

COVID-19 and Schools Update
09 July 2020

Introduction

1. The NASUWT - The Teachers' Union, in addition to the support we are providing to our members across the UK, are committed to ensuring that parliamentarians remain informed of developing challenges in schools and colleges as the country responds to the COVID-19 crisis.

Full Opening of Schools in September

2. The NASUWT recognises the importance of schools reopening to all children as soon as it is safe to do so and welcomes some of the developments within the recent guidance from the Department for Education (DfE), particularly the greater emphasis placed on reminding employers of their legal obligations to provide a safe working environment.
3. However, the Union is also urging the Government to develop a coordinated national plan to deliver the full and safe reopening of all schools in September, which addresses the many practical and logistical issues that have been raised by teachers and headteachers across the country.
4. There are a significant number of measures specified in the guidance that require additional resources. For example, additional funding for school reopening, including funding for additional cleaning, materials, signage and equipment to enable safe teaching and learning practice in schools, together with early clarification from the Government of what additional support will be made available to schools prior to the September return.

5. The majority of schools have a matter of only a few weeks before they close for the summer. Teachers and headteachers need urgent clarification from the DfE on a range of matters if they are to meet the expectations set out in the guidance, appropriately, consistently and safely.

Compliance with health and safety obligations

6. Whilst we welcome the additional guidance the DfE has now provided to schools on the legal health and safety requirements that employers must meet, it remains important that parents and teachers are also assured that schools will, in practice, have in place arrangements that comply with statutory obligations. We therefore believe that the DfE must work urgently with the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and Ofsted to ensure that appropriate inspection and enforcement arrangements are in place, ready for September, in order to safeguard pupils and the workforce, and to promote public confidence in the full reopening of schools.
7. Schools will also need to consider how they will meet their statutory obligations to take all reasonably practicable steps to ensure the health and safety of teachers and pupils in relation to pupils who refuse to obey risk assessment provisions, given that the guidance states that spitting is not sufficient to prevent access. Schools will require further clarification on this matter.

Inter-agency working

8. With the prospect of all children returning to schools in September, securing trust and confidence of teachers and parents will be critical to securing a successful reopening. This will require all schools to have access to data about COVID-19 infection rates in their local areas. We believe that it is essential that information sharing with schools is essential if schools are to make appropriately planned arrangements in the event of a local spike in COVID-19 infections (including arrangements for communicating with parents and pupils). Our members recognise that when dealing with a public health emergency, it is necessary for agencies to work together in the interests of children and young people and the local community. We would, therefore, welcome clarity as to what arrangements for inter-agency working schools should expect to see from September.

The need for additional resources and support

9. The NASUWT does not want to see any schools cutting corners on cleaning and hygiene. DfE guidance makes clear that schools will need additional and meticulous cleaning provision. This will therefore require additional and appropriately trained cleaning staff to be available throughout the day. This will be over and above the provision that schools would normally have available. With the evidence already available of rising costs of cleaning services, it is vital that every school is provided with additional funding to ensure that classrooms, gyms, communal and dining areas, kitchens, curriculum resources and equipment, toilets and recreational areas can be cleaned regularly and appropriately throughout the day and at the beginning and end of each day. We would want to be assured that, in accordance with the COSHH regulations, only trained cleaners should be undertaking cleaning duties, especially given the potential adverse impacts that may be caused from the misuse of detergents and bleaches.

10. Our members would also want to ensure that effective teaching and learning can continue whilst schools are open to all pupils. As more pupils utilise essential equipment during their lessons, it will be necessary for additional resources and stocks of equipment to be available in order that lessons are not delayed, in order to enable essential items of equipment and other materials to be thoroughly cleaned and checked, ready for use by another group of pupils. In order for meticulous cleaning of equipment and resources to take place, additional cleaning resources will also be required for this purpose.

Continuity of provision and remote learning

11. We recognise the Government's aim for a full return of all children to schools from September. However, our members are asking for clarity as to how schools will maintain appropriate continuity of onsite provision for pupils in the event of teacher absences. Indeed, in the event of a second wave of infections, a teacher may be required to self-isolate, necessitating additional qualified teacher cover whilst their school remains open to all

pupils. The return of schools cannot be predicated on the basis that teaching and learning should be led by support staff.

