Schools coronavirus (COVID-19) operational guidance

February 2021
This guidance explains the actions school leaders should take to minimise the risk of transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19) in their school. This includes public health advice, endorsed by Public Health England (PHE).

It is for leaders and staff in:

- primary 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

Overview

From 8 March, all pupils should attend school. Secondary pupils will be offered testing from 8 March.

To prepare for this:

- review and where necessary, update your risk assessment
- make sure you are following the system of controls to minimise the risk of infection, including plan for asymptomatic testing.
- have a contingency plan in place for outbreaks in your school or changes in restrictions
- communicate any changes in your processes to parents

Much of the content in this guidance will be familiar to you, as it replicates what was in place for the autumn term. Specific changes include:

- use of face coverings in classrooms for secondary age pupils and staff
- mandatory attendance expectations in different school phases
- current expectations for clinically extremely vulnerable pupils and staff
- curriculum expectations
- elective home education
- exams

Public health advice

We have worked closely with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and PHE to develop this guidance. Based on the recent ONS data, the risks to education staff are similar to those for most other occupations.
Implementing the system of controls creates a safer environment for pupils and staff where the risk of transmission of infection is substantially reduced. The way to control this virus is the same, even with the current new variants. We are further strengthening the measures, to provide more reassurance and to help decrease disruption the virus causes to education.

You must comply with health and safety law and put in place proportionate control measures. To meet these obligations you must:

- review your health and safety risk assessments in light of this refreshed guidance
- make any necessary changes to your control measures applying the system of controls

**Risk assessment**

Employers have a legal duty to protect people from harm. This includes taking reasonable steps to protect staff, pupils and others from coronavirus (COVID-19) within your school.

You must implement sensible and proportionate control measures which follow the health and safety hierarchy of controls to reduce the risk to the lowest reasonably practicable level. This hierarchy of controls is set out in annex A.

You must regularly review and update your risk assessments - treating them as 'living documents' - as the circumstances at your school and the public health advice changes. This is particularly relevant as you prepare to welcome back more pupils. This includes having active arrangements in place to monitor that the controls are:

- effective
- working as planned

You must notify your staff and their health and safety representatives of review outcomes.

For more information on what is required of school leaders in relation to health and safety risk assessments and managing risk, see annex A.

**System of controls**

We know that the predominant new variant of coronavirus (COVID-19) is more transmissible however, PHE advice remains that the way to control this virus is with the system of controls, even with the current new variants.

In this section where something is essential for public health reasons, as advised by Public Health England (PHE), we have said ‘must’. Where there is a legal
requirement we have made that clear. This guidance does not create any new legal obligations.

This is the set of actions you must take. They are grouped into ‘prevention’ and ‘response to any infection’.

If you follow the system of controls, you will effectively reduce risks in your setting and create an inherently safer environment.

These additional measures will be reviewed in partnership with health experts to decide whether evidence suggests that these measures can be eased ahead of the summer term.

**Prevention**

**You must always:**

1) Minimise contact with individuals who are required to self-isolate by ensuring they do not attend the school.

2) Ensure face coverings are used in recommended circumstances.

3) Ensure everyone is advised to clean their hands thoroughly and more often than usual.

4) Ensure good respiratory hygiene for everyone by promoting the ‘catch it, bin it, kill it’ approach.

5) Maintain enhanced cleaning, including cleaning frequently touched surfaces often, using standard products such as detergents.

6) Consider how to minimise contact across the site and maintain social distancing wherever possible.

7) Keep occupied spaces well ventilated.

**In specific circumstances:**

8) Ensure individuals wear the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) where necessary.

9) Promote and engage in asymptomatic testing, where available.

**Response to any infection**
You must always:

10) Promote and engage with the NHS Test and Trace process.

11) Manage and report confirmed cases of coronavirus (COVID-19) amongst the school community.

12) Contain any outbreak by following local health protection team advice.

In an emergency, call 999 if someone is seriously ill or injured or their life is at risk. Anyone with coronavirus (COVID-19) symptoms should not visit the GP, pharmacy, urgent care centre or a hospital, unless advised to.

The individual should not use public transport if they are symptomatic. If arranging their return to their family home to isolate, schools should follow advice on transport arrangements in the [safe working in education, childcare and children’s social care settings](https://www.gov.uk) guidance.

Public Health England (PHE) has good evidence that routinely taking the temperature of pupils is not recommended as this is an unreliable method for identifying coronavirus (COVID-19).

