



Department
for Education

Schools COVID-19 operational guidance

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Contents

Summary	4
Overview	4
Changes to the previous version	5
Risk assessment	5
Mixing and bubbles	5
Tracing close contacts and isolation	6
Face coverings	7
Transparent face coverings	8
Circumstances where people are not able to wear face coverings	8
Access to face coverings	9
Safe wearing and removal of face coverings	9
Stepping measures up and down	10
Control measures	10
1. Ensure good hygiene for everyone	11
Hand hygiene	11
Respiratory hygiene	11
Use of personal protective equipment (PPE)	11
2. Maintain appropriate cleaning regimes, using standard products such as detergents	11
3. Keep occupied spaces well ventilated	11
4. Follow public health advice on testing, self-isolation and managing confirmed cases of COVID-19	12
When an individual develops COVID-19 symptoms or has a positive test	12
Asymptomatic testing	13
Confirmatory PCR tests	13
Other considerations	13
Those formerly considered to be clinically extremely vulnerable	13
Vaccination	14
Mandatory certification	14
Welcoming children back to school	14
Attendance	14

Vulnerable children	15
Travel and quarantine	15
Remote education	15
Education recovery	16
Pupil wellbeing and support	16
School workforce	17
School meals	17
Educational visits	18
Wraparound provision and extra-curricular activity	18
Inspection	18
Accountability expectations	19

Summary

This guidance explains the actions school leaders should take to reduce the risk of transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19) in their school. This includes public health advice, endorsed by the United Kingdom Health Security Agency (UKHSA).

It is for leaders and staff in:

- primary schools
- secondary schools (including sixth forms)
- special schools, special post-16 providers and alternative provision
- 16 to 19 academies
- infant, junior, middle, upper schools
- boarding schools

We expect independent schools to follow the control measures set out in this guidance in the same way as state-funded schools, and health and safety legislation applies equally to independent schools.

Where this guidance refers to schools, that does not include maintained nursery schools or pre-reception classes.

Separate guidance is available for:

- [early years and childcare settings](#)
- [further education colleges and providers](#)

Additional operational guidance is also available for [special schools, special post-16 providers and alternative provision](#).

Schools and trusts should work closely with parents and carers (future references to parents should be read as including carers), staff and unions when agreeing the best approaches for their circumstances.

We use the terms ‘must’ and ‘should’ throughout the guidance. We use the term ‘must’ when the person in question is legally required to do something and ‘should’ when the advice set out should be followed unless there is a good reason not to.

Overview

The government continues to manage the risk of serious illness from the spread of the virus. The Prime Minister announced on 27 November the temporary introduction of new measures as a result of the Omicron variant and on 8 December that Plan B, set out in the [autumn and winter plan 2021](#), was being enacted. As a result, these measures are reflected in this guidance for schools. This advice remains subject to change as the situation develops.

COVID-19 continues to be a virus that we learn to live with and the imperative to reduce the disruption to children and young people's education remains.

Our priority is for you to deliver face-to-face, high-quality education to all pupils. The evidence is clear that being out of education causes significant harm to educational attainment, life chances, mental and physical health.

We have worked closely with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the United Kingdom Health Security Agency (UKHSA) to revise this guidance.

Changes to the previous version

Changes to the guidance since its 2 January 2021 publication include:

- Updated section on Confirmatory PCR tests
- Additional advice in the section on When an individual develops COVID-19 symptoms or has a positive test about the return to school

Risk assessment

You must comply with health and safety law and put in place proportionate control measures.

You must regularly review and update your risk assessments - treating them as 'living documents', as the circumstances in your school and the public health advice changes. This includes having active arrangements in place to monitor whether the controls are effective and working as planned.

For more information on what is required of school leaders in relation to health and safety risk assessments and managing risk, see the [health and safety advice for schools](#).

Mixing and bubbles

We no longer recommend that it is necessary to keep children in consistent groups ('bubbles'). This means that 'bubbles' will not need to be used in schools. As well as enabling flexibility in curriculum delivery, this means that assemblies can resume and you no longer need to make alternative arrangements to avoid mixing at lunch.

You should make sure your contingency plans (sometimes called outbreak management plans) cover the possibility that it may become necessary to reintroduce 'bubbles' for a temporary period, to reduce mixing between groups.

Any decision to recommend the reintroduction of 'bubbles' would not be taken lightly and would need to take account of the detrimental impact they can have on the delivery of education.

