Cleaning

**What is the government’s guidance on school cleaning?**

The government’s advice on [cleaning in a non-health care setting](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings) covers educational settings. There is additional advice published by the Department for Education on [cleaning the environment](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-protection-in-schools-and-other-childcare-facilities/chapter-6-cleaning-the-environment), which includes toys and equipment. UNISON at a national level is continuously monitoring the situation.

**Who should be cleaning the school given the heightened levels of risk and what provisions should be made for their safety?**

Schools should recognise that cleaning is a skilled role and should not expect staff who are not employed as cleaners to undertake cleaning roles apart from any spraying and general wiping down intended to help keep everyone as safe as possible.

Cleaners employed to clean the school should be provided with the correct equipment. This will include Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) such as gloves and appropriate cleaning solutions along with instructions. See our [detailed advice](https://www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work/personal-protective-equipment-coronavirus/).

Schools should ensure regular cleaning throughout the school day and support cleaning staff including via additional paid hours and hiring additional cleaning staff where necessary.

**What about ‘deep cleaning’?**

Although there is no clear definition of a deep clean it is accepted that a deep clean is more than a standard or regular clean. Only cleaning staff should be asked to carry out a deep clean of a school or particular area within the school. If you are instructed to carry out deep cleaning duties and you are not employed as a cleaner you should make clear to your manager that this is not your role. If your manager continues to insist then [contact your local UNISON branch](http://branches.unison.org.uk/) and seek support.

For cleaning staff, a risk assessment and training should be conducted and appropriate personal protective (PPE) equipment provided by the employer before any deep cleaning is carried out. Instructions should also be given on the use of any specialist equipment such as steamers for sanitising equipment, fixtures and fittings within the school.

Cleaning chemicals should conform to the Chemical Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations (COSHH) and be provided by the employer. Staff should not be asked to provide their own cleaning materials, solutions or equipment at any time.

In conjunction with the above, schools should:

* 1. Contact the [Local Health Protection Team](http://www.gov.uk/health-protection-team) for advice and support
  2. Ensure only those fully trained and equipped with the relevant protective equipment are involved in any deep clean. A specialist cleaning team may have to be established.
  3. Notify all staff of what is happening and keep them updated on any developments.

**What should happen in a deep clean situation when there has been a suspected or confirmed case of COVID-19?**

In this situation the employer should do the following:

* 1. Conduct full risk assessments
  2. Contact the Local Health Protection Team for advice and support
  3. Ensure only those fully trained and equipped with the relevant protective equipment are involved in any deep clean. A specialist cleaning team may have to be established.
  4. Provide the correct Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) including appropriate face masks for those responsible for decontaminating the school
  5. Notify all staff and keep them updated on any development.

See our [detailed advice](https://www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work/personal-protective-equipment-coronavirus/). Also see the government advice on COVID-19: [cleaning in non-healthcare settings.](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-nonhealthcare-settings/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings)

Face coverings

**Can I wear a face covering at work?**

While the government no longer recommends that face coverings are worn by pupils, staff or visitors in classrooms or communal areas, UNISON’s position is that nobody in any part of a primary or secondary school or college should be prevented from wearing a face covering if they wish to do so.

The government still expect face coverings to be worn on public transport and dedicated transport to school or college. Supplies of coverings should be available for pupils along with procedures for disposal and storage of the coverings.

If you are worried about the changes to rules on face coverings in schools or your employer is refusing to allow you to wear one, please [get in touch with your local branch](https://branches.unison.org.uk/) for support.

Mental health

**Where can I get emotional support?**

The pandemic has affected everyone in different ways, and you might need support with anxiety about being in the workplace, stress from juggling caring responsibilities or coping with bereavement or isolation. If your mental health has been affected, or if you just want to talk to someone, there are lots of options.

