Department for Education

Contingency framework: education and childcare settings

August 2021

Contents

Summary 3

Who is this guidance for? 3

Introduction 6

Principles 7

Prioritising education 7

Collaboration 7

Roles and responsibilities 8

Contingency planning 9

When settings should consider extra action 10

Actions to consider 11

Measures that settings should plan for 12

Testing 12

Face coverings 12

Shielding 13

Other measures 13

Attendance restrictions 13

Other considerations where attendance has been restricted 14

Remote education 14

Education workforce 14

Safeguarding and designated safeguarding leads 14

Vulnerable children and young people 15

Transport 16

School and FE meals 16

Educational visits 16

Annex – Guidance for education & childcare settings on managing COVID-19 cases from autumn term 2021 17

Baseline measures 17

When setting should consider extra action 18

Close mixing 19

Actions to consider once a threshold is reached 20

Additional action that could be advised by public health experts 21

Summary

The contingency framework describes the principles of managing local outbreaks of Coronavirus (COVID-19) (including responding to variants of concern) in education and childcare settings, covering:

- the types of measures that settings should be prepared for
- who can recommend these measures and where
- when measures should be lifted
- how decisions are made

Local authorities, directors of public health (DsPH) and PHE health protection teams (HPTs) can recommend measures described here in individual education and childcare settings as part of their outbreak management responsibilities. Where there is a need to address more widespread issues across an area, ministers will take decisions on an area-by-area basis.

Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is for:

Early years settings, including:

- all providers on the Ofsted early years register
- providers registered with an early years childminder agency
- all pre-reception early years provision in maintained, non-maintained and independent schools

Schools, including:

- primary schools (including reception classes)
- middle or upper schools
- secondary schools (including school sixth forms)
- special schools, including non-maintained special schools
- special post-16 providers
- 16 to 19 academies
- Independent schools

Alternative provision (AP), including:

- pupil referral units
- AP academies
- AP free schools

Further education (FE) providers, including:

- sixth-form colleges
- general FE colleges
- independent training providers
- designated institutions
- adult community learning providers
- special post-16 institutions

Higher education providers (HE), including:

- universities
- specialist and independent HE providers

Out-of-school settings and wraparound childcare, including:

- breakfast clubs
- after-school clubs
- holiday clubs
- other out-of-school settings (including providers of wraparound childcare for children over the age of 5)

Summer school provision, which may be arranged or hosted by a range of organisations including:

- secondary schools
- special schools
- pupil referral units
- alternative provision

Holiday activities and food programme, during the Easter, Summer and Christmas school holidays. There are a wide variety of organisations and individuals involved in the delivery of the holiday activities and food programme and other out-of-school settings, including but not limited to:

- schools
- private providers
- charities
- youth clubs
- community groups

This guidance is also for local authorities, DsPH and HPTs.

This guidance should be read alongside the detailed guidance for education and childcare settings and providers operating during COVID-19:

- actions for early years and childcare providers during the COVID-19 outbreak
- actions for schools during the COVID-19 outbreak

- actions for FE colleges and providers during the COVID-19 outbreak
- providing apprenticeships during the COVID-19 outbreak
- COVID-19: Actions for Out-of-School Settings
- guidance for special schools and other specialist settings: COVID 19
- guidance for higher education providers: COVID 19

Introduction

The Government has made it a national priority that education and childcare settings should continue to operate as normally as possible during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Measures affecting education and childcare may be necessary in some circumstances, for example:

- to help manage a COVID-19 outbreak within a setting
- as part of a package of measures responding to a Variant of Concern (VoC) or to extremely high prevalence of COVID-19 in the community
- to prevent unsustainable pressure on the NHS

All education and childcare settings should already have contingency plans (sometimes called outbreak management plans) describing what they would do if children, pupils, students or staff test positive for COVID-19, or how they would operate if they were advised to reintroduce any measures described in this document to help break chains of transmission.

Principles

Prioritising education

The overarching objective is to maximise the number of children and young people in face-to face education or childcare and minimise any disruption, in a way that best manages the COVID-19 risk.

The impacts of having missed face-to-face education during the pandemic are severe for children, young people and adults. In all cases, any benefits in managing transmission should be weighed against any educational drawbacks.

