

**SUPPORTING
LEARNING IF
SCHOOLS CLOSE FOR
EXTENDED PERIODS IN
A FLU PANDEMIC**

DCSF guidance:

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DCSF Guidance for Schools and Local Authorities

KEY MESSAGES

- The objective is that students should be provided with a reasonable degree of teaching and learning if schools close for an extended period in a flu pandemic;
- The overall planning responsibility lies with local authorities (see para 6 below), working with schools on planning and delivery;
- It is important for local authorities to discuss now with local schools their current position on planning, their ability to deal with this issue, and the need for the LA to co-ordinate aspects of this work; any demands that LAs place on schools should be reasonable and proportionate;
- Resources for planning should take account of the current World Health Organization phase (see para 2 below), and should – as far as possible – be aligned with broader work on remote learning options and IT developments;
- It is useful for schools to review the proportion of students with IT facilities at home, and the extent to which students with such facilities could access school IT systems from home;
- It is useful for LAs, or any schools that work outside pan-LA plans, to consider possible (non-IT) systems for getting work to and from students in the event of lengthy school closures;
- Schools should recognise that staff – teachers and support staff – have a role to play in emergency planning and, together with their trade unions or professional associations, should be consulted on the school's emergency plans (for pandemic flu or other emergencies);
- All guidance here is subject to an 'as far as is reasonably practical' proviso; a severe pandemic would cause major disruption to all aspects of life, including what it is reasonable to expect of schools and local authorities – but that is not a reason to neglect planning.

Background

1. In July 2006 the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES) published guidance¹ to schools, local authorities and others on planning for a human flu pandemic. The guidance explained the potential impact of a pandemic, which could lead to 25-50% of the population being infected during the pandemic, and between 50,000 and 750,000 people in the UK dying as a result.

¹ <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/humanflupandemic>

2. It is considered inevitable that there will be a pandemic at some time, but no-one knows when it may be, nor how serious it would be – though the potential severity mentioned in the previous paragraph underlines how significant it may be. The World Health Organization has a scale of pandemic and pre-pandemic phases to reflect its perception of the risk; we are currently – and have been for a few years – in Phase 3, where “there is a new sub-type of virus, but no human-to-human transmission”.

3. Phases 4 and 5 would reflect a growing ability of the new virus sub-type to spread from human to human and Phase 6 would be the start of a pandemic. We could move from Phase 4 to Phase 6 within a few weeks, so time for planning might be limited from Phase 4 onwards. However, planning that can be effected quickly could be left until Phase 4, with planning resource now directed towards what needs to be done well in advance.

4. The guidance set out the reasons for which the Government might advise schools (and group early years and childcare settings) to close to students during a pandemic: to reduce the spread of infection among children. Depending on the duration of the pandemic and its severity, this could mean schools being closed for an extended period of several weeks (at worst, closures could last up to a term during a pandemic wave).

5. The guidance indicated that in the event of schools being closed to students, staff would still be expected to report for work, though headteachers would decide whether staff needed to come into school or could work from home. Headteachers should, in consultation with governors, staff, trade unions and professional associations, take into account, among other factors (including the well-being and family needs of staff), how/where staff could best support the school’s approach to remote learning.

6. As such closures could seriously affect children’s education, the guidance cited local authorities’ legal duty to provide education “‘at school or otherwise’ for children who for any reason may not for any period receive suitable education unless such arrangements are made for them”. Local authorities must ensure that a reasonable level of education is provided for all children in their area if students are unable to attend schools due to school premises being closed to students during term time.

7. The guidance recommended that local authorities make preliminary plans with community schools, and discuss with foundation and aided schools, (and academies and independent schools), how they individually, or working together in clusters, could provide support remotely for students working from home; for voluntary aided schools, diocesan bodies may also be able to play a role in co-ordinating their schools’ planning. This subsequent guidance sets out some of the steps that schools and local authorities could take now to develop an action plan for such an eventuality, in line with other critical incident procedures. It also sets out to highlight the role of the local authority in co-ordinating work and providing a framework within which schools can operate.

