

Adverse weather

All employers should have a policy in place for actions to be taken when there are adverse weather conditions that may affect the opening of schools.

Schools may be unable to open for a variety of reasons, including:

- breakdown in the heating;
- frozen or burst pipes;
- inaccessibility of roads and/or the site due to very heavy snowfall or other adverse conditions.

Some local authorities have policies in which a central decision is made by the local authority about the closure of schools in its area. In many more local authorities, however, the decision is left to individual schools.

Headteachers should ensure that school staff and parents are aware of the school/local authority policy and how they will communicate with them if the school is closed. Many schools have arrangements with local radio stations and have texting/answerphone/website facilities to communicate with parents.

Teachers need to ensure that they are aware of how the school will communicate with them if a decision is made to close the school.

If a decision is made that the weather conditions are such that it is not appropriate to open the school for pupils, then there should be no reason why the school should then expect staff to come into school. If the conditions are unacceptable or dangerous for pupils, then the same considerations apply to staff. It would be reasonable for the school to expect that if the school is closed, staff will use the time to undertake appropriate work-related activities at home.

The decision about whether the school should open should take into account, for example:

- advice from the police and other agencies about travel conditions and conditions around the school;
- advice from the local authority, as appropriate;
- access to the school site for pedestrians, drivers and emergency vehicles and safety of the site;
- availability of staff.

The 'hero headteacher' approach is not recommended, i.e. seeking to keep the school open when common sense and the advice from the police and other agencies is not to travel, or shovelling snow to seek to open the school, despite the conditions and warnings.

If a decision is made to close the school, this should be deemed an unavoidable closure.

Any suggestion by the school management or employer that when the school has been closed, teachers should be expected to make up for this by:

- giving up leave;
- using any of the five teacher days;
- losing planning, preparation and assessment (PPA) time or lunch breaks; or
- losing pay;

should be firmly rejected.

Continued overleaf

It should be made clear that teachers will, as always, act professionally to do everything they can during lessons to ensure that pupils cover all the work that they need to do and may have missed during the closure.

If the school is open as usual, staff should make all reasonable efforts to get into work.

This means assessing the availability of public transport, or if they normally drive to work and are unable to do so, considering the feasibility of walking to work if they live relatively close and are fit and able to do so.

There should be no expectation that teachers will walk miles in severe conditions to get to work.

If there are severe weather warnings in the area in which they live and the police and other agencies are advising people not to travel, teachers affected will need to contact their headteacher to discuss the situation.

It may be that the school is open but some pupils and staff are unable to get into school.

Headteachers will need to assess the staff-to-pupil ratio to ensure that they are able to operate safely. It may be that they will need to advise that some groups of pupils remain at home.

Headteachers need to ensure that they conduct a health and safety risk assessment.

If any difficulties arise for NASUWT teacher or school leader members, please contact the NASUWT.

Enforced closure during the school day

Closing the school during the school day creates numerous issues. Therefore, school leaders and employers should monitor weather forecasts and other factors (such as planned cessation of public transport). If severe weather disruption is likely to occur during the day, they should consider closing the school before the normal start time, even if the current conditions are acceptable.

If, during the course of the day, weather conditions deteriorate to the point that a closure is required, then the school should use existing arrangements to inform parents of the decision. Clearly, the safety of pupils is important. Those who cannot be sent home will require supervision until such time as they can be collected. However, the health, safety and welfare of staff is equally as important. It is therefore unreasonable to expect all staff to remain on site to supervise pupils, and staff should also be enabled to leave the premises as soon as reducing pupil numbers allow. This should be done on an assessment of relative risk (e.g. to determine who is at greatest risk to safety, such as those with the longest journeys, or disabled staff). Staff who will remain to ensure the safety of pupils should have been identified before any adverse weather event, as part of the planning for adverse weather.

Local conditions can vary widely in adverse weather events, and plans should be in place to send staff and pupils home during the day if it becomes apparent that risks to safety are increasing at their home location, even if conditions around the school are acceptable.

COVID-19

COVID-19 risk assessments must not be varied, or virus precautions reduced, due to adverse weather conditions. Indeed, it may be necessary to conduct a review and/or rewrite the existing risk assessment, and it may be useful for schools to conduct some scenario planning well in advance. The need to maintain adequate precautions especially applies to maintaining the integrity of bubbles, and classes from different bubbles must not be combined. The availability of staff, therefore, becomes a crucial consideration when deciding whether schools should open.

Flooding

This advice should be read in conjunction with the NASUWT's general advice on adverse weather.

Employers have a legal duty to ensure that the health and safety of all employees is protected. It is not in anyone's interests to ask staff to risk their lives or health either during floods, or in the aftermath.