UNISON’s own charity for members, [There for You](https://www.unison.org.uk/get-help/services-support/there-for-you/general-advice/), can help you to find relevant sources of emotional support. For more information contact them on 020 7121 5620, email [thereforyou@unison.co.uk](mailto:thereforyou@unison.co.uk) or contact your branch welfare officer. Note you may also be able to access [financial support](https://www.unison.org.uk/get-help/services-support/there-for-you/financial-assistance/) from the charity if you need it.

You can also contact [Education Support](https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/helping-you/telephone-support-counselling), which offers a free 24/7 helpline with fully trained counsellors on hand to listen.

UNISON continues to urge employers to take real action to support staff with their mental health.

Pay

**If I have to self-isolate or my school is closed will I still be paid?**

The overwhelming majority of school members, including in academies, are covered by protections under the NJC ‘Green Book’ terms and conditions. The Green Book is negotiated by UNISON and the other support staff unions and contains the following clause:

*“An employee who is prevented from attending work because of contact with infectious disease shall be entitled to receive normal pay. The period of absence on this account shall not be reckoned against the employee’s entitlements under this scheme”*

This means that if you are employed under Green Book terms and conditions and are required to self-isolate you will continue to receive your normal pay. In addition, this period should not be recorded as sickness absence and **should not** therefore be counted against your sickness absence entitlement or used as part of any other procedure i.e. capability etc.

Even if you are not covered by Green Book terms and conditions, your employer should observe this agreement during this emergency. If you have issues with your employer, please urgently raise them with your rep or [local branch](http://branches.unison.org.uk/) for advice and assistance.

**I work for a catering or cleaning contractor in the school. What will happen to my pay if I have to self-isolate or the school is closed?**

Private outsourced catering, cleaning, IT companies etc. are still being paid by the school, so [contracted staff should be fully paid](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/874178/PPN_02_20_Supplier_Relief_due_to_Covid19.pdf). In addition, this period **should not** be recorded as sickness absence and **should not** therefore be counted against your sickness absence entitlement or be used in any other procedure i.e. capability etc.

UNISON believes that contractors should comply with the same procedures as the school in this emergency, otherwise this could undermine attempts to reduce the spread of virus. UNISON is therefore calling on school employers to require contractors to pay full sick pay and the real Living Wage as a minimum (as part of our [Clean Schools, Safer Schools campaign](https://www.unison.org.uk/our-campaigns/clean-schools-safer-schools/)). This would help to remove financial barriers to outsourced staff self-isolating in cases of local COVID outbreaks. The importance of these measures cannot be overstated. Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that those care homes which offered full contractual sick pay to their staff carried [lower risk of infection](https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2020/07/agency-england-how-casual-labour-and-lack-sick-pay-exposed-care-homes-coronavirus) to their residents.

If you have issues with your employer, please raise them with your UNISON rep or [local branch](http://branches.unison.org.uk/) for advice and assistance.

**I am an agency staff member. Will I still be paid during periods of COVID-related absences/closures period?**

The school should, at the minimum, pay you to the end date of your assignment. In addition, many schools have already committed to continue full pay for agency staff, in line with directly employed staff, during the entire pandemic. Agency staff will, alongside other school-employed staff, play a vital role and UNISON is arguing that you should be kept on full pay during this period.

**I am looking after a clinically extremely vulnerable family member and cannot go to work.  Will I be paid for my absence?**

Your school should supply the necessary equipment to enable you to work from home as illness and caring duties permit and accept that some staff may have to be at home on full pay where such work cannot be found. Also, most employers have special leave policies to cover family/household emergencies etc which you may be able to use in this situation

If you have any difficulties locally please contact your local rep or [UNISON branch](http://branches.unison.org.uk/).

PPE

**Should my school be providing PPE?**

[DfE guidance](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safe-working-in-education-childcare-and-childrens-social-care/the-use-of-personal-protective-equipment-ppe-in-education-childcare-and-childrens-social-care-settings-including-for-aerosol-generating-procedure) says most staff in education settings don’t need Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) beyond what is required for their normal work and that it is only needed in a small number of cases. In their view such cases only include: where a pupil becomes ill with coronavirus (COVID-19) symptoms while at school, and close contact is necessary; or where a pupil already has routine intimate care needs that involve the use of PPE. Their advice recommends that schools refer to [safe working in education, childcare and children’s social care settings](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safe-working-in-education-childcare-and-childrens-social-care) for more information about infection and PPE.