8. Local authorities have a key role in co-ordinating planning for such a situation, and co-ordinating work in a pandemic. Schools should seek to work within a framework developed and managed by their LA. LAs should be reasonable in what they expect of schools, and this planning should not be used as the driver to push schools to develop IT and remote learning systems that they would otherwise not require. Some schools, especially those with access to more advanced technology, will however be well placed to deliver some aspects of remote learning.

9. Even for these schools, it is important that they work with, often through, the local authority. This may for example be the best way to provide some form of helpline for students; across the LA it may be possible to provide specialist staff support for subjects at each key stage (though differing curriculum details may make this difficult at times), whereas this might be hard for individual schools to achieve. It may also be the most effective way to co-ordinate (non-IT) systems for getting work to and from students. This reinforces the need for early LA planning and agreement with schools.

10. As indicated by the reference to a 'reasonable level of education' in paragraph 6 above, objectives have to be realistic: in the event of school closures for an extended period of time, though one would hope to provide as broad a curriculum as possible in the circumstances, one cannot aim to provide the full and balanced curriculum that would normally be offered by schools, nor could fully personalised learning be offered. However, students should be able to expect support with some remote learning activities, taking account of students' special educational needs as far as possible.

11. Other services may also be affected by staff shortages. Though all providers of essential services are being encouraged to develop contingency plans that would allow them to continue to operate, there could be some disruption to postal or transport services (or at least a reduction in levels of service) and, though the internet would continue to function, high levels of usage might make it significantly slower.

12. The guidance aims to be practical. It is based on current practices. It covers both the potential use of new technologies and 'non-technological' approaches. Some schools will be better placed than others to make best use of new technologies, and in all schools there will be students without home access to such technology.

13. The main part of this guidance sets out general advice for schools, with some issues specific to newer technologies in an annex. As newer applications, such as grids for learning, are developed, as learning platforms are adopted in schools and the level of access from the home increases, the guidance will be updated to reflect the possibilities they offer. Additionally, we are looking at how other channels, such as television, might provide support at a national level.

14. Whichever approach is used, it will only provide an effective channel for ensuring continuity of service to learners and parents if it is effectively managed and supported throughout the closure period. The school should review its current critical incidents policy in the light of a longer emergency. (For specific guidance on this see <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/emergencies/>.)

15. Plans should take account of the numbers of staff who are likely to be available, on the school site or working from home, with appropriate contingency arrangements to cover the absence or non-availability of staff with specific skills or knowledge.

Staff absence

16. As set out in the guidance published by DfES in 2006, if schools close, they would close to students, and staff would still, if well (and subject to the issues highlighted in the following paragraph), be expected to report for work – as would staff in all other sectors. It would be for the employer to decide (with the decision generally delegated to the headteacher) whether a school closed to students should also close its premises to staff, with work conducted in some other way.

17. Depending on the severity of the pandemic, absences due to illness of staff or their family members might peak at around 30% (the peak lasting around 2 weeks), but would be much lower at other stages in the pandemic ‘wave’; school and childcare closures might also mean staff needing to stay at home with their healthy children, but such staff might be able to do some work from home, depending on the nature of the work and their home circumstances (see next paragraph). There should however be no question of expecting staff absent from school as a result of illness to carry out work.

18. As in all other sectors, it is for employers to consult and agree with workforce trade unions the HR systems within which schools should operate (for example on special leave to take care of ill family members or children whose schools have closed). Schools will need to work in accordance with the national frameworks and regulations, including the School Teachers’ Pay and Conditions Document, and any statutory guidance issued by the DCSF. It will also be necessary to take into account any local collective agreements covering such eventualities. It will be for schools’ senior management to make decisions within this context.

