

Teachers and school staff are critical to the COVID-19 response, so can send their children to school. In the same way as for other critical workers – many such families should be able to ensure their child is kept at home. And every child who can be safely cared for at home should be, to limit the chance of the virus spreading.

Can schools, trusts and local authorities take a flexible approach to the vulnerable children definition depending on their local circumstances?

We know that schools and trusts will have some knowledge of children they consider vulnerable who have not yet been formally recognised as such, for example, children who have been referred to children's social care but not yet appointed a social worker. It is reasonable for schools and local authorities to take a judgement on including those pupils, although they should take care to balance this with overall numbers of pupils going to school in their local area.

Eligibility for free school meals should not, in and of itself, be a determining factor in assessing vulnerability.

Do children in foster care come under the definition of vulnerable children?

Yes, all children who are looked after by the local authority are eligible. For all looked after children, local authorities will be well placed to identify them and ensure that foster carers know that they will be eligible for a temporary school place and how to access support.

Funding

Will schools receive funding support?

Schools will continue to receive their budgets for the coming year, as usual, regardless of any periods of partial or complete closure. That will ensure that they are able to continue to pay their staff, and meet their other regular financial commitments, as we move through these extraordinary times.

We know that schools may face additional costs as a result of COVID-19. We will put in place a new process that allows us to reimburse schools for exceptional costs that they face as a result. For example, where schools are already issuing vouchers to pupils who are eligible for free school meals but cannot attend school and additional costs for schools that remain open through the Easter holidays.

We will discuss how best to deliver this funding with stakeholders over the next few days, and will publish details of the scheme shortly, but we trust that this will give headteachers the reassurances they need, so that they are able to concentrate on their vital role in supporting the nation through this crisis.

Attendance

Do schools need to take an attendance register?

During this period, schools do not need to take an attendance register. For administrative purposes Code # (planned whole or partial closure) should be used.

However, we will be asking schools to submit a short daily return (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-attendance-recording-for-educational-settings>), reporting whether they are open and how many children and staff are in school. This will allow for a record of attendance for safeguarding purposes and allow schools to provide accurate, up to date data to the government. This will also help DfE to track capacity in the system, enabling the department to feed into wider tracking of the impact of the virus to support scientific advice.

Will critical workers or parents of vulnerable children be penalised if they do not send their child to school?

No.

Children with a parent or carer who is listed on the government's critical worker list (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision/guidance-for-schools-colleges-and-local-authorities-on-maintaining-educational-provision>) are eligible for a school place. However, many parents working in these sectors will be able to ensure their child is kept at home. And every child who can be safely cared for at home should be, to limit the chance of the virus spreading.

For vulnerable children, social workers will work with schools to assess the best option (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-vulnerable-children-and-young-people>) for individual children.

Parents will not be penalised if their child does not attend school.

What should schools do if vulnerable children do not attend school?

Schools should work with LAs to monitor with welfare of vulnerable children who are not attending school, and other pupils they might wish to keep in touch with, for safeguarding purposes.

Working with parents

How should schools identify which pupils are the children of critical workers?

We know many schools will have already spoken with parents/carers to identify who requires a school place.

If required, we recommend asking for simple evidence that the parent in question is a critical worker, such as confirmation from their employer on what their job is and how it is critical to the COVID-19 response.

If any problems occur, schools should speak to their local authority.

What if my school is closed, but parents bring their children on Monday 23 March?

We would like all schools to open on a limited basis on Monday 23 March to support parents to understand next steps.

Once schools have assessed their demand and capacity, any schools experiencing high demand should liaise with their local authority and communicate with parents regarding whether their child needs to attend an alternative setting.

What are the expectations on schools regarding staying in touch with parents whose child is at home?

We recognise that many schools have already shared resources for children who are at home and are grateful for this.

DfE is working with the BBC and other partners to provide advice and support directly to parents, including online resources they can access for their children at home.

Schools should work with local authorities to monitor the welfare of vulnerable children who are not attending school, and other pupils they might wish to keep in touch with, for safeguarding purposes.

Workforce

Will teachers continue to be paid?

Yes. Teachers will continue to be paid during this period as normal.

How many teachers will be needed to keep schools open?

Schools should discuss this with their local authority or trust when making decisions about school capacity.

When will teachers take holiday?

We understand that this is a very difficult time for teachers, and we are asking a lot of them, and all school staff, to help the country fight this virus. We know that school leaders and local authorities will make sensible decisions on staffing and what breaks will be needed, but we are asking schools, wherever possible, to maintain provision for children of workers critical to the COVID-19 response over the Easter holidays.

Will teachers have to work in alternative settings?

Once schools have assessed their demand and capacity, any schools experiencing high demand should liaise with their local authority to establish whether any pupils or teachers need to be moved to an alternative setting.

