Coronavirus briefing: safeguarding guidance and information for schools

This briefing summarises the latest guidance for UK schools on safeguarding during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

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Introduction

There are lots of questions about how schools should be working to keep children safe as the coronavirus pandemic progresses. We have pulled together key safeguarding and child protection guidance from all four UK nations to help answer some frequently asked questions. Professionals may want to use guidance from other nations as examples of best practice where there is no guidance from their own nation.

Across the UK, the governments are publishing a range of new guidance to support schools during the coronavirus pandemic. This briefing will be updated regularly.

Going to school

Who has to go to school?

Across the UK, all children should return to school full-time in the new academic year 2020/21 (Department for Education (DfE), 2020g; 2020h; Department of Education, 2020c; 2020f; Scottish Government, 2020b; Welsh Government, 2020e).
Schools should offer remote learning and support to children whose health prevents them from attending, for example if they are self-isolating (DfE, 2020g; 2020h; Department of Education, 2020c; Scottish Government, 2020b; Welsh Government, 2020e).

What happens if there’s a local outbreak of coronavirus?

In England, the Department for Education (DfE) has stated that schools may be advised to close temporarily if there is a local outbreak. Schools should have a contingency plan for this in place. Schools may need to return to remaining open only for vulnerable children and children of key workers. Schools should have the capacity to offer remote education if there is a local lockdown requiring children and young people to stay at home (DfE, 2020g; 2020h).

In Northern Ireland, schools should contingency plan for delivering remote learning in the event of local school closures (Department of Education, 2020c).

In Scotland, schools may close temporarily in the event of a local outbreak. Schools need to have contingency plans for this. This may involve remaining open for vulnerable children and children of key workers only and providing remote learning and support for other children and young people (Scottish Government, 2020b).

In Wales, every school needs to plan for the possibility of a local lockdown and how they will ensure continuity of education if there are local restrictions (Welsh Government, 2020e).

What if parents and carers don’t want to send their children to school or children don’t want to attend?

In England, the Department for Education (DfE) has stated that school attendance is mandatory from the beginning of the autumn term. This means that parents have a duty to ensure their child attends school and schools have a responsibility to record attendance and follow up absence. Sanctions for non-attendance, including fixed penalty notices, will be available to be issued (DfE, 2020g; 2020h).

Schools should ensure they have clear behaviour and attendance policies and practices in place that are communicated to parents, carers and children and young people (DfE, 2020b).

If parents have concerns about sending their children back to school in the autumn term, schools should discuss these concerns and provide reassurance of the measures in place to stop the spread of infection. Schools should be clear with parents that all children of compulsory school age must be in school unless a statutory reason applies (DfE, 2020g; 2020h).
Reasonable adjustments should be made for children or young people with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) who have found lockdown exceptionally difficult. This may involve a phased return to school. This decision should be taken in discussion with parents and carers in response to the needs of the individual child. Any phased return or part-time learning arrangements should be temporary measures which are kept under review and removed as soon as possible (DfE, 2020h).

Skills for Care has published a toolkit to help social workers have conversations with families about school attendance (Skills for Care, 2020).

In **Northern Ireland**, attendance is mandatory (Department of Education, 2020c). If parents are refusing to send a child to school because of fears around coronavirus, this should be recorded as an unauthorised absence (Department of Education, 2020b).

In **Scotland**, parents are required to provide education for their child. Schools and local authorities should engage with parents and carers to provide reassurance on concerns, overcome any barriers to learning and support attendance. Measures of compulsion for attendance should only be used as a last resort (Scottish Government, 2020b).

In **Wales**, all children and young people should attend their school or education setting. If parents and carers are concerned, schools should discuss these concerns and provide reassurance of the measures in place to reduce the risk of transmission. The Welsh Government has stated that it would be inappropriate to issue a fixed penalty notice for non-attendance at the moment. Concerns should only be escalated to the Education Welfare Service after the school has made every attempt to engage the family (Welsh Government, 2020e).