Getting work to and from students

19. In considering this issue, schools need to take account of:
- a. The accuracy of contact details they have for students and their families; DCSF’s general guidance on planning for a pandemic stresses the importance of up-to-date contact details for students’ families;

- b. The proportion of children who have access to the internet and e-mail at home – and whether the school's IT systems allow those students with IT facilities to access the school's own systems from home (and, for example, use their school e-mail addresses); schools might wish to include in their plans options for providing temporary IT access (eg by loaning lap-tops) to students who would not otherwise have this facility... but this will not be possible for all schools, and some students might not be able to use a laptop from home (eg problems with telephone links);
- c. Security and child protection issues; for example, the personal addresses, e-mail and telephone details of staff should not be made available to students or their parents, so there must be systems to enable them to make appropriate contact through the school's systems and networks if they need to contact staff. Such contact should be on teaching and learning matters only, and should be within the agreed school session times. Schools will also need to be aware of the need to protect the confidentiality of students' home and e-mail addresses and telephone numbers.

20. Schools need to be able to get work to and from students. The LA may play an important role in co-ordinating such arrangements for some or all schools in the area. E-mail is one tool that can be used for students that have access to e-mail systems, and for materials that can be sent electronically. The postal service is an alternative, and it is expected to continue to operate during a pandemic. Another option may be for arrangements to be made for work to be collected from the school, town hall, local library etc. Any plans made now would need to be reviewed in the context of the services available in the event of a pandemic, and need to be appropriate and reasonable in the context of effective workforce deployment and the statutory duty to ensure that teachers and headteachers benefit from a satisfactory work/life balance.

21. For students to return work to the school without burdening families with potentially high postal costs, schools may wish to have arrangements for parents or students to deliver completed work to the school or a collection point. If schools were advised to close to students that closure would be to reduce the risk of infection from students mixing together in the classroom over the school day; so any approach that would bring students into school to deliver or collect work should be managed so as to reduce mixing between students.

22. Alternatively, families living close to one another might arrange for one parent to deliver work from all students in those families. Schools might also consider issuing stamped addressed envelopes to students to use for returning homework. The LA can play a role in this, co-ordinating arrangements for a number of schools. LAs and schools will have to assess costs and budget accordingly.

23. Whichever channel they use, schools will want to explore, in consultation with the local authority and school staff, how they could provide access to a range of on-line materials, text books, worksheets or similar materials for students. They should also consider how they might provide school telephone numbers or a school e-mail address on which students or parents can reach staff during school session times in order to raise any questions on the work that has been sent home. In doing this, schools will need to consider how such facilities will be staffed.

24. Schools may however agree with the LA for such support to be provided at LA level, with schools pooling some resources to make sure that support is available for all subjects and all key stages. Any such cross-LA plans, particularly for secondary students in exam years, should as far as possible take account of schools' curriculum plans and the requirements of awarding bodies.

25. *Particularly for younger children*, though it also applies to other children, schools should provide parents with some simple, straightforward advice on how they can support their children's learning while the school is closed. This may include information on the curriculum, or hints about how to use a child's home surroundings – or programmes on television or radio – to inform their work. The local authority's guidance to home educators, on which DCSF issued guidelines in late November 2007, may be a useful source of information to which schools can draw parents' attention.

26. Local authorities and schools will also wish to support the learning of children who may be bereaved in a pandemic. Wherever possible, they should be provided with appropriate pastoral support from suitably qualified support staff.

Students studying at institutions other than their own

27. It is becoming increasingly common for secondary students to spend part (occasionally all) of their week studying at institutions other than the school in which they are registered: other schools, colleges or work-based providers. The school with which they are registered would remain responsible for these students, and should liaise with the other institutions concerned.

Public examinations (and coursework)

28. DCSF and QCA are working with awarding bodies and regulatory bodies on procedures to address any disruption to public examinations through school closures in a pandemic, or any loss of coursework that would contribute to students' final grades. The special consideration rules that are currently used when individual students miss exams, or are unwell or upset during exams, would be applied on a larger scale. QCA would issue detailed advice at the time, but procedures are being developed that would allow the vast majority of students to have their work assessed and grades allocated.

Television/radio/internet

29. In a pandemic, DCSF would need to ensure that information is made available to LAs, schools and families about what materials are available where and when. DCSF is currently in discussion with public sector broadcasters to develop a collective response to any pandemic. This may include the possibility of using television (and radio) channels to broadcast more educational programmes during a period of school closures, or to make programmes and other materials available through the internet.

