

Joint union safety checklist for schools

Checklist for fuller opening
in March 2021

Coronavirus crisis
Workplace checklist



The Government has asked schools and colleges to prepare for fuller opening from 8 March. Before then, leaders will need to review the safety procedures previously established and ensure they are updated as necessary.

The joint unions are keen to see schools open more widely, but this should only happen when the science says it is safe and in a manner which is safe - when schools' risk assessments, including individual risk assessments, have been completed and updated and when appropriate safety measures have been introduced.

We must ensure schools do not become 'vectors of transmission' for Covid-19 again. We are continuing to call on the Department for Education (DfE) to facilitate a staggered approach which does not increase local transmission rates, allowing schools to adopt phased returns and flexible rota systems, as well as the measures set out below to help them maintain safety.

Using this advice

This joint advice, like our advice for September opening, aims to help you to understand the [current DfE advice](#), identify the most important areas to be considered and ensure that appropriate risk assessments and safety measures are in place for a safer workplace.

It is aimed specifically at schools, but its principles can and should be applied in other settings.

We aim to help leaders with their difficult responsibilities, by providing comprehensive advice and supporting them to ensure confidence through full consultation and communication.

Union reps should seek meetings with leaders to discuss their preparations. If members have concerns about safety measures proposed or areas not addressed, then support will be available from their union.

The full joint union advice previously published for September opening is available in a form updated to reflect changes in Government and union advice. It can be used for reference on a complete range of issues which may need to be considered in each workplace.

Risk assessments

The DfE advice continues to emphasise the importance of risk assessments and safety measures which are regularly reviewed and updated.

Matters which need to be considered by leaders, reps and members include:

- ❑ Has the risk assessment process considered all the areas identified in DfE and joint union advice, fully evaluated the risk of harm, including local prevalence, and identified the measures to apply in each area?
- ❑ Has there been sufficient consultation with union reps and staff?
- ❑ Is it clear how revised procedures will be communicated to staff, students and parents/carers, contractor staff and visiting workers?
- ❑ Has the position of the most vulnerable staff been adequately considered through individual risk assessments?

Question to reps and members:

Are you and your colleagues satisfied with the risk assessment process, or do you feel the situation is unsafe due to omissions or errors?

Social distancing and safety measures

The DfE's main concern is to reduce community transmission and the extent to which schools may contribute to this, through contact on site and travel between home and school. The joint unions are also concerned to ensure members are kept safe while at work.

Safety around the school and within each classroom depends on a range of inter-connected factors – the number of staff and students, the extent to which they are kept distanced, and other measures to reduce the risk of transmission, such as face coverings, ventilation etc.

The Government's social distancing advice continues to be that everyone should stay two metres apart where possible, or one metre with extra precautions in place (such as wearing face coverings or increasing ventilation indoors). The DfE advice says that "this is not always possible" in some situations in schools but reaffirms the basic principle where possible.

The DfE advice does not go as far as the joint unions think is necessary on face coverings. These should be supplied by the school, be of good quality and training given on how to use. Breaks from wearing should be implemented to avoid fatigue and discomfort. We recognise that expecting primary age pupils to wear them is more challenging. The World Health Organisation states that children aged 5 and under should not wear masks but that between the ages of 6 and 11 decisions should be made based on various factors, including local transmission, access to masks, ability of the children to use them and their well-being [Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\): Children and masks \(who.int\)](#). Mask wearing among younger children is required in a significant number of other countries, including the USA. If this is achieved even only among older primary pupils, it could help reduce transmission and disruption. Where face coverings are not required to be worn by pupils in classrooms, school staff should be provided with appropriate higher grade face masks, which protect the wearer, eg FFP2, or FFP3 in higher risk settings, such as SEND. This should form part of the Risk Assessment.

Exemptions from wearing face coverings will of course be necessary for students who find it difficult to wear them, in particular in special schools.

Each school and each classroom is different. We advise you to consider the following issues and then decide whether you think matters are safe. If not, seek support. You should also consider the advice on vulnerable and higher-risk staff set out later in this advice.

Safety measures around the school

- ❑ Are bubbles being made as small as possible (for example, no return to full year bubbles)?
- ❑ Will staff and students be kept in one bubble, with staff movement between bubbles avoided altogether wherever possible, except in emergencies?
- ❑ Will arrangements for moving around the site minimise the extent of contact and mixing?
- ❑ Will lunch breaks and other breaks be staggered?
- ❑ Will large gatherings such as assemblies be avoided?
- ❑ Have ventilation arrangements been reviewed to ensure maximum ventilation of all school spaces?
- ❑ What additional measures and equipment are being used to aid and improve ventilation? Are CO2 monitors available to enable regular monitoring to take place?
- ❑ Are there any areas of the school with unsafe ventilation which should not be used?
- ❑ Have enhanced cleaning regimes been introduced throughout the school including employing additional cleaning staff and payment for extra workload or hours worked to support cleaning and estates staff)
- ❑ Are toilets cleaned regularly

- ❑ Are closed bins for tissue disposal provided
- ❑ Will face coverings be required to be worn around the school as required or advised by DfE advice?
- ❑ Will face coverings also be required to be worn around the school more widely than required by DfE advice?
- ❑ Will face coverings be provided by the school where needed?
- ❑ Will personal protective equipment (PPE), including FFP2 or FFP3 grade masks, if appropriate, be provided for staff administering first aid, medical care or personal care activities where social distancing cannot be maintained, for example in some special schools and nurseries.
- ❑ Will catering, cleaning and estates staff be provided with PPE?
- ❑ Will adequate arrangements for enhanced cleaning and hand washing be maintained?