Tracing close contacts and isolation

Close contacts in schools are now identified by [NHS Test and Trace](#) and education settings will no longer be expected to undertake contact tracing.

As with positive cases in any other setting, NHS Test and Trace will work with the positive case and/or their parent to identify close contacts. Contacts from a school setting will only be traced by NHS Test and Trace where the positive case or their parent specifically identifies the individual as being a close contact. This is likely to be a small number of individuals who would be most at risk of contracting COVID-19 due to the nature of the close contact. You may be contacted in exceptional cases to help with identifying close contacts, as currently happens in managing other infectious diseases.

From 14 December 2021, adults who are fully vaccinated and all children and young people aged between 5 and 18 years and 6 months identified as a contact of someone with COVID-19 are strongly advised to take a LFD test every day for 7 days and continue to attend their setting as normal, unless they have a positive test result. Daily testing of close contacts applies to all contacts who are:

- fully vaccinated adults – people who have had 2 doses of an approved vaccine
- all children and young people aged 5 to 18 years and 6 months, regardless of their vaccination status
- people who are not able to get vaccinated for medical reasons
- people taking part, or have taken part, in an approved clinical trial for a COVID-19 vaccine

Children under 5 years are exempt from self-isolation and do not need to take part in daily testing of close contacts.

Pupils with SEND identified as close contacts should be supported by their school and their families to agree the most appropriate route for testing including, where appropriate, additional support to assist swabbing. For further information please see [SEND guidance](#).

Further information is available in [NHS Test and Trace: what to do if you are contacted](#) and in the [stay at home: guidance for households with possible or confirmed coronavirus \(COVID-19\) infection](#).

18-year-olds are treated in the same way as children until 6 months after their 18th birthday, to allow them the opportunity to get fully vaccinated. At which point, they will be subject to the same rules as adults and so if they choose not to get vaccinated, they will need to self-isolate if identified as a close contact.

Settings will continue to have a role in working with health protection teams in the case of a local outbreak. If there is a substantial increase in the number of positive cases in a setting (see [Stepping measures up and down](#) section for more information) or if central

government offers the area an enhanced response package, a director of public health might advise a setting to temporarily reintroduce some control measures.

Face coverings

Face coverings help protect the wearer and others against the spread of infection because they cover the nose and mouth, which are the main confirmed sources of transmission of COVID-19.

Where pupils in year 7 (which would be children who were aged 11 on 31 August 2021) and above are educated, we recommend that face coverings should be worn by pupils, staff and adult visitors when moving around the premises, outside of classrooms, such as in corridors and communal areas. This is a temporary measure.

From January 4th, we also recommend that in those schools where pupils in year 7 and above are educated, face coverings should be worn in classrooms. This does not apply in situations where wearing a face covering would impact on the ability to take part in exercise or strenuous activity, for example in PE lessons. This will also be a temporary measure.

Pupils in these schools must also wear a face covering when travelling on public transport and should wear it on dedicated transport to and from school.

We would not ordinarily expect teachers to wear a face covering in the classroom if they are at the front of the class, to support education delivery, although settings should be sensitive to the needs of individual teachers.

In primary schools, we recommend that face coverings should be worn by staff and adults (including visitors) when moving around in corridors and communal areas. Health advice continues to be that children in primary schools should not be asked to wear face coverings.

See [Circumstances where people are not able to wear face coverings](#) for exceptions to this.

Face coverings do not need to be worn when outdoors.

Schools, as employers, have a duty to comply with the Equality Act 2010 which includes making reasonable adjustments for disabled staff. They also have a duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled pupils, to support them to access education successfully. No pupil should be denied education on the grounds that they are not wearing a face covering.

Transparent face coverings

Transparent face coverings can be worn to assist communication with someone who relies on:

- lip reading
- clear sound
- facial expression.

Transparent face coverings may be effective in reducing the spread of COVID-19. However, the evidence to support this is currently very limited.

The benefits of transparent face coverings should be considered alongside the comfort and breathability of a face covering that contains plastic, which may mean that the face covering is less breathable than layers of cloth.

Face coverings (whether transparent or cloth) should fit securely around the face to cover the nose and mouth and be made with a breathable material capable of filtering airborne particles.