Under no circumstances should headteachers ask any staff to travel in a flooded area. Members should not drive in flooded areas unless they have to, and should never try to drive through floodwater. Not only is there the possibility that a vehicle may be swept away, but floodwater is also likely to be contaminated with sewage.

Members should not attempt to walk or wade through floodwater to get to work. It is very easy to be swept away by currents or come into contact with contaminated water. Even in very shallow water there can still be many hazards underneath the surface, such as uncovered holes. The force of water often removes manhole covers, for example.

Floods can cause premises, including schools, to be without water supply or electricity, even beyond the area immediately flooded. Teachers should not be expected to work without an adequate supply of fresh water and sanitation facilities.

This is contrary to the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations. Staff in affected schools should normally be sent home. No-one should be expected to work in buildings that are flooded.

After the flooding subsides

Death and injury is a serious risk in the aftermath of any flood and there are a number of precautions that should be taken. Following the flooding, NASUWT Representatives should meet with the headteacher to make sure the school is safe to be reoccupied.

While it is understandable that teachers will want to 'pull together' with others, they should not be put at any further unnecessary risk and no building should be reoccupied until it has been properly inspected and a risk assessment undertaken. In extreme cases, the structure of the building will need to be checked before anyone is allowed in.

There must be no expectation that teachers will assist in the clean-up.

If staff are involved in the clean-up, there should be a risk assessment prior to their involvement and the provision of proper personal protective equipment (PPE).

Before the school is reopened, buildings will not only need to be dried out, they will also have to be cleaned and disinfected. Floodwater contains not only silt but also sewage.

All surfaces that have been contaminated need to be properly cleaned and disinfected, as well as dried.

The school must be fit for purpose, with adequate heating and sanitation. Under no circumstances should a school reopen where heating systems and/or sanitation is inadequate.

Fungus and mould

Dampness can promote the growth of fungus and mould, which can cause allergies and breathing problems if inhaled (see also the NASUWT advice on mould): www.nasuwt.org.uk/HealthandSafety.

Heating

Where schools use temporary portable gas or oil heaters to dry premises, it is important to ensure they have sufficient ventilation and are kept away from any flammable materials. Under no circumstances should petrol or diesel generators be used indoors, due to the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning. Temporary gas/oil heaters should not be used when pupils are in attendance.

Electrical equipment

Any electrical equipment that may have been affected by floodwater must not be used until it has been checked and verified as being safe by a competent person.

The electricity and gas supply should also not be switched on unless it has been similarly checked.

Chemicals

If any materials, such as chemicals, are stored on the premises, they may also have been affected by water. In some cases, the composition of the material may have changed or hazardous materials may have spilled out.

Fire exits

NASUWT Representatives should ensure that schools have verified that any material that could become dangerous as a result of water damage has been checked and, if necessary, disposed of safely.

NASUWT Representatives should also ensure that external doors, in particular fire exits, have been checked to ensure that they are usable before the building is reoccupied and fire alarms and emergency lighting systems have been inspected by a competent person before the premises are used.

Vermin

After flooding, rats and other vermin can often be displaced from flooded buildings and will move to other premises in the vicinity. Members in areas that are in, or close to, flooded areas should be particularly vigilant and report any signs of infestation immediately.

Loss of personal items

It may be that, as a result of flooding, members lose or have their personal items damaged in the workplace. It is good practice to restrict personal items in the workplace only to those which are required to support teachers in their work, as any items are vulnerable to damage or theft.

It is also good practice to keep a list of personal items in the workplace. If loss or damage occurs then members should make a complete list of the items damaged or lost.

If possible, take pictures of the damaged item. The list should be provided to the headteacher with a dated written request that the list be submitted as a claim against the employer's insurance.

A copy of the list and the written request should be kept. If any difficulties arise with the employer providing insurance cover, contact should be made with the NASUWT for further advice.

Support for members whose homes are flooded

In flooded parts of the country, there will be schools which have not been directly affected, but members' homes will have been partially underwater or will have had no water or electricity supply.

NASUWT Representatives should work with headteachers to make sure that such members are given as much support as possible.

This could include access to showers and washing facilities at work, time off, or other support as required. Local conditions can vary widely in adverse weather events, and plans should be in place to send staff and pupils home during the day if it becomes apparent that risks to safety are increasing at their home location, even if conditions around the school are acceptable.

Some members may experience severe financial hardship as a result of the flood damage to their homes and property and may be eligible for NASUWT Benevolence Assistance. Contact the NASUWT for further information.

Met Office 'red warnings'

Red warnings are issued by the Met Office where exceptionally severe weather is forecast and a danger to life exists. Where a red warning is issued, it will be difficult to justify opening a school.

If any NASUWT member is at a workplace within a red warning area which is due to open, or has failed to make plans to close, contact should be made with the NASUWT for further advice.

If there is no NASUWT Representative in your school and you need support to implement this advice, contact the NASUWT.