UNISON believes that PPE should be made available for all personal care activities and where social distancing cannot be maintained, particularly in some special schools and nurseries. Schools must ensure that they always have adequate supplies of PPE such as disposable gloves, aprons and medical grade face masks.

The PPE required will depend on the nature of your role and should be issued where the risks you are exposed to make it necessary, such as cleaning staff and anyone administering first aid, medical care or personal support for special needs pupils. Any staff who require it must be trained in its use. Please see UNISON’s [PPE guide](https://www.unison.org.uk/coronavirus-rights-work/personal-protective-equipment-coronavirus/) for more details.

**I am a first aider and have been asked to look after children who display symptoms of COVID-19 at school until their parent/carer picks them up. What protection should my school provide with me to do this role?**

DfE guidance states that [“appropriate PPE should also be used if close contact is necessary”.](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/schools-covid-19-operational-guidance#control-measures) In the specific [DfE guidance](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safe-working-in-education-childcare-and-childrens-social-care/the-use-of-personal-protective-equipment-ppe-in-education-childcare-and-childrens-social-care-settings-including-for-aerosol-generating-procedure#what-ppe) on the use of PPE in education settings, it says:

“Depending on how close you need be to an individual with COVID-19 symptoms you may need the following PPE:

* fluid-resistant surgical face masks (also known as Type IIR)
* disposable gloves
* disposable plastic aprons
* eye protection (for example, a face visor or goggles)

How much PPE you need to wear when caring for someone with symptoms of COVID-19 depends on how much contact you have.

1. A face mask should be worn if you are in face-to-face contact.
2. If physical contact is necessary, then gloves, an apron and a face mask should be worn.
3. Wear eye protection if a risk assessment determines that there is a risk of fluids entering the eye, for example, from coughing, spitting or vomiting.”

UNISON strongly believes that full PPE listed above must be available for anyone supervising someone with symptoms as staff cannot predict how close they will need to get to pupils. Any member of staff volunteering for this duty must be given full training and an individual risk assessment.

The DfE guidance also states that 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 and any rooms they use should be cleaned after they have left.

Risk assessments

**What is a risk assessment?**

Employers have a legal duty to protect people from harm in the workplace. This includes taking reasonable steps to protect staff, pupils and others from coronavirus (COVID-19) within schools. A risk assessment is the combined effort of identifying and analysing potential hazards and dangers that may negatively impact individuals.

All risk assessments should be periodically updated or as and when local and or individual circumstances change. Your school has a legal requirement to update its risk assessment to include additional/revised control measures needed for the school to remain open safely and to consult with trade unions.

UNISON believes that schools should undertake an individual risk assessment for any staff member who requests one, for example if they or someone they live with is in a vulnerable group Department for Education guidance does not mention schools carrying out individual risk assessments for vulnerable school staff – despite the fact that government advice for businesses reopening advises them to consider vulnerable groups. UNISON believes the DfE guidance for schools on carrying out risk assessments is inadequate.

The joint unions have produced a helpful [checklist to help with carrying out risk assessments](https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/07/Joint-union-checklist-for-September.pdf) in a school setting, which you can send to your school to aid them in their planning. You can also contact your local UNISON health and safety rep or [local branch](http://branches.unison.org.uk/) for further information and support.

**I haven’t seen my school’s risk assessment. What should I do?**

Your employer has a legal obligation to carry out a risk assessment. If you have not been spoken to about your risk assessment or had a risk assessment prior to your school opening, you should speak to your head teacher and request that a risk assessment is done before you return to work. A collective group risk assessment will not be sufficient in identifying individual risk. Contact [your local UNISON branch](https://branches.unison.org.uk/) immediately if you are required to work without a risk assessment being carried out.