Safety measures within the classroom

- ❑ Are class sizes being reduced to the smallest possible size, for example through splitting into two groups?
- ❑ What level of social distancing will be maintained between staff and students?
- ❑ What distancing will be maintained between students?
- ❑ Is the classroom adequately ventilated?
- ❑ Will face coverings be required to be worn in the classroom where required or advised by DfE advice?
- ❑ Will face coverings also be required to be worn in the classroom more widely than required by DfE advice?

Safety measures on arrival and departure

- ❑ Has the use or possible use of staggered start and finish times been reviewed?
- ❑ Have arrangements for queuing on arrival, waiting to collect students, staff supervision etc been reviewed?
- ❑ Have arrangements for school transport, including when travelling, boarding and disembarking, been reviewed?
- ❑ Has the school agreed to apply public transport rules on social distancing and face coverings to both primary and secondary pupils on all dedicated school transport?
- ❑ Will pupils on dedicated school transport be kept within their bubbles?
- ❑ Have arrangements for visitors been reviewed?

Question to reps and members:

Are you and your colleagues satisfied with arrangements for safety in individual classrooms and/or around the school?

Protecting vulnerable staff

While transmission risks are still high, arrangements should be made for the most vulnerable staff to work at home. This must continue to include all those in the expanded "shielding" category of clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) staff, who are being instructed by Government not to attend work, even after vaccination until 31 March. The joint unions believe that clinically vulnerable (CV) staff and staff aged 60 and above should also be able to work from home until they are advised by their GP that their initial vaccination should have taken effect. Where possible, measures should be taken to protect others in phase 1 of the vaccination programme, aged 50 or above, who may be awaiting their first vaccination. Pregnant women in their third trimester who are, with limited exceptions, currently being advised against vaccination should also be allowed to work from home. In all cases, individual risk assessments for vulnerable workers, should be undertaken before they return to work. See the full joint union advice here [Coronavirus: medically vulnerable and higher risk groups | NEU](#).

- ❑ Have individual Covid-19 risk assessments been carried out (and reviewed where previously carried out) for the most vulnerable staff and for staff concerned about vulnerable household members?
- ❑ Have individual risk assessments been offered to staff with characteristics that put them at higher risk, such as age, ethnicity, sex and disability?
- ❑ Will CEV and other employees covered by shielding arrangements be instructed to work at home as instructed by Government?
- ❑ Will the most vulnerable remaining staff - CV employees and those over aged 60 or above - be permitted to work at home until they are advised by their GP that their initial vaccination has taken effect,

as per joint union advice? Will individual risk assessments be undertaken before any return to school/college?

- ❑ Where possible, have measures been taken to protect others in phase 1 of the vaccination programme aged 50 or over who may be awaiting their first vaccination?
- ❑ Will pregnant women in their third trimester be permitted to work at home?
- ❑ Is it clear that no pregnant woman, whatever the stage of pregnancy, should be in the workplace unless an agreed risk assessment advises that it is safe?
- ❑ Will temporary changes in responsibilities be agreed as appropriate to allow the above where necessary to facilitate home working?
- ❑ Will appropriate PPE be provided for those staff at significant risk?

Question to reps and members:

Are medically vulnerable colleagues satisfied with arrangements for them personally?

Avoiding excessive workload

The Covid-19 pandemic has hugely increased workload for many staff. By now schools should have taken steps to ensure that new working arrangements minimise additional workload and that some existing practices are changed or dropped to reduce overall working time.

- ❑ Has the school conducted a review to seek to reduce staff workload?
- ❑ Have steps been taken to remove unnecessary working activities altogether and conduct others in a way which avoids the need for staff to be or remain present in school?
- ❑ Will the school maintain PPA time and other non-contact time for classroom staff?
- ❑ Will demands to work outside of normal responsibilities be kept to a minimum?
- ❑ Will there be arrangements in place to support staff wellbeing, such as individual counselling support?

Question to reps and members:

Has your school taken satisfactory steps to address wellbeing and reduce workload?

Testing, tracing and isolating

The joint unions expect all schools to comply fully with the NHS Test and Trace system and to support testing systems to identify cases which might not otherwise be identified. Procedures should ensure that all students who test positive and their contacts are excluded from school for the necessary period.

- ❑ Is the school complying with the NHS process, with all staff being encouraged to use the NHS Covid-19 app in school, including in classrooms, and self-isolating when notified by the app?
- ❑ Has the school established workable arrangements for testing to identify asymptomatic cases?
- ❑ Will all those with symptoms, and close contacts of positive cases, be expected to self-isolate, in line with DfE advice for the necessary period?
- ❑ Are arrangements for supervising students with symptoms prior to them going home satisfactory?
- ❑ Will all staff, including outsourced staff such as catering and cleaning staff, receive full pay when required to self-isolate, without any impact on their sickness absence record?

Question to reps and members:

Are the school's processes for testing, tracing and excluding contacts satisfactory?