Decision-makers should endeavour to keep any measures in education and childcare to the minimum number of settings or groups possible, and for the shortest amount of time possible.

Decision-makers should keep all measures under regular review and lift them as soon as the evidence supports doing so.

Measures affecting education and childcare settings across an area should not be considered in isolation, but as part of a broader package of measures. Attendance restrictions should only ever be considered as a last resort.

The Government will try to give as much notice as possible of any changes to the way settings should operate.

Collaboration

Multi-agency collaboration and communication is important in ensuring consistency in approach across England wherever issues occur, so that no group of children, pupils or students is unfairly disadvantaged.

Local authorities, DsPH and DfE's regional schools commissioners (RSCs) should maintain close working relationships through their regional partnership teams (RPTs). These teams are made up of:

- PHE regional directors
- Contain regional convenors
- Joint Biosecurity Centre (JBC) regional leads

Where decisions about measures in education and childcare settings are made at a national level, DfE will work with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), JBC, NHS Test and Trace, the Chief Medical Officer, PHE and other government departments, as well as relevant local authorities and DsPH. The Government will review the available evidence and take into account the judgement of public health professionals.

Roles and responsibilities

Local authorities, DsPH and HPTs are responsible for managing localised outbreaks. They play an important role in providing support and advice to education and childcare settings.

Local authorities, DsPH and HPTs can work with their regional partnership teams (RPTs) to escalate issues from the local level into the central Local Action Committee command structure. RPTs support local areas in managing outbreaks and provide advice and insights from across the country to the Chief Medical Officer and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to inform decision making.

Through the Local Action Committee command structure, ministers consider and take decisions on measures on an area-by-area basis in light of all available evidence, public health advice and the local and national context.

In rare circumstances, it may be necessary to escalate issues to ministers through other central government committees (for example incident management teams), but this should be by exception only.

Contingency planning

All education and childcare settings should already have contingency plans (sometimes called outbreak management plans) describing what they would do if children, pupils, students or staff test positive for COVID-19, or how they would operate if they were advised to reintroduce any measures described in this document to help break chains of transmission.

COVID-19 resilience and planning is now more important than ever. Settings do not need to reformat their existing contingency plans to specific templates, but the plans should be kept robust and up to date in light of the advice set out here.

A good plan should cover:

- roles and responsibilities
- when and how to seek public health advice
- details on the types of control measures you might be asked to put in place (described in measures that settings should plan for and your sector's guidance)

For each control measure you should include:

- actions you would take to put it in place quickly.
- how you would ensure every child, pupil or student receives the quantity and quality of education and support to which they are normally entitled.
- how you would communicate changes to children, pupils, students, parents, carers and staff.

When settings should consider extra action

For settings testing pupils, students and staff in asymptomatic test sites after the summer holidays, this section only applies after the initial two tests are complete. Cases identified in the test-on-return period should not trigger extra measures or escalation to the DfE helpline.

The Operational Guidance sets out the measures that all education settings should have in place to manage transmission of COVID-19 day to day. For most settings it will make sense to think about taking extra action if the number of positive cases substantially increases. This is because it could indicate transmission is happening in the setting. The thresholds, detailed below, can be used by settings as an indication for when to seek public health advice if they are concerned.

For most education and childcare settings, whichever of these thresholds is reached first:

- 5 children, pupils, students or staff, who are likely to have mixed closely, test positive for COVID-19 within a 10-day period; or
- 10% of children, pupils, students or staff who are likely to have mixed closely test positive for COVID-19 within a 10-day period

For special schools, residential settings, and settings that operate with 20 or fewer children, pupils, students and staff at any one time:

- 2 children, pupils, students and staff, who are likely to have mixed closely, test positive for COVID-19 within a 10-day period

Identifying a group that is likely to have mixed closely will be different for each setting. The annex gives examples for each sector, but a group will rarely mean a whole setting or year group.

Higher education providers should continue to liaise with their DsPH. If and when outbreaks occur, providers should work with their local HPTs to identify any additional measures to put in place.

All settings should seek public health advice if a pupil, student, child or staff member is admitted to hospital with COVID-19. They can do this by phoning the DfE helpline (0800 046 8687, option 1), or in line with other local arrangements. Hospitalisation could indicate increased severity of illness or a new variant of concern. Settings may be offered public health support in managing risk assessments and communicating with staff and parents.