**Can schools take children and young people on educational trips?**

In **England**, the Department for Education (DfE) advises against overnight visits in the UK and overseas educational visits. Schools can resume non-overnight UK visits, keeping in line with protective measures (DfE, 2020g; 2020h).

In **Scotland**, the Scottish Government advises that trips which include overnight stays should be introduced in an incremental manner. Planning for such trips should not commence until later in the school year (Scottish Government, 2020a).

In **Wales**, the Welsh Government advises against overseas education trips for children and young people under 18. Non-overnight UK visits can resume, in adherence with protective measures (Welsh Government, 2020e).

**Can schools have visitors?**
In **England**, guidance from the Department for Education (DfE) stats that visiting specialists such as therapists, peripatetic teachers and other support staff for children with SEND should provide interventions as usual, wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) where necessary (DfE, 2020h).

In **England** and **Wales**, visitors to all schools will be expected to comply with the school’s arrangements for managing and minimising risk (DfE, 2020g; Welsh Government, 2020e)

In **Scotland**, visits should be kept to a minimum including psychologists, nurses, social workers and those providing therapeutic support (Scottish Government, 2020b).

**Will schools be subject to inspection?**

In **England**, Ofsted will begin carrying out interim visits to schools, academies and further education and skills providers. These visits will not result in any evaluation or graded judgement of a school. Inspectors will work collaboratively with leaders to understand how education providers are managing the return to full education and their safeguarding arrangements. Full inspection is expected to return in January 2021 (Ofsted, 2020a; 2020b; 2020c).

In **Northern Ireland**, inspections by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) will remain paused as schools re-open to all children and young people (ETI, 2020).

In **Scotland**, the school inspection programme is temporarily suspended to allow schools to focus on reopening. Inspectors will engage with schools to provide bespoke help and support, contributing to the recovery of the education system (Education Scotland, 2020).

In **Wales**, Estyn will not inspect schools in the new academic year 2020/21. Once schools have readjusted to the new situation, inspectors will visit to listen to concerns and identify what is working well (Estyn, 2020).

**Safeguarding and child protection**

**What changes should be made to schools’ safeguarding policies and procedures?**

In **England**, schools and colleges should continue to follow the Department for Education (DfE)’s statutory guidance, Keeping children safe in education (DfE, 2020i). Schools and colleges should regularly review their safeguarding and child protection policy and revise it in line with current circumstances (DfE, 2020g; 2020h).
The DfE’s guidance highlights that some children and young people returning to school will have been exposed to a range of trauma and adversity and increased safeguarding and welfare risks (DfE, 2020g; 2020h).

Designated safeguarding leads (DSLs) should be provided with more time, especially in the first few weeks of the autumn term, to provide support to staff and children regarding any new child protection and welfare concerns and handle referrals to children’s social care and other agencies (DfE, 2020g; 2020h).

Vulnerable groups such as children with a social worker, previously looked-after children and young carers will need additional support and access to services such as educational psychologists, social workers and counsellors (DfE, 2020g; 2020h).

Schools should continue to work with local safeguarding partners as set out in statutory safeguarding guidance (DfE, 2020i).

In Northern Ireland, education staff should continue to follow the statutory guidance, Safeguarding and child protection in schools: a guide for schools (Department of Education, 2019).

In Scotland, the National guidance for child protection has been amended to reflect the current circumstances. Professionals should be aware that the vulnerability of some children may increase as a result of the pandemic (Scottish Government, 2020c).

In Wales, the Keeping learners safe guidance continues to apply to school or college settings (Welsh Government, 2012). All staff should be reminded of their safeguarding duties. Designated safeguarding persons (DSPs) should consider the current challenges in a safeguarding context and review their child protection policies as circumstances evolve. It is sufficient to create an annex that summarises any key COVID-19 related changes (Welsh Government, 2020a).

