



Department  
for Education

# Schools COVID-19 operational guidance

**November 2021**

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# Summary

This guidance explains the actions school leaders should take to reduce the risk of transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19) in their school. This includes public health advice, endorsed by the United Kingdom Health Security Agency (UKHSA).

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

We expect independent schools to follow the control measures set out in this guidance in the same way as state-funded schools, and health and safety legislation applies equally to independent schools.

Where this guidance refers to schools, that does not include maintained nursery schools or pre-reception classes.

Separate guidance is available for:

- [early years and childcare settings](#)
- [further education colleges and providers](#)

Additional operational guidance is also available for [special schools, special post-16 providers and alternative provision](#).

Schools and trusts should work closely with parents and carers (future references 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 a good reason not to.

## Overview

The government continues to manage the risk of serious illness from the spread of the virus. The Prime Minister announced on 27 November the temporary introduction of new measures as a result of the Omicron variant. These measures are precautionary, while the variant is tracked and assessed. As a result, we are reflecting these measures in this guidance for schools, most directly a temporary recommendation on the wearing of face coverings in schools and changes to isolation requirements for confirmed and suspected cases of the Omicron variant and their contacts. This advice remains subject to change as the situation develops.

COVID-19 continues to be a virus that we learn to live with and the imperative to reduce the disruption to children and young people's education remains.

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, life chances, mental and physical health.

We have worked closely with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the United Kingdom Health Security Agency (UKHSA) to revise this guidance.

## Changes to the previous version

Changes to the guidance since its 27 September 2021 publication include:

- updated advice on Tracing close contacts and isolation to reflect the change in measures for close contacts of suspected or confirmed Omicron cases
- updated advice on Face coverings to reflect the change in measures – they are now recommended in communal areas in all schools for adults and for pupils from year 7 onwards
- replacement of references to Public Health England with references to the United Kingdom Health Security Agency (UKHSA)
- updated information in the Other considerations section on vaccination of under 18 year olds
- an updated Travel and quarantine section to reflect that pupils arriving from abroad will need to isolate and test on arrival
- an updated Educational visits section to advise you consider whether to go ahead with any planned international educational visits

## Risk assessment

You must comply with health and safety law and put in place proportionate control measures. You must regularly review and update your risk assessments - treating them as 'living documents', as the circumstances in your school and the public health advice

changes. This includes having active arrangements in place to monitor whether the controls are effective and working as planned. For more information on what is required of school leaders in relation to health and safety risk assessments and managing risk, see the [health and safety advice for schools](#).

## Mixing and bubbles

We do not recommend that it is necessary to keep children in consistent groups ('bubbles'). This means that 'bubbles' will not need to be used in schools. As well as enabling flexibility in curriculum delivery, this means that assemblies can resume and you do not need to make alternative arrangements to avoid mixing at lunch.

You should make sure your contingency plans (sometimes called outbreak management plans) cover the possibility that it may become necessary to reintroduce 'bubbles' for a temporary period, to reduce mixing between groups.

Any decision 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

Close contacts in schools are now identified by [NHS Test and Trace](#) and education settings are not expected to undertake contact tracing.

As with positive cases in any other setting, NHS Test and Trace will work with the positive case and/or their parent 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 parent specifically identifies the individual as being a close contact. This is likely to be a small number of individuals who would be most at risk of contracting COVID-19 due to the nature of the close contact. You may be contacted in exceptional cases to help with identifying close contacts, as currently happens in managing other infectious diseases.

All individuals who have been identified as a close contact of a suspected or confirmed case of the Omicron variant of COVID-19, irrespective of vaccination status and age, will be contacted directly and required to self-isolate immediately and asked to [book a PCR test](#). They will be informed by the local health protection team or NHS Test and Trace if they fall into this category and provided details about self-isolation.

Further actions for educational settings may be advised by a local Incident Management Team (IMT) investigating a suspected or confirmed case of the Omicron variant of COVID-19.

For everyone else, isolation rules are unchanged. Individuals are not required to self-isolate if they live in the same household as someone with COVID-19 who is not a suspected or confirmed case of the Omicron variant, or are a close contact of someone with COVID-19 who is not a suspected or confirmed case of the Omicron variant, and any of the following apply:

- they are fully vaccinated
- they are below the age of 18 years and 6 months
- they have taken part in 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 a positive case and advised to take a [PCR test](#). We would encourage all individuals to take a 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 who usually attend school, and have been identified as a close contact of someone with COVID-19 who is not a suspected or confirmed case of the Omicron variant, should continue to attend school as normal.