When an individual has had close contact with someone with coronavirus (COVID-19) symptoms

Any member of staff who has provided close contact care to someone with symptoms, regardless of whether they are wearing PPE, and all other members of staff or pupils who have been in close contact with that person, do not need to go home to self-isolate unless:

- the symptomatic person subsequently tests positive
- they develop symptoms themselves (in which case, they should self-isolate immediately and arrange to have a test)
- they are requested to do so by NHS Test and Trace or the Public Health England (PHE) advice service (or PHE local health protection team if escalated)

Asymptomatic testing

Coronavirus (COVID-19) asymptomatic testing in schools

Rapid testing using Lateral Flow Devices (LFD)s will support the return to face-to-face education by helping to identify people who are infectious but do not have any coronavirus (COVID-19) symptoms. For secondary school staff and pupils we are moving to a home testing model (for pupils, following the first 3 onsite tests). The
lateral flow devices used have received regulatory approval from the MHRA for self-use. Home test kits will be available for all staff on return. Once pupils have been tested 3 times at school, they will be provided with home test kits for regular testing. Testing remains voluntary but strongly encouraged.

**Secondary school testing on-site through an Asymptomatic Testing Site (ATS)**

Secondary schools should offer pupils testing at an on-site ATS from 8 March. Testing and return of pupils can be phased during the first week to manage the number of pupils passing through the test site at any one time. You should offer 3 tests, 3 to 5 days apart.

You have the flexibility to consider how best to deliver testing on a phased basis from 8 March, depending on your circumstances and local arrangements, but you should prioritise vulnerable children and children of critical workers, and year groups 10 to 13.

Pupils should return to face-to-face education following their first negative test result. Pupils not undergoing testing should attend school in line with your phased return arrangements. Schools will have discretion on how to test students over that week as they return to the classroom.

Testing is voluntary. If consent is provided, pupils will be asked to self-swab at the on-site ATS and after 30 minutes they should be informed of their results.

Individuals with a positive LFD test result will need to self-isolate in line with the [guidance for households with possible coronavirus infection](#). Those with a negative LFD test result can continue to attend school unless they have individually been advised otherwise by NHS Test and Trace or Public Health professionals (for example as a close contact). They should continue to apply the measures in the system of controls to themselves and the wider school setting.

Schools should retain a small on-site ATS on site so they can offer testing to pupils who are unable or unwilling to test themselves at home. We will provide further information about funding available to support this.

**Home testing**

Both pupils and staff in secondary schools will be supplied with LFD test kits to self-swab and test themselves twice a week at home. Staff and pupils must report their result to NHS Test and Trace as soon as the test is completed either online or by telephone as per the instructions in the home test kit. Staff and pupils should also
share their result, whether void, positive or negative, with their school to help with contact tracing. Pupils aged 18 and over should self-test and report the result, with assistance if needed. Adolescents aged 12 to 17 should self-test and report with adult supervision. The adult may conduct the test if necessary. Children aged 11 attending a secondary school should be tested by an adult.

Staff or pupils with a positive LFD test result will need to self-isolate in line with the stay-at-home guidance. They will also need to arrange a lab-based polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test to confirm the result if the test was done at home. Those with a negative LFD test result can continue to attend school and use protective measures.

**Symptomatic testing**

The asymptomatic testing programme does not replace the current testing policy for those with symptoms. Anyone with symptoms (even if they recently had a negative LFD test result), should still self-isolate immediately according to government guidelines.

Those with symptoms are also expected to order a test online or visit a test site to take a lab-based polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test to check if they have the virus.

**Attendance**

School attendance will be mandatory for all pupils from 8 March.

The usual rules on school attendance apply, including:

- parents’ duty to secure their child’s regular attendance at school (where the child is a registered pupil at school and they are of compulsory school age)
- the ability to issue sanctions, including fixed penalty notices in line with local authorities’ codes of conduct

As usual, you are responsible for recording attendance, following up absence and reporting children missing education to the local authority.

**Educational visits**

We advise against all educational visits at this time. This advice will be kept under review.

The Association of British Insurers (ABI) has produced information on travel insurance implications following the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. If schools
have any further questions about their cover or would like further reassurance, they should contact their travel insurance provider.

**School uniform**

We would encourage all schools to maintain their usual uniform policies. Uniform can play a valuable role in contributing to the ethos of a school and setting an appropriate tone.

Uniforms do not need to be cleaned:

- more often than usual
- using different methods