30. One factor may be the timing of a pandemic in terms of the roll-out of digital TV across the country: it would doubtless be easier to dedicate a free-to-air digital channel to educational programmes than one of the 5 (in some areas, 4) terrestrial channels. However, if a pandemic closes schools while a substantial proportion of the population does not have access to digital TV, this might disadvantage students without digital TV, who may well also be those without access to ICT systems. We would therefore hope that at least a reasonable proportion of educational programming could appear on terrestrial channels, though clearly what would be most appropriate and its availability will be the subject of on-going discussions.

31. All programmes from Teachers TV can already be viewed on-line at, and downloaded from <http://www.teachers.tv/> .

32. We would ensure that schools were advised of the content of coming educational programmes on TV/radio so that they could – if they wished – try to link the materials being sent to children’s homes (by post or electronically) to the programmes children would be able to see. DCSF could provide this information through its own website and/or Teachernet, as well as flagging programmes or materials being made available on the internet.

Post-pandemic

33. After a pandemic wave, if schools have been closed for an extended period, LAs and schools will need to work together on activities to help children catch up on education that they have lost during the pandemic. DCSF would expect to issue further guidance on this towards the end of the pandemic when the circumstances, and the impact of the closures, would be clearer.

34. Even if there have not been extended widespread school closures, a significant number of students will have missed out on at least some days’ schooling as a result of illness or being unable to get to school. Local authorities and schools will need to work together to identify the students affected and coordinate the delivery of appropriate activities and support.

35. Priorities for ‘catch-up’ work may depend on the extent and duration of any closures, and the time of year at which they occur. DCSF would expect to include some guidelines on this in the guidance mentioned in para 23 above.

36. Any 'catch up' work provided by school staff within their existing contracts must be handled within the existing school sessions. There should be no expectation that staff would be expected to work extra hours to provide extra 'catch up' classes.

Correction/revision to earlier guidance: In paragraph 2.14 of the guidance issued in July 2006, we mentioned the 'BBC Jam' service as one to be included in schools' plans. This service has now been discontinued. The guidance in the annex covers (in general terms) some of the alternatives.

THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

As with other aspects of remote learning, the LA can and should play an important role in planning, identifying what schools can do themselves and what the LA can do for schools.

New technologies provide a number of ways of:

- maintaining communications between home and school and keeping the community informed through email and the school website, where available
- providing learners with access to learning materials and support through the school's learning platform or website, where these exist.

However, technology also poses its own problems. Without effective planning there is a real risk of access and security issues preventing the school from utilising technology to provide effective solutions in an emergency. Schools should review their current policies to ensure they are in a position to ensure a satisfactory level of engagement with learners, their workforce and community in the unfortunate event of an emergency. A number of practical steps that schools should take to ensure that their use of technology will provide continuity during an emergency are set out below.

This guidance relates only to the use of ICT systems for supporting teaching and learning during a pandemic.

Policies and plans

Within the context of an overall plan, the following steps will help schools ensure that their technology remains fit for purpose to support distance learning throughout the closure period :

- ⇒ The school should review the security implications for technology equipment if, for example the ICT suite is not being regularly used; staff may be in the school in daytime, but the headteacher may agree to many of them working from home.
- ⇒ If a number of schools are closed for extended periods this may place additional burdens on local authority or other ICT support. For example, there may be increased calls on help-desk support. Local Authorities or other providers may wish to work together to develop an ICT support plan to ensure that support is effectively distributed between centres through scheduling or cluster arrangements.
- ⇒ In some areas of the country an erratic supply of electricity for the schools ICT system might disrupt provision. Data will need to be backed-up regularly in the case of a break down in service.

Emergency communication and connectivity strategy

If the school is closed to students, the following steps should be taken to ensure that students and parents can be contacted (for example to update them on the current position) and supported (for example, by making learning resources available).