Staff and children should be informed of who the designated safeguarding person (DSP) is and how to contact them. Schools should consider how children can talk privately with the DSP or a trusted adult whilst following social distancing measures (Welsh Government, 2020e).

Schools and children’s services should continue to work closely together to ensure that every child and family has the support they need (Welsh Government, 2020d).

The Welsh Government has published non-statutory guidance for professionals, including those in education, to assist them in identifying abuse, supporting disclosure and reporting concerns (Welsh Government, 2020d).

What happens if nominated child protection leads need to self-isolate or become ill?
In **Northern Ireland**, schools should ensure there is at least one member of staff with up-to-date designated teacher for child protection training available to work in school. Employing authorities may be able to provide a suitable person to temporarily cover the designated teacher for child protection role (Department of Education, 2020c).

In **Wales**, if it is not possible for a trained designated safeguarding person (DSP) to be on site, a senior leader should take responsibility for safeguarding. In addition to this, a trained DSP from the school or another school should be available to contact by phone or online video (Welsh Government, 2020a).

**How can schools support and protect children who are not attending?**

In **England**, the Department for Education (DfE) says there must be clear reporting routes for staff who have any child protection concerns about any child they are educating remotely, and these should be regularly reviewed. Staff should only contact children within school hours (or hours agreed with the school’s senior leadership team). Any one-to-one sessions such as pastoral care meetings should be risk assessed and approved by the school’s senior leadership team (DfE, 2020j).

In **Northern Ireland**, staff should continue to follow their school’s safeguarding procedures if they become aware of any child protection concerns (Department of Education, 2020a).

In **Scotland**, schools should make appropriate provision for children who cannot attend school. There should be a particular focus on addressing digital exclusion as part of these arrangements (Scottish Government, 2020b).

In **Wales**, if children and young people are unable to attend school it is vital that the school continues to engage with them remotely (Welsh Government, 2020e).

**How should schools deliver remote education safely?**

- Read our information about undertaking remote teaching safely

**Staffing and recruitment**

**Do schools still need to follow safer recruitment practices?**

In **England**, schools should continue to follow safer recruitment practices set out in the Department for Education (DfE)’s statutory guidance when they are recruiting new staff and volunteers. Staff and volunteers who have not undergone safer recruitment
checks must not be left unsupervised or allowed to work in regulated activity (DfE, 2020g; 2020h).

In **Wales**, recruitment should continue as usual, following safer recruitment practices set out in Keeping learners safe (Welsh Government, 2020e; Welsh Government, 2012).

In **England** and **Wales**, the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) has updated its guidance on checking identification, to minimise the need for face-to-face contact (DBS, 2020).

› Read our information on recruiting safely during the pandemic

## Child welfare

### How should schools implement social distancing and additional hygiene measures?

In **England**, the Department for Education (DfE) has published guidance on the measures schools, including special schools, must take to minimise the risk of infection (DfE, 2020g; 2020h). They have also published guidance on face coverings in education (DfE, 2020f).

The DfE has published additional guidance on isolation in residential educational settings (DfE, 2020d). Further guidance for residential educational settings who have international students has also been published. This guidance covers what to do when children arrive in the UK and what to do if children and young people develop symptoms of coronavirus (DfE, 2020c).

In **Northern Ireland**, the Department of Education has published guidance on how education settings should implement social distancing and other protective measures to minimise the risk of infection, including the wearing of face coverings (Department of Education, 2020c).

In **Scotland**, the Scottish Government has published guidance on the public health measures schools and local authorities should implement to minimise the risks of coronavirus transmission and infection, including the wearing of face coverings (Scottish Government, 2020b).

In **Wales**, the Welsh Government has published guidance on protective measures schools, including residential special schools, should put in place to reduce the risk of infection (Welsh Government, 2020e; 2020c). Guidance for residential schools who have learners from overseas has also been published (Welsh Government, 2020c).
Additional advice has been published about the wearing of face coverings in education settings (Welsh Government, 2020f).