Face visors or shields can be worn by those exempt from wearing a face covering but they are not an equivalent alternative in terms of source control of virus transmission. They may protect the wearer against droplet spread in specific circumstances but are unlikely to be effective in preventing the escape of smaller respiratory particles when used without an additional face covering. They should only be used after carrying out a risk assessment for the specific situation and should always be cleaned appropriately.

Circumstances where people are not able to wear face coverings

There are some circumstances where people may not be able to wear a face covering. Please be mindful and respectful of such circumstances. Some people are less able to wear face coverings, and the reasons for this may not be visible to others.

In relation to education settings, this includes (but is not limited to):

- people who cannot put on, wear or remove a face covering because of a physical or mental illness or impairment, or disability
- people for whom putting on, wearing or removing a face covering will cause severe distress
- people speaking to or providing assistance to someone who relies on lip reading, clear sound or facial expressions to communicate
- to avoid the risk of harm or injury to yourself or others
- you are also permitted to remove a face covering in order to take medication.

Access to face coverings

Due to the use of face coverings in wider society, staff and pupils are already likely to have access to face coverings.

You should have a small contingency supply available for people who:

- are struggling to access a face covering
- are unable to use their face covering as it has become damp, soiled or unsafe
- have forgotten their face covering

Staff and pupils may consider bringing a spare face covering to wear if their face covering becomes damp during the day.

Safe wearing and removal of face coverings

Your contingency plans should already cover a process for when face coverings are worn within your school and how they should be removed. You should communicate this process clearly to pupils, staff and visitors and allow for adjustments to be made for pupils who may be distressed if required to remove a face covering against their wishes, particularly those with SEND.

When wearing a face covering, staff, visitors and pupils should:

- wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water for 20 seconds or use hand sanitiser before putting a face covering on
- avoid touching the part of the face covering in contact with the mouth and nose, as it could be contaminated with the virus
- change the face covering if it becomes damp or if they've touched the part of the face covering in contact with the mouth and nose
- avoid taking it off and putting it back on a lot in quick succession to minimise potential contamination

When removing a face covering, staff, visitors and pupils should:

- wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water for 20 seconds or use hand sanitiser before removing
- only handle the straps, ties or clips
- not give it to someone else to use
- if single-use, dispose of it carefully in a household waste bin and do not recycle
- once removed, store reusable face coverings in a plastic bag until there is an opportunity to wash them.
- if reusable, wash it in line with manufacturer's instructions at the highest temperature appropriate for the fabric

- wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water for 20 seconds or use hand sanitiser once removed

Separate guidance is also available on preventing and controlling infection, including the use of personal protective equipment (PPE), in education, childcare and children's social care settings.

Stepping measures up and down

You should have contingency plans (sometimes called outbreak management plans) outlining what you would do if children, pupils, students or staff test positive for COVID-19, or how you would operate if you were advised to take extra measures to help break chains of transmission. Given the detrimental impact that restrictions on education can have on children and young people, any measures in schools should only ever be considered as a last resort, kept to the minimum number of schools or groups possible, and for the shortest amount of time possible.

Central government may offer local areas of particular concern an enhanced response package to help limit increases in transmission.

For most settings it will make sense to think about taking extra action if the number of positive cases substantially increases. Information on what circumstances might lead you to consider taking additional action, and the steps you should work through, can be found in the [contingency framework](#).

The contingency framework describes the principles of managing local outbreaks of COVID-19 in education and childcare settings. Local authorities, directors of public health (DsPH) and UKHSA health protection teams (HPTs) can recommend measures described in the contingency framework in individual education and childcare settings – or a small cluster of settings – as part of their outbreak management responsibilities.

Control measures

You should:

1. Ensure good hygiene for everyone.
2. Maintain appropriate cleaning regimes.
3. Keep occupied spaces well ventilated.
4. Follow public health advice on testing, self-isolation and managing confirmed cases of COVID-19.

1. Ensure good hygiene for everyone

Hand hygiene

Frequent and thorough hand cleaning should now be regular practice. You should continue to ensure that pupils clean their hands regularly. This can be done with soap and water or hand sanitiser.

Respiratory hygiene

The 'catch it, bin it, kill it' approach continues to be very important.

The [e-Bug COVID-19 website](#) contains free resources for you, including materials to encourage good hand and respiratory hygiene.

Use of personal protective equipment (PPE)

Most staff in schools will not require PPE beyond what they would normally need for their work. The guidance on the [use of PPE in education, childcare and children's social care settings](#) provides more information on the use of PPE for COVID-19.