Actions to consider

When the above thresholds are reached, education and childcare settings should review and reinforce the testing, hygiene and ventilation measures they already have in place. There is more detail on these in the annex to this document and in the guidance for each sector.

Settings may wish to seek additional public health advice if they are concerned about transmission in the setting, either by phoning the DfE helpline (0800 046 8687, option 1) or in line with other local arrangements.

A director of public health or an HPT may give settings advice reflecting the local situation. In areas where rates are high, this may include advice that local circumstances mean that the thresholds for extra action can be higher than set out above. If they judge that additional action should be taken, they might advise the setting to take some or all of the other measures described in this document, for example extra testing.

All settings should make sure their contingency plans cover how they would operate if any of the measures described below were recommended for their setting or area.

For all cases relating to staff, please also see the guidance for workplaces: NHS Test and Trace in the workplace

Employers should call the Self-Isolation Service Hub on 020 3743 6715 as soon as they are made aware that any of their workers have tested positive.

If cases amongst staff mean a setting meets the threshold, described above, employers will need to provide the 8-digit NHS Test and Trace Account ID (sometimes referred to as a CTAS number) of the person who tested positive, alongside the names of co-workers identified as close contacts. This will ensure that all workplace contacts are registered with NHS Test and Trace and can receive the necessary public health advice, including the support available to help people to self-isolate. Further guidance is available here

Measures that settings should plan for

Testing

All settings should ensure their contingency plans reflect the possibility of increased use of testing by staff and, where they are already being offered testing, for pupils and students. This could include advice on more frequent testing, or on the reintroduction of asymptomatic test sites (ATS) (where they have been stood down).

These measures may be advised:

- for an individual setting only, by DsPH as part of their responsibilities in outbreak management, or
- for settings across areas that have been offered an enhanced response package or are in an enduring transmission area, where settings and directors of public health decide it is appropriate

These additional testing measures would need to be agreed with settings and we encourage DsPH to consult settings and work with them to identify what support may be needed to do this.

Secondary schools and colleges should consider how ATS could be implemented in a way that does not negatively impact the education they provide to their pupils and students.

DsPH should keep DfE informed of all cases where they are considering recommending ATS for an education setting, via their RPT and RSC.

Face coverings

Education settings should make sure their contingency plans cover the possibility that it may be advised that face coverings should temporarily be worn in settings in their area. This may include face coverings in communal areas and/or classrooms, for pupils, students and staff.

Children of primary school age and early years children should not be advised to wear face coverings.

Any guidance should allow for reasonable exemptions for their use.

These measures may temporarily be advised:

- for an individual setting only, by DsPH as part of their responsibilities in outbreak management, or

- for settings across areas that have been offered an enhanced response package, or are in an enduring transmission area, where settings and DsPH decide it is appropriate

In all cases any educational and wellbeing drawbacks in the recommended use of face coverings should be balanced with the benefits in managing transmission.

Shielding

Shielding is currently paused. In the event of a major outbreak or VoC that poses a significant risk to individuals on the shielded patient list (SPL), ministers can agree to reintroduce shielding. Shielding would be considered in addition to other measures to address the residual risk to people on the SPL, once the wider interventions are taken into account.

Settings should make sure their contingency plans cover this possibility.

Shielding can only be reintroduced by national government.

Other measures

Settings should make sure their contingency plans cover the possibility they are advised to limit:

- residential educational visits
- open days
- transition or taster days
- parental attendance in settings
- live performances in settings

Local authorities, DsPH and HPTs may recommend these precautions in individual settings or across an entire area.

Attendance restrictions

High quality face-to-face education remains a government priority. Attendance restrictions should only ever be considered as a short-term measure and as a last resort:

- for individual settings, on public health advice in extreme cases where other recommended measures have not broken chains of in-setting transmission; or
- across an area, on government advice in order to supress or manage a dangerous variant and to prevent unsustainable pressure on the NHS.

In all circumstances, priority should continue to be given to vulnerable children and young people and children of critical workers to attend to their normal timetables.