- ⇒ Ensure all details for students are electronically stored and are readily available to a range of authorised users.
- ⇒ Ensure that secure facilities are available to communicate in an emergency with all parents/students eg by text, by phone, by e-mail, by the web or by local media
- ⇒ Establish and plan for a two way method of communication via the school website, the learning platform or telephone system.
- ⇒ Ensure all possible emergency resources are available in a range of formats so a range of possible communication channels can be utilised.
- ⇒ Establish emergency protocols with users for appropriate usage eg daily messaging.
- ⇒ Ensure that all protective measures, including anti-virus software and firewalls, are installed and up-to-date to protect the remote learning arrangements from being compromised or sabotaged.

Becta's Functional specifications for connectivity services and school infrastructure set out a set of requirements for effective ICT services that schools should expect from their service providers. These are available at http://industry.becta.org.uk/content_files/industry/resources/Specification_key_docs/functional_spec_connectivity_v1.pdf

and

http://industry.becta.org.uk/content_files/industry/resources/Specification_key_docs/functional_spec_institutional_infrastructure.pdf

Support for remote learning and teaching

Schools can take a number of steps to ensure that curriculum materials will be available to learners throughout the crisis period. The suggestions below reflect what many schools are already doing to extend learning beyond the school day and to provide learners with access to the school's materials at home. At present many schools with websites are providing these services through the web site. Increasingly, as the use of learning platforms becomes more embedded they will become an important means of supporting out-of-school learning.

- ⇒ **Curriculum resources:** Develop a core online set of content to support specific curriculum objectives that can be managed in the main by learners themselves. These resources may be provided from a range of sources and may include school-generated and commercial content, and free material available via Teachers TV or similar to support formal and informal learning. If learners' access to the Internet is limited, these resources should be printed and delivered to homes. Schools will want to allow sufficient directed time for the production and assembly of such curriculum material.
- ⇒ **Feedback to learners:** Schools will wish to ensure that learners receive feedback on any work they have completed at home. This will be particularly important for examination classes. While some on-line resources (such as the major examination revision sites) are sufficiently interactive to provide feedback directly to the learner, students' responses to much school-generated and other resources will need marking by teachers. Ensure that facilities are available, either through e-mail, the school website or the learning platform, for students to communicate with staff and gain feedback and support. Schools will not be able to devote inordinate amounts of time to chasing up work that students have not returned, but will need contact details so that they may contact students in the event of failure to return work.
- ⇒ **Peer to peer support:** Students benefit from discussing their work with other learners. Where students are unable to meet because of the risks of contagion, schools may develop facilities for online student dialogue through the learning platform facilitated by learning mentors. A number of local authorities and schools already making this facility available through their online learning services.

Where schools have learning platforms, they should review the functionality of the school's learning platform to ensure it can be used for a range of activities during an emergency.

http://matrix.becta.org.uk/GMATRIX_6381882_acb95f499dd8aebd-D5CF9F47-A42C-8310-EFE0ECB3B63CC3CC/1166004952223/rebrand/matrix/index.cfm?matrix=136&forcenew=yes

Developing competencies to utilise remote learning and teaching

Technology will only support the continuity of learning if learners and staff have the necessary skills to utilise it effectively.

- ⇒ Ensure that learners are experienced users and have developed the competencies needed to make best use of online resources.
- ⇒ Develop learners' competencies to learn effectively independently with little supervision.

The value of cluster arrangements

Many schools would benefit by entering into cluster arrangements to put in place the recommendations set out above (though cluster arrangements may also benefit schools using more 'low tech' approaches).

For example:

- Schools that are well advanced in providing out-of-school hours support to learners through the use of a learning platform could become cluster leaders, registering students and staff from other schools on their services.
- Schools in a cluster could pool online resources to maximise the amount of the curriculum that is covered, using a central hosting arrangement.
- Technical and other support could be more effectively managed across a cluster of schools.

While the above recommendations set out above are aimed at providing out of school access for students in the case of a school closure, many are in line with existing school and local authority plans for extending learners' access to learning generally. Schools and local authorities may wish to consider the guidance in this document alongside their wider strategies for engaging learners through the use of technology. Further advice on this is available through the Becta web site.