2. Maintain appropriate cleaning regimes, using standard products such as detergents

You should put in place and maintain an appropriate cleaning schedule. This should include regular cleaning of areas and equipment (for example, twice per day), with a particular focus on frequently touched surfaces.

UKHSA has published guidance on the [cleaning of non-healthcare settings](#).

3. Keep occupied spaces well ventilated

When your school is in operation, it is important to ensure it is well ventilated and that a comfortable teaching environment is maintained.

You should identify any poorly ventilated spaces as part of your risk assessment and take steps to improve fresh air flow in these areas, giving particular consideration when holding events where visitors such as parents are on site, for example, school plays.

Mechanical ventilation is a system that uses a fan to draw fresh air or extract air from a room. These should be adjusted to increase the ventilation rate wherever possible and checked to confirm that normal operation meets current guidance and that only fresh outside air is circulated.

If possible, systems should be adjusted to full fresh air or, if this is not possible, then systems should be operated as normal as long as they are within a single room and supplemented by an outdoor air supply.

Where mechanical ventilation systems exist, you should ensure that they are maintained in accordance with the manufacturers' recommendations.

Opening external windows can improve natural ventilation, and in addition, opening internal doors can also assist with creating a throughput of air. If necessary, external opening doors may also be used (if they are not fire doors and where safe to do so).

You should balance the need for increased ventilation while maintaining a comfortable temperature.

The [Health and Safety Executive guidance on air conditioning and ventilation during the COVID-19 pandemic](#) and [CIBSE COVID-19 advice](#) provides more information.

CO2 monitors are being provided to state-funded education settings, so staff can quickly identify where ventilation needs to be improved.

4. Follow public health advice on testing, self-isolation and managing confirmed cases of COVID-19

When an individual develops COVID-19 symptoms or has a positive test

Pupils, staff and other adults should follow public health advice on [when to self-isolate and what to do](#). They should not come into school if they have symptoms, have had a positive test result or other reasons requiring them to stay at home due to the risk of them passing on COVID-19 (for example, they are required to quarantine).

If anyone in your school develops [COVID-19 symptoms](#), however mild, you should send them home and they should follow public health advice.

If a pupil in a boarding school shows symptoms, they should usually self-isolate in their residential setting so that their usual support can continue, others may then benefit from self-isolating in their family home.

For everyone with symptoms, they should avoid using public transport and, wherever possible, be collected by a member of their family or household.

If a pupil is awaiting collection, they should be left in a room on their own if possible and safe to do so. A window should be opened for fresh air ventilation if possible.

Appropriate PPE should also be used if close contact is necessary. Further information on this can be found in the [use of PPE in education, childcare and children's social care settings](#) guidance. Any rooms they use should be cleaned after they have left.

The household (including any siblings) should follow the UKHSA [stay at home guidance for households with possible or confirmed coronavirus \(COVID-19\) infection](#).

Pupils and staff should return to school as soon as isolation rules allow.

Asymptomatic testing

Testing remains important in reducing the risk of transmission of infection within schools.

Staff and secondary school pupils should continue to test twice weekly at home, with lateral flow device (LFD) test kits, 3-4 days apart. Testing remains voluntary but is strongly encouraged.

Secondary schools should also retain a small asymptomatic testing site (ATS) on-site until further notice so they can offer testing to pupils who are unable to test themselves at home.

Schools are strongly encouraged to ask parents and other visitors to take a lateral flow device (LFD) test before entering the school.

Further information on Daily Rapid Testing can be found in the Tracing close contacts and isolation section.

There is no need for primary age pupils (those in year 6 and below) to regularly test, unless they have been identified as a contact for someone who has tested positive for Covid-19 and therefore advised to take lateral flow tests every day for 7 days.

Confirmatory PCR tests

You should follow the latest government guidance on confirmatory PCR tests in [Stay at home: guidance for households with possible or confirmed coronavirus \(COVID-19\) infection - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#) following a positive LFD test.

Other considerations

You should ensure that key contractors are aware of the school's control measures and ways of working.

Those formerly considered to be clinically extremely vulnerable

Following expert clinical advice and the successful rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine programme, people previously considered to be particularly vulnerable, clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV), and high or higher-risk are not being advised to shield again. Children and young people who were previously identified as being in one of these

groups, are advised to continue to follow the guidance contained in Coronavirus: how to stay safe and help prevent the spread.