Where measures include attendance restrictions, DfE may advise on any other groups that should be prioritised. Settings should make sure their contingency plans cover the possibility they are advised, temporarily, to limit attendance and should ensure that high-quality remote education is provided to all pupils or students not attending.

Other considerations where attendance has been restricted

Remote education

High-quality remote learning in schools, further education and higher education settings should be provided for all pupils and students if:

- they have tested positive for COVID-19 but are well enough to learn from home; or
- attendance at their setting has been temporarily restricted

On-site provision should in all cases be retained for vulnerable children and young people and the children of critical workers. If settings have to temporarily stop onsite provision on public health advice, they should discuss alternative arrangements for vulnerable children and young people with the local authority. Full detail on remote education expectations and the support available to schools and FE providers is available at Get help with remote education.

Education workforce

If restrictions on child, pupil and student attendance are ever needed, leaders of childcare and education settings will be best placed to determine the workforce required onsite and if it is appropriate for some staff to work remotely.

Employers should have regard to the guidance on clinically extremely vulnerable people.

Safeguarding and designated safeguarding leads

There should be no change to local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements, which remain the responsibility of the 3 safeguarding partners:

- local authorities
- clinical commissioning groups
- chief officers of police

If attendance restrictions are needed in any education or childcare setting, we would expect all local safeguarding partners to be vigilant and responsive to all safeguarding

threats with the aim of keeping vulnerable children and young people safe, particularly as more children and young people will be learning remotely.

All settings must continue to have regard to any statutory safeguarding guidance that applies to them, including:

- Keeping children safe in education
- Working together to safeguard children
- Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework

Out of school settings should also review the Keeping children safe in out-of-school settings: code of practice.

Early years providers, schools, out-of-school settings and FE providers (ideally led by the designated safeguarding lead (DSL) or a deputy) should review their child protection policy so that it reflects the local restrictions and remains effective.

It is expected that schools, out-of-school settings and FE providers will have a trained DSL (or deputy) available on site. However, it is recognised that for some schools and FE providers there may be operational challenges to this. In such cases, there are two options to consider:

- a trained DSL (or deputy) from the early years setting, school, out-of-school settings or FE provider can be available to be contacted via phone or online video, for example working from home
- sharing trained DSLs (or deputies) with other settings, schools or FE providers (who should be available to be contacted via phone or online video)

Where a trained DSL (or deputy) is not on site, in addition to one of the above options, a senior leader should take responsibility for co-ordinating safeguarding on site.

Vulnerable children and young people

Where vulnerable children and young people are absent, education settings should:

- follow up with the parent or carer, working with the local authority and social worker (where applicable), to explore the reason for absence and discuss their concerns
- encourage the child or young person to attend educational provision, working with the local authority and social worker (where applicable), particularly where the social worker and the Virtual School Head (where applicable) agrees that the child or young person's attendance would be appropriate
- focus the discussions on the welfare of the child or young person and ensuring that the child or young person is able to access appropriate education and support while they are at home

- have in place procedures to maintain contact, ensure they are able to access remote education support, as required, and regularly check if they are doing so

If settings have to temporarily stop onsite provision on public health advice, they should discuss alternative arrangements for vulnerable children and young people with the local authority.

Transport

Transport services to education settings should continue to be provided as normal where children are attending education settings. The guidance on transport to schools and colleges during the COVID-19 pandemic guidance remains in place.

School and FE meals

Schools should provide meal options for all pupils who are in school. Meals should be available free of charge to all infant pupils and pupils who meet the benefits-related free school meals eligibility criteria.

Schools should also continue to provide free school meals support in the form of meals or lunch parcels for pupils who are eligible for benefits related free school meals and who are not attending school because they have had symptoms or a positive test result themselves.

Further information is available in the guidance on providing school meals during the COVID-19 pandemic.

FE providers should continue to support students who are eligible for, and usually receive, free meals, even if students are studying remotely due to COVID-19. This includes students in further education, who are newly eligible.

There is further guidance on free meals in further education-funded institutions.

Educational visits

Any attendance restrictions should be reflected in the visits risk assessment and setting leaders should consider carefully if the educational visit is still appropriate and safe. Only students who are attending the setting should go on an educational visit. Education settings should consult the health and safety guidance on educational visits when considering visits.