Any schools which are unable to stay open should liaise with their local authority about teachers providing support elsewhere.

Teachers and other school staff should continue to be paid by their school as normal, wherever they are working.

Practicalities

What is expected of schools in terms of opening hours?

We expect schools to operate as close as possible to their normal hours. Where possible, we would encourage breakfast club and after school provision to help support the children of workers critical to the COVID-19 response.

What public health advice should schools follow?

Schools should continue to follow the advice from Public Health England on handwashing and other measures to limit the risk of spread of coronavirus (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-to-educational-settings-about-covid-19>).

Can schools flex on legal requirements in order to deliver this service?

We are preparing legislation that will temporarily disapply or modify some requirements on schools to enable them to focus on this core new ask. Schools should focus on safeguarding duties as a priority. Where schools and trusts have concerns about the impact of staff absence – such as their Designated Safeguarding Lead or first aiders – they should discuss immediately with the local authority or trust.

Are schools expected to provide education as normal to pupils who are in attendance?

We understand that these are extraordinary times. The most important thing is that children of critical workers and vulnerable children are supervised and properly cared for at school. Emergency legislation will lift curriculum requirements for schools, giving flexibility to provide support, activities and education in the way they see fit.

Do schools need to provide educational support for pupils at home?

We recognise that many schools have already shared resources for children who are at home and are grateful for this.

DfE is working with the BBC and other partners to provide advice and support directly to parents, including online resources they can access for their children at home.

If children are attending an alternative setting, will transport be provided?

We will work closely with local authorities to put the necessary arrangements in place to support children.

Will it be mandatory for all schools, colleges and early years settings to remain open in some form?

We are asking all schools and early years settings to remain open for children of critical workers and vulnerable children.

We acknowledge that some schools and early years settings may be unable to do so, and will support them to work with local authorities, regional school commissioners and neighbouring schools and settings to continue to support these children.

What else needs to happen if a child is attending a different setting than usual?

Important information should be provided on day one, including emergency contact details, dietary requirements and medical needs to safeguard the health, safety and welfare of children.

School meals

What about children who rely on free school meals, but won't be in school?

We will give schools and trusts the flexibility to provide meals or vouchers to children eligible for free school meals. We will reimburse any additional costs.

Guidance on supporting children receiving free school meals

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

We are working to put in place a national voucher system as soon as possible.

What arrangements should we put in place to feed children attending school?

Schools which are open for the children of critical workers and vulnerable children should provide meal options for staff and children in attendance, and free schools meals for those who are in attendance.

Exams

What will happen to exams?

Primary assessments, including SATs, and exams including GCSEs, AS levels and A levels will not go ahead this summer. The exam regulator, Ofqual, and exam boards will work with teachers to provide grades to students whose exams have been cancelled this summer. Further information on the cancellation of GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2020 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-cancellation-of-gcses-as-and-a-levels-in-2020>) is available.

Types of setting

Will this apply to alternative provision/ pupil referral units?

Alternative provision (AP) settings and pupil referral units (PRUs) serve a small number of children and young people, a high proportion of whom meet the definition of vulnerability and are well-placed to cater for their needs. This would be difficult to replicate elsewhere.

We will support these settings via local authorities and other key agencies to identify the best way to protect young people in AP and PRUs, and to keep them open where it is feasible to do so.

Will this apply to special schools?

All children in special schools, and in particular in residential special schools, are in the vulnerable category. Special and special residential schools/colleges should be supported to remain open, wherever that is possible, to provide vital services and support to children with complex needs and their families. This may include assistance in sourcing and deploying specialist health and care staff from other settings to provide cover arrangements and ensure the right ratios and skills are in place to enable these vital specialist settings to remain open safely where needed.

Schools, colleges, other training providers and local authorities will need to consider the needs of all children and young people with an EHC plan, alongside the views of their parents, and make a risk assessment for each child or young person. This will inform whether they need to continue to be offered a school/college place in order to meet their needs, or whether they can safely have their needs met at home, noting that some children with EHCPs may also have parents who are key workers and will need to have a school/college place available for that reason.

In collaboration with PHE and DHSC, we have produced guidance on Coronavirus (COVID-19) isolation for residential educational settings (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-isolation-for-residential-educational-settings>), this includes residential special schools and colleges. This contains advice on managing the setting, in the case of self-isolation or infection.

Are academies, free schools and independent schools expected to do this and to work with local authorities?

Yes. We expect all schools to open from Monday 23 March only to children of critical workers and to vulnerable children. To ensure this is done as efficiently as possible, we expect schools to work with local authorities and regional school commissioners as necessary.

How should boarding and residential schools manage this new operating model?

Most boarding schools will need to keep their residential provision open and decisions will have to happen on a case by case basis.

We will update this guidance as further information becomes available.