



Joint union safety checklist for schools

Advice for safe opening
March 2021 updated for June 2021

Workplace checklist

This advice has been issued by the joint unions (GMB, NEU, UNISON and UNITE) for use in schools and colleges and will remain in place at least until the end of the 2020–21 academic year.

Using this advice

This joint advice, like our original advice for September opening, aims to help you to understand the [current Department for Education \(DfE\) 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 regular meetings with leaders in order to review safety. If members have concerns about safety measures proposed or areas not addressed, then support will be available from their union.

The original and fuller joint union advice previously published for September opening is available [here](#) in a form updated to reflect changes in Government and union advice and can be used for reference for 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?
- Have these measures been reviewed in the light of whenever local rates increase or new variants become prevalent?
- 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 joint unions are concerned to ensure pupils and staff are kept safe while at school.

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 has been clear that schools can reintroduce face coverings locally to mitigate against the risk from new variants.

In light of the evidence of increased transmission in schools, face coverings, alongside other measures such as improved ventilation, are an essential part of the wider control system in schools and colleges. Masks help keep students and staff safe, help reduce community transmission and allow the safe lifting of restrictions to be achieved as soon as possible. They also minimise educational disruption, allowing students to remain in school and protect household members, including clinically vulnerable contacts from onward risk of infection.

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 and in classrooms, in response to increase risks of transmission?
- ❑ 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 to reduce the risk of transmission?

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 the virus is still spreading through communities, arrangements should be made for the most vulnerable staff to work at home. The Government's shielding advice to the clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) group ended as of 1 April. The Government continues, however, to advise that employees generally should work at home where possible.

The joint unions' advice is that education staff in the CEV group should continue to work at home at this time, with no change to current arrangements, even when vaccinated. The joint unions continue to believe that this will also be an appropriate safety measure for clinically vulnerable and higher risk staff eg staff aged 60 and above until their second vaccination has taken effect. Pregnant women in their third trimester, and in particular any who have not been vaccinated, 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](#)

- ❑ 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 permitted to work at home?
- ❑ Will CV employees and other higher risk groups eg those aged 60 and above be permitted to work at home until their second vaccination has taken effect, as per joint union advice? Will individual risk assessments be undertaken before any return to school/college?
- ❑ 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 also 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 the testing to identify asymptomatic cases?
- ❑ Will all those with symptoms, and 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?
- ❑ In the light of increased transmissibility of the new variant, is the school isolating whole bubbles as a minimum to reduce the risk of wider bubble or whole school closures?

Question to reps and members:

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

Long Covid

Punitive action under absence management or other procedures is inappropriate, given that staff may have contracted Covid at work. Such procedures should not be applied to staff diagnosed with long Covid or awaiting such a diagnosis. Absence should also not be counted against sick pay entitlements, given that Covid may have been contracted at work.

Question to reps and members:

Is the school following the above arrangements on long Covid?