Annex – Guidance for education & childcare settings on managing COVID-19 cases from autumn term 2021

The Government's roadmap guidance on moving to Step 4 set out how restrictions have been eased across society, including in education and childcare settings. We need to continue to proceed with caution and find the right balance between protecting public health and living with Coronavirus (COVID-19) as more of the population is vaccinated.

Wherever additional measures are considered, the objective is to maximise the number of children and young people in face-to-face teaching and minimise control measures that disrupt education, balanced against the risks of COVID-19 transmission.

There is strong evidence that children and young people are much less susceptible to severe clinical disease than older people and that there are significant disadvantages to children and young people associated with missed education.

It is of course acknowledged that this evidence may change with the emergence of new variants of concern (VoCs). The Government will continue to advise baseline measures and provide thresholds at which help can be sought and extra measures may be introduced. Local spikes in COVID-19 will usually be best managed through a dynamic risk assessment approach. Attendance restrictions are unlikely to be a proportionate response to the level of risk that COVID-19 currently poses to children and young people, and public health authorities would only consider them as a last resort if all other risk mitigations proved insufficient to break chains of transmission.

In light of this, all education and childcare settings should revisit their contingency plans based on the advice below. There is no expectation that education and childcare settings should create new documents or reformat any existing plans to specific templates, but plans should be robust and up to date.

Baseline measures

The Operational Guidance sets out the measures that all education settings should have in place to manage transmission of COVID-19. This includes:

1. Students in secondary schools and colleges should be **tested twice on site** at an Asymptomatic Testing Site (ATS) on return in the autumn term. The tests should be 3-5 days apart.

2. All students in Higher Education (HE) settings should test before they travel back to university. They can order a free test online or collect one from their local pharmacy. On arrival at university, all students should take two Lateral Flow Device (LFD) tests (3-4 days apart) using either home test kits (LFD Collect) or an ATS.

3. Thereafter, staff and students in secondary schools and colleges, and staff in

primary schools, should **test themselves using LFD twice a week at home** until the end of September, when this will be reviewed. All early years and wraparound childcare staff should also continue to test twice weekly as they have done throughout the summer. Twice weekly testing for staff and students in HE settings will also continue until the end of September using either home test kits (LFD Collect) or an ATS. This is critical for identifying positive cases early and ensuring they isolate.

4. **Those who test positive** should isolate, take a confirmatory polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test, and continue to isolate if the result is positive. Schools and colleges will need to be prepared to implement high-quality blended learning arrangements so that any child who is well enough to learn from home can do so.

5. Under-18s, irrespective of their vaccination status, and double vaccinated adults will **not need to self-isolate** if they are a close contact of a positive case. They will be strongly advised to take a PCR test and, if positive, will need to isolate. 18-year-olds will be treated in the same way as children until 6 months after their 18th birthday, to allow them the opportunity to get fully vaccinated. Further guidance can be found here for close contacts of someone who has tested positive and lives in the same household, and here for those who do not live together.

6. All education and childcare settings should continue to ensure **good hygiene** for everyone, maintain appropriate **cleaning regimes**, keep occupied spaces **well ventilated**, and follow public health advice on testing and managing confirmed cases of COVID-19.

7. All settings should continue their **strong messaging about signs and symptoms**, isolation advice and testing, to support prompt isolation of suspected cases. Settings should also continue to encourage vaccination uptake for eligible students and staff.

When setting should consider extra action

For settings testing pupils, students and staff in asymptomatic test sites (ATS) after the summer holidays, this section only applies after the initial two ATS tests are complete. Cases identified in the test-on-return period should not trigger extra measures or escalation to the DfE helpline.

For most settings it will make sense to think about taking extra action if the number of positive cases substantially increases. This is because it could indicate transmission is happening in the setting. The thresholds, detailed below, can be used by settings as an indication for when to seek public health advice if they are concerned. For most education and childcare settings, whichever of these thresholds is reached first:

- 5 children, pupils, students or staff, who are likely to have mixed closely, test positive for COVID-19 within a 10-day period; or

- 10% of children, pupils, students or staff who are likely to have mixed closely test positive for COVID-19 within a 10-day period

For special schools, residential settings, and settings that operate with 20 or fewer children, pupils, students and staff at any one time:

- 2 children, pupils, students and staff, who are likely to have mixed closely, test positive for COVID-19 within a 10-day period

Identifying a group that is likely to have mixed closely will be different for each setting. The annex gives examples for each sector, but a group will rarely mean a whole setting or year group.