**What should I do if I think my health and safety is at risk?**

Raise the issue immediately with your line manager. In addition contact your local rep and or [UNISON branch](https://branches.unison.org.uk/)

Vaccination

**Can I get paid time off to go for my vaccination?**

If you are unable to book a vaccination appointment outside of working hours, your employer does not legally have to give you paid time off to attend. However, employers are advised to support staff as much as possible to get vaccinated. For example, the latest DfE advice to Heads says

“We welcome your support enabling staff who are eligible for a vaccination to attend booked vaccine appointments where possible even during term time.

Advice from the NJC says:

*“The NJC urges all employees who are called forward to be inoculated to ensure that they take up the opportunity as soon as possible. Employers are asked to ensure that every possible effort is made in providing employees with reasonable time off in order for them to receive their jab. This guidance applies equally to when subsequent doses of vaccination will need to be administered.”*

UNISON believes that employers should offer staff paid time off as part of the national effort to offer all adults the vaccine as widely and quickly as possible.

**If I have to take time off because of a reaction to the vaccine can my employer class it as sick leave?**

Employers can categorise time off due to an adverse reaction to the vaccine as normal sickness absence.

Current NJC guidance on this issue states that the usual sickness policy should apply:

*“An employee who self-certifies, or produces a sick note, for any COVID related sickness absence (including an adverse reaction to a vaccination) should receive pay and leave in accordance with their length of service so that the usual provisions of the sickness scheme apply.”*

However, Acas guidance on the vaccine recommends paying full pay if staff are off sick with vaccine side effects and this type of absence should not count in sickness records or towards any trigger system in their absence management policy.

UNISON supports this recommendation, so that staff are not deterred from getting vaccinated to avoid disciplinary action or having to work while feeling unwell. In the interests of encouraging staff to get the vaccine, any vaccine-related absence should be treated sympathetically. If you are concerned about a potential reaction to the vaccine and how this may affect your sickness absence please [contact your branch](https://branches.unison.org.uk/) for advice.

**I’ve heard that 12-15yr olds will receive Covid vaccinations at school. What does this mean for me as a staff member?**

The NHS is now offering a single COVID-19 vaccination to 12-15 year olds. The School Age Immunisation Service will deliver the bulk of the programme in schools, with separate vaccination sites used for pupils where this is not possible. The Service is used to dealing with schools. While school admin and site staff may be involved in arranging logistics, it is not expected that the programme will create a huge extra burden on schools. Legal responsibility for the programme rests with the health team involved, not the school. Any issues around consent should be dealt with by the health care professionals involved.

Teaching assistants, PPA time and cover supervision

**Should teaching assistants/learning support assistants be leading classes?**

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis school staff have gone above and beyond to keep schools running and support children and young people. During this time many staff have stretched the boundaries of their job roles to help schools out while vulnerable colleagues were forced to stay away from work or while other colleagues were re-assigned to other areas.

UNISON has concerns that in schools with staff shortages for any reason,, teaching assistants will be asked to lead full classes and cover full teaching duties. This would not be fair on staff or pupils. Any proposed changes in role or responsibility should be discussed and agreed with you.

Schools should not impose new roles or duties on staff. We expect that changes which impact on others should be discussed with all those affected, and that the local UNISON reps/contact should be involved. If there are no school-based reps then schools should contact the [local UNISON branch](http://branches.unison.org.uk/). Members who are unhappy with proposals or are aware that their school has not talked to the union should [contact their branch](http://branches.unison.org.uk/).

Our clear position is that only suitably experienced teaching assistants should be asked to lead classes and then only in situations known about in advance, for example where a teacher is working from home due to being clinically extremely vulnerable,, and where another teacher is unavailable. Suitably experienced teaching assistants should only be those whose job description already includes this occasional responsibility, usually Higher Level Teaching Assistants (HLTAs, working at levels 4 and 5 according to the [NJC model job profiles](http://www.skillsforschools.org.uk/media/1053/model_school_profiles_teaching_and_learning_support_23jul13.pdf)), and who are paid at the appropriate grade.