Children and young people previously considered CEV should attend school and should follow the same [COVID-19 guidance](#) as the rest of the population. In some circumstances, a child or young person may have received personal advice from their specialist or clinician on additional precautions to take and they should continue to follow that advice.

Vaccination

We recommend all school staff and eligible pupils take up the offer of a vaccine.

You can find out more about the in-school vaccination programme in COVID-19 vaccination programme for children and young people guidance for schools.

Mandatory certification

Schools are not required to use the NHS COVID Pass, unless they are holding a specific event (such as a reception, concert or party) that meets the attendance thresholds. Where applicable, schools should follow guidance on mandatory certification for events. Under 18s are exempt from showing their COVID Status but should be counted towards attendance thresholds.

You should not use the NHS COVID Pass as a condition of entry for education or related activities such as exams, teaching, extra-curricular activities or any other day-to-day activities that are part of education or training.

Welcoming children back to school

In most cases, parents and carers will agree that a pupil with symptoms should not attend the school, given the potential risk to others.

If a parent or carer insists on a pupil attending your school, you can take the decision to refuse the pupil if, in your reasonable judgement, it is necessary to protect other pupils and staff from possible infection with COVID-19. Your decision would need to be carefully considered in light of all the circumstances and current public health advice.

Attendance

School attendance is mandatory for all pupils of compulsory school age and it is a priority to ensure that as many children as possible regularly attend school.

Where a child is required to self-isolate or quarantine because of COVID-19 in accordance with relevant legislation or guidance published by UKHSA or the DHSC, they should be recorded as code X (not attending in circumstances related to coronavirus).

Where they are unable to attend because they have a confirmed case of COVID-19 they should be recorded as code I (illness).

For pupils abroad who are facing challenges to return, code X is unlikely to apply. In some specific cases, code Y (unable to attend due to exceptional circumstances) will apply. Further guidance about the use of codes is provided in the [school attendance guidance](#).

Vulnerable children

Where pupils who are self-isolating are within our definition of vulnerable, it is very important that you put systems in place to keep in contact with them, particularly if they have a social worker. Some children may be vulnerable who are not officially in statutory systems and schools should seek to support any children who they believe may have challenging circumstances at home.

When a vulnerable pupil is asked to self-isolate, you should:

- notify their social worker (if they have one) and, for looked-after children, the local authority virtual school head
- agree with the social worker the best way to maintain contact and offer support

You should have procedures in place to:

- check if a vulnerable pupil is able to access remote education support
- support them to access it (as far as possible)
- regularly check if they are accessing remote education
- keep in contact with them to check their wellbeing and refer onto other services if additional support is needed.

Travel and quarantine

All children and staff travelling to England must adhere to government travel advice in travel to England from another country during coronavirus (COVID-19).

Parents travelling abroad should bear in mind the impact on their child's education which may result from any requirement to quarantine or isolate upon return.

Where pupils travel from abroad to attend a boarding school, you will need to explain the rules to pupils and their parents before they travel to the UK.

Additional guidance has been issued on [boarding school students quarantine and testing arrangements](#).

Remote education

Where appropriate, you should support those who need to self-isolate because they have tested positive to work or learn from home if they are well enough to do so. Schools subject to the [remote education temporary continuity direction](#) are required to provide remote education to pupils covered by the direction where their attendance would be contrary to government guidance or legislation around COVID-19.

You should maintain your capacity to deliver high-quality remote education across this academic year, including for pupils who are abroad, and facing challenges to return due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, for the period they are abroad.

Independent Schools (not including academies) are only covered by the remote education temporary continuity direction in relation to state-funded pupils in their schools. However, they are still expected to meet the [Independent School Standards](#) in full at all times.

The remote education provided should be equivalent in length to the core teaching pupils would receive in school.

You should work collaboratively with families and put in place reasonable adjustments so that pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) can successfully access remote education.

Full expectations for remote education, support and resources can be found on the [get help with remote education service](#).

Education recovery

We have announced a number of programmes and activities to support pupils to make up education missed as a result of the pandemic. Further information is available on [education recovery support](#). Specifically for schools, the document includes further information on:

- [recovery premium](#)
- tutoring (including the [National Tutoring Programme](#) and [16 to 19 tuition fund](#))
- teacher training opportunities
- curriculum resources
- [curriculum planning](#)
- specialist settings
- wider continuous professional development resources, including to support teacher wellbeing and subject-specific teaching

Pupil wellbeing and support

Some pupils may be experiencing a variety of emotions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as anxiety, stress or low mood. You can access useful links and sources of support on [promoting and supporting mental health and wellbeing in schools](#).