Higher education providers should continue to liaise with their DsPH. If and when outbreaks occur, providers should work with their local HPTs to identify any additional measures to put in place.

All settings should seek public health advice if a pupil, student, child or staff member is admitted to hospital with COVID-19. They can do this by phoning the DfE helpline (0800 046 8687, option 1), or in line with other local arrangements. Hospitalisation could indicate increased severity of illness or a new variant of concern. Settings may be offered public health support in managing risk assessments and communicating with staff and parents.

Close mixing

Identifying a group that is likely to have mixed closely will be different for each setting. Below are some examples.

For early years, this could include:

- a childminder minding children, including their own
- childminders working together on the same site
- a nursery class
- a friendship group who often play together
- staff and children taking part in the same activity session together

For schools, this could include:

- a form group or subject class
- a friendship group mixing at breaktimes
- a sports team
- a group in an after-school activity

For boarding schools, this could include:

- staff and children taking part in the same class or activity session together
- children who share the same common space in a boarding house
- children who have slept in the same room or dormitory together

For FE, this could include:

- students and teachers on practical courses that require close hands-on teaching, such as hairdressing and barbering
- students who have played on sports teams together
- students and teachers who have mixed in the same classroom

For wraparound childcare or out-of-school settings, this could include:

- a private tutor or coach offering one-to-one tuition to a child, or to multiple children at the same time
- staff and children taking part in the same class or activity session together
- children who have slept in the same room or dormitory together

For higher education institutions, this could include:

- students in the same household, sharing living, washing and cooking facilities
- students who take part in sporting or social activities together.
- students taking part in the same seminar or group learning activity such as a presentation

Actions to consider once a threshold is reached

At the point of reaching a threshold, education and childcare settings should review and reinforce the testing, hygiene and ventilation measures they already have in place. Settings should also consider:

- whether any activities could take place outdoors, including exercise, assemblies, or classes
- ways to improve ventilation indoors, where this would not significantly impact thermal comfort
- one-off enhanced cleaning focussing on touch points and any shared equipment

Settings may wish to seek additional public health advice if they are concerned about transmission in the setting, either by phoning the DfE helpline (0800 046 8687, option 1) or in line with other local arrangements.

A director of public health or an HPT may give settings advice reflecting the local situation. In areas where rates are high, this may include advice that local circumstances

mean that the thresholds for extra action can be higher than set out above. They might advise the setting to take some of the other measures described in this document.

Additional action that could be advised by public health experts

If you have called the DfE helpline and a Director of Public Health (DsPH) or a Health Protection Team (HPT) subsequently judges that additional action should be taken because they have assessed that transmission is likely to be occurring in the setting, they may advise settings take extra measures such as:

1. **Strengthened communications** to encourage pupils / students to undertake twice weekly rapid asymptomatic home testing and reporting

2. **Temporarily reinstating face coverings** for pupils/students, staff and visitors in indoor and/or communal spaces in secondary schools, FE and HE settings, and for staff in primary, early years, out-of-school, and specialist settings. This should be for two weeks in the first instance, pending regular review

3. **Reinstating on-site rapid LFD testing** in secondary schools, colleges and universities for a two-week period to encourage uptake of twice weekly testing

4. **Increased frequency of testing**

They may also recommend the actions listed under Other Measures in the contingency framework, or other proportionate measures to support continuing face-to-face education.

In extreme cases, and as a last resort where all other risk mitigations have not broken chains of in-school transmission, a DPH may advise introducing short-term attendance restrictions in a setting, such as sending home a class or year group (as they could any workplace experiencing a serious infectious disease outbreak).

High-quality remote learning should be provided for all students well enough to learn from home. On-site provision should in all cases be retained for vulnerable children and young people and the children of critical workers.

Where they have advised settings to take extra measures, DsPH and HPTs will work closely with their Regional Partnership Teams and keep the situation under regular review. They will inform settings when it is appropriate to stop additional measures, or if they should be extended.

Department for Education

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