12. Our members recognise that the safest way to achieve such cover safely and appropriately is with the provision of additional teachers available within schools, including through the provision of teachers on long-term supply teacher assignments. Long-term supply assignments entered into by schools prior to September would not only support plans for COVID-secure education bubbles to be formed and maintained, but would also ensure that cover teachers are familiar with the COVID security arrangements within the school and therefore better prepared to keep children safe. However, it is clear that schools will only enter into such arrangements with supply teachers if they are confident that they will have the funding to do so.
13. Whilst we welcome the continued emphasis that those with COVID-19 symptoms should not attend schools, given that it is accepted that children often have milder/no symptoms, extending this emphasis to include any flu-like symptoms, however mild, will prevent COVID-19 cases being overlooked or misdiagnosed as a cold or flu, and aid in avoiding school-based outbreaks that could be extremely disruptive.
14. The DfE's guidance is clear that schools must have in place a robust plan for remote learning provision in the event that onsite provision for children is disrupted for any reason. It is clear that such a requirement will place additional burdens on schools and, unless appropriately managed, this could significantly increase the workload demands on teachers. We support the concept of blended learning provision; however, this must also be sustainable. It is not sustainable or reasonable to expect teachers and headteachers to organise, plan and deliver provision onsite to pupils during the day whilst also organising, planning and delivering remote learning support for pupils who are not, or who may not, be in school at some point, without additional resourcing and support for teachers. Our members are asking for clarity as to what additional resourcing will be available to support the provision of remote learning for pupils, including

to fund the provision of additional teachers, materials, and technology to enable equality of access for all pupils, irrespective of their household circumstances.

Education bubbles

15. Our members recognise the need to introduce education bubbles as a strategy to reduce the risk of virus transmission. However, there are considerable practical concerns that our members have raised which need to be addressed, including:
- the logistical challenge of securing sufficient provision of home-school transport for pupils that does not result in mixing of pupils in different year group cohorts or mixing of pupils from different schools;
 - the logistical and additional financial implications associated with the implementation of staggered start and finish times;
 - the additional cost of providing suitable home-school transport for pupils, particularly in rural areas, and what additional funding will be provided to schools for this purpose, and in order to ensure that such transport is cleaned appropriately to the level and frequency that schools will require;
 - the additional workload and working hours implications arising from the guidance and the need for additional funding to enable extra staff to be deployed to enable schools to implement staggered start and finish times for pupils.
16. In terms of social distancing, DfE guidance advises schools that pupils should sit in forward-facing desks. Where secondary schools have fixed seating in rooms such as science labs and technology rooms, etc., they may need to reconfigure classrooms in order to maintain teaching and learning provision. This will require additional funding for remedial works to be undertaken and it would be helpful to know what financial assistance will be available to schools for this.

Support for Black and Minority Ethnic and clinically vulnerable teachers

17. The Union remains concerned about support for Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) teachers. It is therefore deeply regrettable that the September guidance fails to advise schools adequately on meeting their obligations under the Equality Act 2010, which is also critical to meeting schools' legal obligations appropriately with regard to health and safety.

18. In addition, the guidance has also prompted our members to raise concerns about the support available for all teachers who are clinically vulnerable and clinically extremely vulnerable, or who are living in households with other vulnerable persons or with persons with underlying health conditions, or who are pregnant.

19. The guidance assumes that all teachers will be able to return to the workplace; however, that will only be possible with additional staffing support to enable risks to these staff to be further reduced, including with the implementation of additional risk control measures. For example, we would expect that schools may need to organise their staffing in such ways as to minimise the risks to teachers who are amongst the most vulnerable of contracting the virus, and for those who are at greater risk of becoming seriously ill or dying.

20. This may mean significantly reducing the amount of pupil contact that such teachers are asked to undertake, or offering more support for these teachers in the form of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and an insistence on stringent two-metre social distancing. We would also suggest the targeted provision of COVID-19 testing, including the use of antibody tests for staff and regular temperature checks of pupils, and the introduction of swab tests for those who may be expected to be taught or supervised by these teachers, to enable such teachers to be deployed in the workplace with greater confidence.

21. Our members recognise that such measures will require additional funding and staffing to enable their schools to deploy vulnerable teachers appropriately, taking account of the additional risks they face.

Managing Local Lockdowns

22. In light of the recent experiences in the city of Leicester, the NASUWT believes that in order to ensure clarity and the confidence of our members, it is vital that clear information is provided about the practical steps that will be taken in the event of further local spikes in coronavirus transmission or in the event of a local lockdown in other areas. There are a number of practical questions from NASUWT members about how a local lockdown will apply to schools, including:

- How much notice can schools expect to receive?
- Who will provide schools with notice that lockdown will be required?
- What provision will schools be required to make for pupils on site
- What provision will be made for pupils eligible for free school meals?
- What additional control measures will need to be applied in schools where they remain open to some children during the period of the local lockdown (e.g. social distancing rules; PPE provision; test/trace; etc.)?
- What enforcement measures will be applied to schools that do not follow the local lockdown rules?
- Will additional coronavirus funding be reinstated to assist schools in the event of a local lockdown?
- What provision will be made on the lifting of lockdown controls, including for the phased reopening of schools within the lockdown area and the provision of Coronavirus testing?

23. Our members would also welcome further clarity from the Department for Education in the event of a confirmed case of COVID-19 within a school and the triggers for sending some or all pupils and staff home to self-isolate. We would also seek clarification for schools, to make clear, that in the event of a positive case of COVID-19, schools must always contact the health protection teams, rather than this being optional for schools to do.

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