**How should schools look after children’s mental health and wellbeing?**

In **England**, the Department for Education (DfE)’s guidance highlights that some children and young people returning to school will have been exposed to a range of trauma and adversity which may lead to an increase in social, emotional and mental health concerns. There may also be an impact on children’s behaviour (DfE, 2020g; 2020h).

Schools should engage with the parents and carers of children who are likely to need social and emotional support as soon as possible to set expectations, understand concerns and build confidence (DfE, 2020b).

Schools should use risk assessments to identify any additional support that children and young people with an education, health and care (EHC) plan may need in order to make a successful return to full-time education. Risk assessments should incorporate the views of the child. The local authority should be involved in the risk assessment along with the child’s social worker or local authority virtual school head where appropriate. Schools should also contact parents and involve them in planning for their child’s return to school (DfE, 2020h).

Schools should consider the provision of pastoral and extra-curricular activities to support children and young people’s wellbeing. Schools should provide more focused pastoral support where issues are identified, using external support where necessary. Schools should also consider how they are working with school nursing services to support the health and wellbeing of children and young people (DfE, 2020g; 2020h).

The DfE has launched the Wellbeing for education return programme, which provides training and resources to help school staff respond to the children’s wellbeing and mental health needs as a result of coronavirus (DfE, 2020g; 2020h).

The DfE has also published a range of resources to help teachers support children’s mental health and wellbeing, including a free webinar and a training module on mental wellbeing. Teachers can also access the free MindEd learning platform to find resources on peer support, stress, bereavement fear and trauma (DfE, 2020g; 2020h).

The DfE has published additional guidance for parents and carers on how they can support children’s mental health and wellbeing (DfE, 2020e).

In **Northern Ireland**, schools should consider the emotional wellbeing of children and young people, especially those who are already vulnerable to mental health issues (Department of Education, 2020c).
The Department of Health has published a COVID-19 mental health response plan as part of their wider mental health action plan. Actions to help ensure child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) continue to operate efficiently and effectively include: suspending the transition to adult mental health services for 18-year-olds; promoting the use of electronic platforms for communication; and signposting helplines and other sources of support (Department of Health, 2020).

In **Scotland**, the wellbeing of children and young people should be the central focus as children return to school. Schools should recognise that children and young people may be affected by trauma and adversity or may feel anxious about returning to school. Children and young people may need additional time and support to re-adjust to the school environment and education settings should prioritise support for the mental health and wellbeing of children (Scottish Government, 2020b).

In **Wales**, teachers and school staff should continue to focus on wellbeing as a foundation for learning. All children and young people should have access to a range of tools and support for their emotional and mental wellbeing at school. Staff should encourage children and young people to discuss their questions and concerns (Welsh Government, 2020b).

**What should schools do about free school meals?**

**Across the UK**, schools must provide free school meals to eligible children and young people (Department for Education (DfE), 2020g; 2020h; Department of Education, 2020d; Scottish Government, 2020b; Welsh Government, 2020e).

In **Scotland**, local authorities should continue the provision of free school meals to eligible students if a school is closed during term time. This could be done by providing a direct cash payment, voucher, home delivery or collection (Scottish Government, 2020b).

**References**

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Scottish Government (2020a) **Coronavirus (COVID-19): Advisory Sub-Group on Education and Children’s Issues – advisory note on school trips which include an overnight stay.** [Accessed 01/09/2020].


Welsh Government (2020c) *Keep education safe: guidance for independent boarding and residential special schools in Wales (COVID-19)*.


<https://gov.wales/keeping-learners-safe>

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**More ways to help you protect children**

- Sign up to CASPAR to stay up-to-date with the latest safeguarding legislation and guidance.
  [nspcc.org.uk/caspar](http://nspcc.org.uk/caspar)

- Visit [NSPCC Learning](http://nspcc.org.uk/learning) for more information about safeguarding during the coronavirus pandemic.

- Visit [Childline](https://www.childline.org.uk) for advice and resources for children about the coronavirus pandemic.