

PANDEMIC FLU - FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Possible closure of schools and early years and childcare settings

Q1 Will schools, nurseries and childcare facilities be expected to close in a pandemic?

A We cannot give a definitive answer at this time. It would depend on the nature of the pandemic and the level of risk to children. We would take the decision based on the evidence available once the pandemic was declared and on advice from medical experts.

Q2 Why might you want schools and other services to close?

A Influenza spreads rapidly in schools and other closed communities. If schools and group early years and childcare settings close at the right time, it could significantly reduce the spread of infection and the number of children infected.

Q3 How many children might be protected by schools and other settings closing?

A This would depend on the severity of the pandemic, and whether or not specific age groups were affected, but it could be significant. Some analyses of the potential benefits of closure suggest that it could reduce the number of children infected by up to 50%.

Q4 Your guidance speaks of closing schools and settings on an area by area basis. If the pandemic is going to hit the whole country, why not close them all at once?

A It may take 2-3 weeks, or more, for a pandemic to spread across the country. Given the impact of closures on children's education, and on working parents, we would not want schools and settings to close before it is necessary to do so.

Q5 What notice of closure can schools and early years and childcare settings expect to receive, and from whom? Who will tell parents? And will closure be immediate?

A If schools and group early years and childcare settings were advised to close when the pandemic reached their area, the local authority would advise the head teacher or setting manager when this happened and the advice thus became applicable. In that situation, we would expect closures to take effect from the end of the day when that message was received from the local authority, unless staff shortages made it impossible for the school or setting to operate safely for the day – unlikely in the early stages of a pandemic. We would not expect parents to be asked to come and collect their children earlier than usual.

Where possible, it would be helpful for the school or setting to contact parents during the day to advise them of the coming closure, so that parents could start to make plans. They should otherwise give them the information when they collect children at the end of the day and/or give children letters to take home.

Q6 Your guidance speaks of possibly advising ‘group’ early years and childcare settings to close. How many children constitute a group, or how many can safely mix?

A There is no ‘safe’ or ‘unsafe’ number. It is a question of the risk increasing with the number of children. We do not envisage advising all childminders to stop looking after children, as they typically care for only small numbers. But if we advised schools to close, the advice would probably apply to all nurseries, crèches, playgroups and other facilities catering for groups of children.

Q7 If schools and early years and childcare settings close, would parents have to keep their children locked indoors to keep them protected? What sort of contact between children, if any, would be safe?

A We acknowledge that it may be unrealistic – and unhelpful – to try to stop children mixing with others altogether. However, the less they mix, especially in larger groups, the lower the chance of infection. In the light of information about the pandemic strain of virus, we would provide more guidance to parents – and to those whose facilities might be used by groups of children – about the factors that might increase or reduce the risk.

Establishments staying open

Q8 While schools and early years and childcare settings remain open (because it’s a less severe pandemic, or because the pandemic has not yet reached their area), how can they keep children safe?

A In summer 2007 we published guidance on infection control for different settings, which is available at <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/humanflupandemic> .

In broad terms, much of the guidance reflects normal good practice to reduce the spread of any infection: washing hands, using tissues etc.

Q9 If residential special schools stay open, will they have enough staff to operate safely?

A It is for the schools themselves to plan their staffing, and we have provided guidance to assist them with that planning. Local authorities have a responsibility for vulnerable children in their area and they must plan to ensure that essential services can operate. We are working with local authorities to assist them in planning services for vulnerable children.

Impact on education and exams

Q10 If a pandemic came during the exam period, and schools were advised to close, would pupils be able to sit exams?

A We would have to consider this in the light of information about the pandemic virus and the level of risk. Exams might be considered a lower-risk activity: the students would be older, only those sitting exams would be present, students would only be in school for the duration of the exam, and students would have to sit apart in the exam room. But 'lower risk' does not mean 'no risk', so we would have to decide in the context of the overall level of risk to young people.

Q11 What if GCSE and A-level students couldn't sit exams? Could they be awarded grades?

A The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority and the awarding bodies have developed business continuity plans to deal with crises like this. Awarding bodies would use the 'special consideration' procedures they currently use when a student misses an exam through illness or other reasons, and believe they could fairly assess and award grades to almost all students on this basis.

Q12 If schools closed for several weeks, this would have a severe adverse effect on children's education. What would you do to reduce the impact of this?

A If schools closed to pupils, staff who were well would still be expected to report for work. One possible task for teaching staff would be to support remote learning, on which we will be publishing guidance in due course. After the pandemic, we would work with schools on ways to help students catch up on anything that they had missed during the closure.

Impact of closures on parents

Q13 What could working parents do if their child's school or nursery was closed for an extended period? Would they have to stay off work?

A We appreciate that closures would present a challenge for working parents, but believe they would agree with a decision taken to reduce a significant threat to their children's wellbeing.

Parents would have to make other arrangements for looking after their children. Some might be able to work from home, work flexible hours, or use informal childcare arrangements with a relative or friend.

Q14 Could employers with a significant proportion of parent workers establish their own nursery?

A Any advice to close group childcare settings would apply to such a newly established nursery or crèche as much as to any other establishment, so it would not be helpful for employers to do this. Also, any such new facility would have to be registered with Ofsted, which could not be completed at very short notice; they would have to check that relevant National Standards are met before confirming registration.

Q15 Parent workers staying off work to look after children will have a severe impact on the economy and on essential services.

A We have drawn this issue to the attention of employers so that they can plan for this eventuality. It will have an impact on all sectors, but with good planning we believe that impact to be manageable.

HE and FE

Q16 If you advise schools to close, why would the same advice not apply to FE colleges and universities?

A Children spread infection more readily than adults, so the risk of spreading infection would be lower in FE and HE settings. Workers will be advised to continue working as long as they are well, and the same would apply to students in HE and FE.

Q17 Are there no circumstances in which you would advise all universities and FE colleges to close?

A If a strain of virus presented a particular risk to young adults – as was the case for the ‘Spanish flu’ pandemic of 1918 – then we would ensure that college managers were aware of this, and would expect that many would close, or change the nature of their activities, to reduce the level of risk.

Q18 If colleges remain open, how can they operate more safely to reduce the level of risk?

A We issued infection control guidance for HE and FE settings in summer 2007 to assist them in reducing the spread of infection in a pandemic. That advice can be found at

<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/humanflupandemic>