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. At which point, they 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 identified as a close contact.

Settings will continue to have a role in working with health protection teams in the case of a local outbreak. If there is a substantial increase in the number of positive cases in a setting (see [Stepping measures up and down](#) section for more information) or if central government offers the area an enhanced response package, a director of public health might advise a setting to temporarily reintroduce some control measures.

## Face coverings

Face coverings help protect the wearer and others against the spread of infection because they cover the nose and mouth, which are the main confirmed sources of transmission of COVID-19.

Where pupils in year 7 (which would be children who were aged 11 on 31 August 2021) and above are educated, we recommend that face coverings should be worn by pupils, staff and adult visitors when moving around the premises, outside of classrooms, such as in corridors and communal areas. This is a temporary measure. Pupils in these schools should also wear a face covering when travelling on public transport and dedicated

transport to and from school. We do not advise that pupils and staff wear face coverings in classrooms.

In primary schools, we recommend that face coverings should be worn by staff and adults (including visitors) when moving around in corridors and communal areas. Health advice continues to be that children in primary schools should not be asked to wear face coverings.

See [Circumstances where people are not able to wear face coverings](#): for exceptions to this.

Face coverings do not need to be worn when outdoors.

Schools, as employers, have a duty to comply with the Equality Act 2010 which includes making reasonable adjustments for disabled staff. They also have a duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled pupils, to support them to access education successfully. No pupil should be denied education on the grounds that they are not wearing a face covering.

## Transparent face coverings

Transparent face coverings can be worn to assist communication with someone who relies on:

- lip reading
- clear sound
- facial expression

Transparent face coverings may be effective in reducing the spread of COVID-19. However, the evidence to support this is currently very limited.

The benefits of transparent face coverings should be considered alongside the comfort and breathability of a face covering that contains plastic, which may mean that the face covering is less breathable than layers of cloth.

Face coverings (whether transparent or cloth) should fit securely around the face to cover the nose and mouth and be made with a breathable material capable of filtering airborne particles.

A face visor or shield may be worn in addition to a face covering but not instead of one. This is because face visors or shields do not adequately cover the nose and mouth, and do not filter airborne particles.

## **Circumstances where people are not able to wear face coverings:**

There are some circumstances where people may not be able to wear a face covering. Please be mindful and respectful of such circumstances. Some people are less able to wear face coverings, and the reasons for this may not be visible to others.

In relation to education settings, this includes (but is not limited to):

- people who cannot put on, wear or remove a face covering because of a physical or mental illness or impairment, or disability
- people for whom putting on, wearing or removing a face covering will cause severe distress
- people speaking to or providing assistance to someone who relies on lip reading, clear sound or facial expressions to communicate
- to avoid the risk of harm or injury to yourself or others
- you are also permitted to remove a face covering in order to take medication

## **Access to face coverings**

Due to the use of face coverings in wider society, staff and pupils are already likely to have access to face coverings.

You should have a small contingency supply available for people who:

- are struggling to access a face covering
- are unable to use their face covering as it has become damp, soiled or unsafe
- have forgotten their face covering

Staff and pupils may consider bringing a spare face covering to wear if their face covering becomes damp during the day.

## **Safe wearing and removal of face coverings**

Your contingency plans should already cover a process for when face coverings are worn within your school and how they should be removed. You should communicate this process clearly to pupils, staff and visitors and allow for adjustments to be made for pupils who may be distressed if required to remove a face covering against their wishes, particularly those with SEND.

When wearing a face covering, staff, visitors and pupils should:

- wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water for 20 seconds or use hand sanitiser before putting a face covering on
- avoid touching the part of the face covering in contact with the mouth and nose, as it could be contaminated with the virus
- change the face covering if it becomes damp or if they've touched the part of the face covering in contact with the mouth and nose
- avoid taking it off and putting it back on a lot in quick succession to minimise potential contamination

When removing a face covering, staff, visitors and pupils should:

- wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water for 20 seconds or use hand sanitiser before removing
- only handle the straps, ties or clips
- not give it to someone else to use
- if single-use, dispose of it carefully in a household waste bin and do not recycle
- once removed, store reusable face coverings in a plastic bag until there is an opportunity to wash them.
- if reusable, wash it in line with manufacturer's instructions at the highest temperature appropriate for the fabric
- wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water for 20 seconds or use hand sanitiser once removed

Separate guidance is available on preventing and controlling infection, including the use of personal protective equipment (PPE), in education, childcare and children's social care settings.