Where HLTAs are deployed to lead classes, they should be provided with enough time, within their contracted hours, in which to plan and prepare, including opportunities to liaise with class teachers. They too should be supported by a teaching assistant. UNISON is clear that HLTAs should not be expected to lead classes on an indefinite basis. Any arrangement for a HLTA to lead a class should be reviewed and agreed with the staff member on at least a fortnightly basis.

UNISON recently released the findings of new research into TAs’ experiences during the pandemic, led by the Institute of Education at University of London. These findings will inform our work to support TAs as we move into the next phase of the pandemic and recovery.

[Read the UCL research report ‘Unsung Heroes’](https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2021/04/UnSung-heroes-TA_CA-22.3.21-Final-v2-002.pdf)

**What about cover for teacher PPA time?**

Schools are required to put additional staff into their timetable to ensure that teaching continues during PPA time

**What about cover supervision?**

Cover supervision should only be for a teacher’s short-term absence from the classroom where the absence was not known about in advance (for example to cover short-term sickness). To undertake cover supervision, TAs should have skills and knowledge of at least level 3 and be paid at the appropriate grade for this level (see the [NJC model job profiles](http://www.skillsforschools.org.uk/media/1053/model_school_profiles_teaching_and_learning_support_23jul13.pdf)). In this situation there is no expectation that active teaching takes place. Rather, pupils should carry out a pre-prepared exercise under supervision. For more information see our [factsheet on cover supervision](https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2018/04/24922.pdf).

Schools should consider contingency arrangements for appropriate cover supervision in their planning.

**What should members do if the use of teaching assistants in school is inappropriate?**

Please [contact your local UNISON branch](http://branches.unison.org.uk/) to discuss your concerns. As much as UNISON understands the challenging circumstances in which schools are operating, it is not fair to staff or pupils if staff are being deployed inappropriately.

Testing

**What does mass testing mean for my school?**

Mass testing of all schools and early years staff and secondary school pupils, using rapid lateral flow tests, is a key part of the government’s plan for reopening schools. All staff and secondary school pupils are encouraged to test themselves twice a week at home.

Schools should maintain a small testing site to be able to offer tests to pupils who need or want to take their tests at school.

Whilst government is strongly encouraging schools to roll out the testing it is not mandatory for schools take part. Neither is it mandatory for pupils and staff to be tested.

[Read the government guidance on testing](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/asymptomatic-testing-in-schools-and-colleges#specialist-settings-and-pupils-or-students-with-send)

**What is UNISON’s position on mass testing in schools?**

UNISON supports mass testing in schools as an ‘additional’ measure to try and identify asymptomatic cases. However, due to the reported number of false negatives generated by the lateral flow test (some reports suggest that self testing can miss over 50% of positive cases) we are clear it should not be used as an alternative to self-isolation. Self isolation of whole bubbles should still take place until more assurance about the accuracy of this test can be provided.

**What is ‘daily contact testing’?**

In addition to mass testing, the government is exploring the possibility of using daily lateral flow tests on close contacts of someone who has tested positive for Covid to avoid self-isolation from school.

Under the plans, over seven days close contacts will be asked to do a daily test on arrival at school. If the result is negative, they can remain on site, if positive they will be sent home to self-isolate. The government is currently running a trial of this testing programme in selected schools, with plans to review the results at the end of term. Participating in this trial is completely voluntary for staff and pupils – close contacts will still be given the option to self-isolate.

UNISON is very concerned at the reliance on lateral flow tests to enable school attendance when there is still uncertainty about the false negative rate. We believe that the government has not been clear enough that testing negative on a lateral flow test does not guarantee that you do not have the virus. We are calling for the DfE to allow clinically extremely vulnerable staff and pupils in participating schools to work and learn from home during the trial.

If you work at a school participating in the trial and have any concerns please [contact your branch](https://branches.unison.org.uk/) for support.

