

SAFER SCHOOLS PLAN

UNISON's recommendations for safer re-opening of schools in England

The government announced on 27 January that it hopes to re-open schools in England on 8 March. UNISON believes that school re-opening should only happen when the science says it is safe, when school risk assessments have been updated, and when appropriate safety measures have been introduced.

We must ensure that schools do not become 'vectors of transmission' again. It is vital that the Department for Education (DfE) allows for a staggered approach so that a sudden re-opening does not increase local transmission rates. We believe a phased return and the ability to have flexible rota systems would help to make schools safer.

In a noticeable change in policy the DfE has constructively engaged with UNISON and other unions in the last few weeks. We are hopeful that this new relationship will result in improved guidance that will make the full return to schools safer.

UNISON has outlined several key measures below that we believe the DfE should implement before schools can fully re-open:

- 1 Allow schools to use a rota system/ blended learning when schools re-open.
- 2 Split classes into smaller groups to keep bubble sizes as small as possible. If necessary, give schools additional funding to hire extra staff and space to accommodate them. Small bubbles, rotas and a phased return would help to ensure 2m social distancing.
- 3 Keep staff and pupils within one bubble (except for emergencies) to reduce risk of cross transmission and wider closures.
- 4 Subject to a risk assessment, provide appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), including medical grade masks, 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.
- 5 Staff and pupils in secondary schools should wear face coverings in all areas of the school, including classrooms. There should be an urgent review of the

international evidence for face coverings for pupils in primary schools. Stocks of face coverings, including clear face coverings that facilitate lip-reading, should be made available.

- 6 Review the quality of face coverings and recommendations, noting [the banning of home-made masks in schools in France](#).
- 7 Mass testing can be used as an additional tool, alongside the full maintenance of all other preventative measures such as isolation of contacts of those with symptoms. Home tests must be backed up by access to more reliable PCR tests.
- 8 As part of re-opening, the DfE should ask the government to prioritise vaccinating school staff.
- 9 Provide additional national guidance on ventilation in schools and support local reviews of ventilation in all schools prior to wider re-opening. This guidance should include advice on minimum safe temperatures for classrooms. Classrooms and other school areas with unsafe ventilation should not be used.
- 10 Clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) and clinically vulnerable (CV) staff should continue to work from home on full pay until risk from the virus has significantly reduced.
- 11 The DfE should issue urgent guidance requiring that all outsourced staff in schools, such as catering and cleaning staff, must receive full pay when they are required to self-isolate, without any impact on their sickness absence record.
- 12 School staff should not be expected to take on tasks that are beyond their job description or that they are not fully trained and remunerated for. It is unfair to depend on support staff to take on additional work when they have already gone the extra mile to support pupils throughout the pandemic.

- 13 UNISON fully supports catch-up programmes, but they must be properly resourced by government, with full consideration of the existing financial, administrative and workload pressures that schools face. Any catch-up programmes should not result in additional workload pressures on already overworked school staff.
- 14 Apply public transport rules on social distancing and face coverings to all school transport.
- 15 Provide additional funding to cover any additional costs incurred by schools to implement these measures. Schools will need additional financial support to re-open safely.

Nursery classes and early years

Although nursery classes have not been formally restricted to vulnerable children and the children of critical workers, many nursery classes have restricted the number of children in classes.

As pupil numbers increase, schools will need to continue to risk assess the impact of increased numbers, particularly around expanding bubbles

We recognise that social distancing is impossible in early years settings. When CEV and CV staff are no longer at high risk from community transmission and they choose to continue to work at their early years settings, consideration should be given to finding these staff alternative roles where social distancing can be applied.

For UNISON's latest guidance, see our schools and early years advice.