## 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, or how you would operate if you were advised to take extra measures to help break chains of transmission. Given the detrimental impact that restrictions on education can have on children and young people, any measures in schools should only ever be considered as a last resort, kept to the minimum number of schools or groups possible, and for the shortest amount of time possible.

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

For most settings it will make sense to think about taking extra action if the number of positive cases substantially increases. Information on what circumstances might lead you to consider taking additional action, and the steps you should work through, can be found in the [contingency framework](#).

The contingency framework describes the principles of managing local outbreaks of COVID-19 in education and childcare settings. Local authorities, directors of public health (DsPH) and UKHSA health protection teams (HPTs) can recommend measures described in the contingency framework in individual education and childcare settings – or a small cluster of settings – as part of their outbreak management responsibilities.

## Control measures

### You should:

1. Ensure good hygiene for everyone.
2. Maintain appropriate cleaning regimes.
3. Keep occupied spaces well ventilated.
4. 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 thorough hand cleaning should now be regular practice. You should continue to ensure that pupils clean 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 encourage good hand and respiratory hygiene.

## **Use of personal protective equipment (PPE)**

Most staff in schools will not require PPE beyond what they would normally need 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.

UKHSA has published guidance on the [cleaning of non-healthcare settings](#).

## **3. Keep occupied spaces well ventilated**

When your school is 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 steps to improve fresh air flow in these areas, giving particular consideration when holding events where visitors such as parents are on site, for example, school plays.

Mechanical ventilation is a system that uses a fan to draw fresh air or extract air from a room. These should be adjusted to increase the ventilation rate wherever possible and checked to confirm that normal operation meets current guidance and that only fresh outside air is circulated.

If possible, systems should be adjusted to full fresh air or, if this is not possible, then systems should be operated as normal as long as they are within a single room and supplemented by an outdoor air supply.

Where mechanical ventilation systems exist, you should ensure that they are maintained in accordance with the manufacturers' recommendations.

Opening external windows can improve natural ventilation, and in addition, opening internal doors can also assist with creating a throughput of air. If necessary, external opening doors may also be used (if they are not fire doors and where safe to do so).

You should balance the need for increased ventilation while maintaining a comfortable temperature.

The [Health and Safety Executive guidance on air conditioning and ventilation during the COVID-19 pandemic](#) and [CIBSE COVID-19 advice](#) provides more information.

CO<sub>2</sub> monitors will also be provided to all state-funded education settings from September, so staff can quickly identify where ventilation needs to be improved. Further information will be issued as monitors are rolled out.

The government has also launched a trial of air purifiers in 30 schools in Bradford, which is designed to assess the technology in education 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**

Pupils, staff and other adults should follow public health advice on [when to self-isolate and what to do](#). They should not come into school if they have symptoms, have had a positive test result or other reasons requiring them to stay at home due to the risk of them passing on COVID-19 (for example, they are required to quarantine or they are a close contact of a suspected or confirmed case of the Omicron variant of COVID-19).

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

If a pupil in a boarding school shows symptoms, they should usually self-isolate in their residential setting so that their usual support can continue, others may then benefit from self-isolating in their family home.

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

If a pupil is awaiting collection, they should be left in a room on their own if possible and safe to do so. A window should be opened for fresh air ventilation if possible.

Appropriate PPE should also be used if close contact is necessary. Further information on this can be found in the [use of PPE in education, childcare and children's social care settings](#) guidance. Any rooms they use should be cleaned after they have left.

The household (including any siblings) should follow the UKHSA [stay at home guidance for households with possible or confirmed coronavirus \(COVID-19\) infection](#).

### **Asymptomatic testing**

Testing remains important in reducing the risk of transmission of infection within schools.

Staff and secondary school pupils should continue to test twice weekly at home, with lateral flow device (LFD) test kits, 3-4 days apart. Testing remains voluntary but is strongly encouraged.

There is no need for primary age pupils (those in year 6 and below) to test.

Secondary schools should also retain a small asymptomatic testing site (ATS) on-site until further notice so they can offer testing to pupils who are unable to test themselves at home.

## Confirmatory PCR tests

Staff and pupils with a positive LFD 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 [get a free PCR test to check if they have COVID-19](#).

Whilst 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, it overrides the self-test LFD test and the pupil can return to school, as long as the individual doesn't have COVID-19 symptoms.