**Who should be undertaking the testing – do I have to do it?**

The test will be self-administered by pupils and staff however some roles will be needed to oversee, manage and clean the testing centres in schools. UNISON has been clear that this must be on a voluntary basis, with full training, clinical oversight, appropriate PPE and clear guarantees around any potential liabilities. Additional staff time must be fully paid at the appropriate rate.

If you are having issues with testing in your school please contact your branch for advice and support.

**I work in a secondary special school what is the guidance on mass testing?**

Many pupils in special schools and colleges will not be able to self-administer the lateral flow tests. UNISON believes that testing falls under the statutory guidance [Supporting pupils at school with medical conditions](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/803956/supporting-pupils-at-school-with-medical-conditions.pdf). This says:

* 1. 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** (our emphasis).
  2. 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. Helping pupils to administer a lateral flow test is voluntary. If your contract of employment does not explicitly state you must administer medical procedures. If your contract states 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.

If you are having issue with testing in your school please [contact your branch](https://branches.unison.org.uk/) for advice and support

**What are the guidelines on the NHS Test and Trace App?**

The Government introduced the NHS COVID-19 App in England and Wales to support the Test and Trace system. It uses Bluetooth technology to track contact between app users, alerting individuals when they have come into ‘close contact’ with someone who has subsequently tested positive for coronavirus. Close contact means within 2 metres of someone for 15 mins or more.

The app is available to anyone aged 16 or over, therefore some students in years 11 and 12 can use the app alongside staff. The DfE has provided guidance on using the app in schools. It recommends that the app be used and switched on where possible, unless phones are required by schools to be left in lockers or bags in communal areas at all times.

UNISON believes that schools should permit and encourage staff and eligible pupils to use the app, see page 21 of the [DfE guidance](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/950510/School_national_restrictions_guidance.pdf). Schools should also follow alerts from the app to self-isolate when directed.

If you have issues with your employer, please raise them with your UNISON rep or [local branch](http://branches.unison.org.uk/) for advice and assistance.

Ventilation

**What is the government’s guidance on airborne transmission?**

Significantly the government and Public Health England now recognise the role of airborne transmission, particularly in poorly ventilated places where groups of people spend long periods of time together (this crucial new information is particularly important for schools). See section 7, ‘keeping occupied spaces well ventilated’ of the [DfE guidance](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools) for more information.

Schools should seek to achieve both ventilation and thermal comfort by opening windows and doors (where fire regulations permit it), keeping heating on and taking other steps to ensure constant flow of fresh air throughout the building. Schools should not use rooms which lack adequate ventilation, for example where windows cannot open.

**How do I identify poorly ventilated areas?**

Where your school (or parts of it) are poorly ventilated, employers need to improve ventilation in those areas to reduce the risk of airborne transmission.

There are some simple ways to identify poorly ventilated areas:

* 1. Look for areas where there is no mechanical ventilation or no natural ventilation, such as opening windows and vents etc, unless doors are opened very frequently
  2. Check that mechanical systems provide outdoor air, temperature control or both. If a system (eg a local air conditioner) is recirculating only and doesn’t have an outdoor air supply, or a separate source of outdoor air, the area is likely to be poorly ventilated
  3. Identify areas that feel stuffy or smell badly
  4. Use carbon dioxide (CO2) monitors to identify the CO2 levels to help decide if ventilation is poor. CO2 monitors are most effective for areas that are regularly attended by the same group of people. They are less effective in areas with low numbers of people

**Should my school keep open its windows to reduce the risk of infection spreading?**

All evidence to date suggests that ventilation is hugely important in helping reduce the risk of COVID-19 spreading (risk decreases outdoors).

Please see page 5 of the [joint union checklist](https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2020/07/Joint-union-checklist-for-September.pdf). The section called ‘Ensuring good respiratory hygiene’ sets out the measures your school should be taking in this regard. If your school is not following these measures, please contact your local rep or [UNISON branch](http://branches.unison.org.uk/).