

## Advice for UNISON members working in special schools and colleges, and alternative education settings – updated March 2021

### Context:

From the 8 March it will become mandatory for all pupils in England, other than those who are extremely clinically vulnerable, to attend their usual setting, be this a special school or college, alternative provision or residential school or college. Ideally the usual level of schooling should be provided, although the government does acknowledge that this may be difficult as settings are short-staffed.

For information on Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland please see the links at the end of the document.

With new variants of the virus appearing, at least some of which are considerably more transmissible than the version prevalent in 2020, and little understanding as yet as to how effective the vaccines will be on the variants, previous risk assessments will no longer be fit for purpose.

As a matter of priority, specialist schools and colleges focus on:

- **Revisiting and improving the previous risk assessments** well before 8 March.
- Risk assessments should be updated for the **premises as a whole** and for **individual** children and young people with more complex needs.
- A new requirement for **lateral flow testing** of staff and children over the age of 11 twice-weekly needs to be built into plans
- A new requirement for staff and children to wear **face coverings** in classrooms and corridors if they are able
- Time must be built in for **extra training** of staff in adopting the new measures identified on the risk assessment, to order necessary extra equipment (for example clear face masks to aid communication) and to carry out twice weekly testing (initially on site and later in the home)
- Allowing **time for pupils** and their parents/carers to be inducted into the new processes. This is particularly important. Many pupils will not be able to self-administer tests and may refuse the swab from a helper. A different approach will be needed based on the pupil's individual need.

We agree that we want to see pupils with SEND back in school, but only when it is safe for pupils and staff to do so. SAGE recommended to the government that pupils should return to school in phases and not all at once and this is the position that UNISON support. All clinically extremely vulnerable staff and pupils must continue to shield at home – this could mean that a flexible rota system would be the best way to safely support the return to school sites of all staff and pupils.

Leaders in special education settings must follow public health advice including:

- A revised and updated setting-based risk assessment

- Revised and updated risk assessments for individual pupils
- Revised and updated risk assessments for staff members with characteristics that result in them being more vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19
- Note:
  - If numbers of staff in school are too low to provide a safe learning environment with adequate staffing ratios then leaders must work with the local education authority and health partners to co-produce alternative arrangements to deliver learning and/or therapies.
  - Catch-up funding has been provided which can be used to help and support families and learners.
  - Visitors delivering external therapies (e.g. speech therapists, education psychologists etc.) are allowed onto sites and plans must include arrangements for them to do so safely.

**Advice:**

UNISON advice is that members should agree to support vulnerable pupils provided the following conditions have been met:

1. The necessary risk assessments have been consulted on with your union rep
2. The risk assessments have been reviewed and appropriate measures taken to ensure safety
3. You are clear what additional mitigations have been put in place to ensure the safety of both yourself and others, including lateral flow testing procedures and face coverings
4. Where face coverings are not required to be worn by pupils in classrooms, school staff should be provided with appropriate higher grade face masks, which protect the wearer, eg FFP2, or FFP3 in higher risk settings, such as SEND. This should be part of individual risk assessments
5. If PPE has been identified in the risk assessment then sufficient supplies are available to you
6. You have received training on the new measures
7. A system is in place to feedback on how well the new measures are working

If you have concerns regarding the health and safety procedures in your school or college, please refer to our advice.

**Lateral flow testing:**

It is recognised that many pupils in special schools and colleges will not be able to self-administer the lateral flow tests. UNISON guidance on administering medical procedures has been negotiated with the government and remains the same:

- Any member of school staff may be asked to provide support to pupils with medical conditions, including the administering of medicines, although they cannot be required to do so.
- School staff should receive sufficient and suitable training and achieve the

necessary level of competency before they take on responsibility to support children with medical conditions.

Remember, helping pupils with **administering a lateral flow test is voluntary** if your contract of employment does not explicitly state you must administer medical procedures.

**If your contract does state that you have responsibility for administering medicines then you must receive full training and only take on the task once you are fully competent to do so.**

### **Government advice:**

England - The [government guidance for special schools and other specialist settings](#) states that settings work closely with staff and unions to agree best approaches for their circumstances.

Scotland – The [Covid-19 guidance on reducing risks](#) and the [advice on supporting learners with complex needs](#) states that in special schools risk assessments should be conducted in full consultation with staff and their trade unions, aligned to the relevant protection level and reviewed on a regular basis.

Wales – The [schools coronavirus guidance](#) states that in pupil referral units (PRU), or other education otherwise than at school (EOTAS) settings or special schools, the settings should work through the system of controls collaboratively, enabling them to address any risks identified.

Northern Ireland – updates on Covid-19 with links to DfE advice <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/latest-guidance-covid-19-coronavirus>