**[Additional information on PCR test kits for schools and further education providers is available.](#)**

## Other considerations

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

Clinical studies have shown that children and young people, including those previously considered to be clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV), are at very low risk of serious illness if they catch the virus. The UK Clinical Review Panel has recommended that no children and young people under the age of 18 should be considered CEV and under-18s should be removed from the Shielded Patient List. The chief executive of the UK Health Security Agency and head of NHS Test and Trace has written to parents of these children to inform them.

Children and young people previously considered CEV should attend school and should follow the same [COVID-19 guidance](#) as the rest of the population. However, if advised to isolate or reduce their social contact by their specialist, due to the nature of their medical condition or treatment, rather than because of the pandemic, they should continue to follow the advice of their specialist

We recommend all school staff and eligible pupils take up the offer of a vaccine.

You can find out more about the in-school vaccination programme in [COVID-19 vaccination programme for children and young people guidance for schools](#).

## Welcoming children back to 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, in your reasonable judgement, 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 UKHSA or the DHSC, they should be recorded as code X (not attending in circumstances related to coronavirus). Where they are unable to attend because they have a confirmed case of COVID-19 they should be recorded as code I (illness).

For pupils abroad who are facing challenges to return, code X is unlikely to apply. In some specific cases, code Y (unable to attend due to exceptional circumstances) will apply. Further guidance about the use of codes is provided in the [school attendance guidance](#).

## Travel and quarantine

Where pupils travel from abroad to attend a boarding school, you will need to explain the rules to pupils and their parents before they travel to the UK. All pupils travelling to England must adhere to [travel legislation](#), details of which are set out in [government travel advice](#).

All travellers arriving into the UK will need to isolate and get a PCR test by 'day two' after arrival. They may end their isolation once they receive a negative result. If the result is positive, they should continue to isolate and [follow rules on isolation following a positive test](#). Unvaccinated arrivals aged over 18 will follow the existing, more onerous, testing and isolation regime. All Red list arrivals will enter quarantine.

Additional guidance has been issued on [boarding school students: quarantine and testing arrangements](#).

Parents travelling abroad should bear in mind the impact on their child's education which may result from any requirement to quarantine or isolate upon return.

## Remote education

Where appropriate, you should support those who need to self-isolate to work or learn from home if they are well enough to do so. Schools subject to the [remote education temporary continuity direction](#) are required to provide remote education to pupils covered by the direction where their attendance would be contrary to government guidance or legislation around COVID-19.

You should maintain your capacity to deliver high-quality remote education across this academic year, including for pupils who are abroad, and facing challenges to return due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, for the period they are abroad.

Independent Schools (not including academies) are only covered by the remote education temporary continuity direction in relation to state-funded pupils in their 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 successfully access remote education.

Full expectations for remote education, support and resources can be found on the [get help with remote education service](#).

## 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 support](#). Specifically for schools, the document includes further information on:

- [recovery premium](#)
- tutoring (including the [National Tutoring Programme](#) and [16 to 19 tuition fund](#))
- teacher training opportunities
- curriculum resources
- [curriculum planning](#)
- specialist settings
- wider continuous professional development resources, including to support teacher wellbeing and subject-specific teaching

## 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 useful links and sources of support on [promoting and supporting mental health and wellbeing in schools](#).

## School workforce

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

Social distancing measures ended in the workplace on 19 July and the government is not advising people to work from home.

The shielding programme has now come to an end and adults previously considered CEV should, as a minimum, continue to follow the same guidance as everyone else. It is important that everyone adheres to this guidance but people previously considered CEV may wish to consider taking extra precautions.

Employers should be able to explain the measures they have in place to keep 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](#).

## 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

We recommend that you consider whether to go ahead with planned international educational visits at this time, recognising the risk of disruption to education resulting from the need to isolate and test on arrival back into the UK. You should refer to the [Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office travel advice](#) and the [guidance on international travel](#) before booking and travelling.

You are advised to ensure that any new bookings have adequate financial protection in place.

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 for [providers who run community activities, holiday clubs, after-school clubs, tuition and other out-of-school provision for children](#).

## Inspection

For state-funded schools, Ofsted has resumed its programme of routine inspections 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. 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), both Ofsted and the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) have resumed their programme of routine inspections 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 the academic year 2021 to 2022, results from qualifications achieved at key stage 4 and post 16 will be published at school and college level on performance tables.

We will not publish the results of Key Stage 2 primary assessments. We will still produce the normal suite of KS2 accountability measures and share these securely with schools, academy trusts, local authorities and Ofsted.

For further information, see [COVID-19: school and college accountability](#).



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