School workforce

From 13 December office workers who can work from home should do so. Anyone who cannot work from home, such as those involved in the face-to-face provision of education, should continue to go to their place of work.

School leaders are best placed to determine the workforce required to meet the needs of their pupils. School leaders will need to consider whether it is possible for specific staff undertaking certain roles to work from home without disrupting to face-to-face education.

Following expert clinical advice and the successful rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine programme, people previously considered to be particularly vulnerable, clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV), and high or higher-risk are not being advised to shield again. If staff were previously identified as being in one of these groups, they are advised to continue to follow the guidance contained in [Coronavirus: how to stay safe and help prevent the spread](#).

In some circumstances, staff may have received personal advice from their specialist or clinician on additional precautions to take and they should continue to follow that advice. Whilst individual risk assessments are not required, employers are expected to discuss any concerns that people previously considered CEV may have.

Employers will need to follow this specific [guidance for pregnant employees](#). [COVID-19 vaccination: a guide for women of childbearing age, pregnant or breastfeeding](#) contains further advice on vaccination. Your workplace risk assessment should already consider any risks to female employees of childbearing age and, in particular, risks to new and expectant mothers. You should also consider the needs of pregnant pupils.

Employers should be able to explain the measures they have in place to keep staff safe at work. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has published guidance on [protecting vulnerable workers](#), including advice for employers and employees on [how to talk about reducing risks in the workplace](#). For home working, employers should consider whether home working is appropriate for workers facing mental or physical health difficulties, or those with a particularly challenging home working environment. Employers should discuss concerns with staff.

School meals

You should continue to provide free school meal support to any pupils who are eligible for benefits-related free school meals and who are learning at home during term time.

More information on [providing school meals during the COVID-19 pandemic](#) is available.

Educational visits

We recommend that you consider whether to go ahead with planned international educational visits at this time, recognising the risk of disruption to education resulting from the need to isolate and test on arrival back into the UK. You should refer to the [Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office travel advice](#) and the guidance on international travel before booking and travelling.

You are advised to ensure that any new bookings have adequate financial protection in place.

You should speak to either your visit provider, commercial insurance company, or the risk protection arrangement (RPA) to assess the protection available. Independent advice on insurance cover and options can be sought from the British Insurance Brokers' Association (BIBA) or Association of British Insurers (ABI). Any school holding ATOL or ABTA refund credit notes may use these credit notes to rebook educational or international visits.

You should undertake full and thorough risk assessments in relation to all educational visits and ensure that any public health advice, such as hygiene and ventilation requirements, is included as part of that risk assessment. [General guidance about educational visits](#) is available and is supported by specialist advice from the [Outdoor Education Advisory Panel \(OEAP\)](#).

Wraparound provision and extra-curricular activity

More information on planning extra-curricular provision can be found in the guidance for [providers who run community activities, holiday clubs, after-school clubs, tuition and other out-of-school provision for children](#).

Inspection

For state-funded schools, Ofsted has resumed its programme of routine inspections and will aim to inspect every state-funded school within the next 5 academic years. This will mean an extension of up to 6 terms in the inspection interval for those schools not inspected since the start of the pandemic. Within the 5-year period, Ofsted will continue to prioritise schools most in need of inspection, particularly those with the lowest Ofsted grades. It will also prioritise outstanding schools that were previously exempt from routine inspection that have gone the longest without a visit.

For independent schools (other than academies), both Ofsted and the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI) have resumed their programme of routine inspections and they will complete the current cycle of standard inspections – which was delayed by the pandemic – in 2022.

Accountability expectations

We will not publish data based on exam and assessment results from summer 2021 in performance tables and you will not be held to account for this data. We will publish Key Stage 4 and 16 to 18 subject entries and destinations data at school and college level in performance tables in autumn 2021.

For the academic year 2021 to 2022, results from qualifications achieved at key stage 4 and post 16 will be published at school and college level on performance tables.

We will not publish the results of Key Stage 2 primary assessments. We will still produce the normal suite of KS2 accountability measures and share these securely with schools, academy trusts, local authorities and Ofsted.

For further information, see [COVID-19: school and college accountability](#).



Department
for Education

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