

# **COVID-19**

## **Guidance**

### **Vulnerable Children and Young People**

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# Vulnerable Children

## What is the definition of “vulnerable”?

The term “**vulnerable**” encompasses those children who are in need of protection, or in need, as defined by the Children (NI) Order 1995.

Children and young people in need may include those:

- Receiving support from Health & Social Services including family support, child protection and looked after children services;
- On the Child Protection Register;
- With statements of special education needs;
- Accessing Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS);
- Accessing Education Nurture Units;
- With emerging and diagnosed mental health needs;
- Who are homeless;
- Who are young carers;
- Subject to paramilitary threat;
- Whose parents have mental health problems;
- Whose parents have alcohol and drug addictions;
- Affected by domestic violence.

## Should vulnerable children be facilitated to continue to attend school?

Schools should work in conjunction with parents/carers, the Education Authority (EA) and, where appropriate, social services to identify and assess vulnerable children to determine if their best interests would be met by the school’s continued supervised learning.

## Why are these children being prioritised?

Some families need more support than others and attending educational settings is an important protective factor for children receiving support from a social worker. We want to prioritise supporting those most in need at this difficult time.

If you feel your child falls within the vulnerable category and should be attending school, then you should contact the school who will consider each case.

Guidance on support available and contact details for the various services for pupils either attending school or staying at home can be found on the EA website “COVID-19 Questions and Answers”: <https://www.eani.org.uk/school-management/health-safety/covid-19-coronavirus>

### **Why have schools been asked to open for children who are vulnerable?**

The issue of vulnerable children has changed since we started dealing with COVID-19. The numbers of vulnerable children attending is low and this means that some may be potentially more at risk from non-attendance.

If attendance is deemed in the child’s best interest then they should have access to school settings, either in their normal setting or a suitable alternative.

### **Are looked after children covered in the ‘vulnerable children’ category?**

Yes, support for looked after children, including those who do not have a statement of SEN, their schools, carers and health and social care staff, will continue to be provided by the EA’s Children Looked After Champion and Team. This support can be accessed through a Helpline, 028 7051 1086, operational from 8.00am to 5.00pm Monday to Thursday and 8.00am to 4.00pm Fridays. Alternatively, email queries can be addressed to [Lookedafterchildren@eani.org.uk](mailto:Lookedafterchildren@eani.org.uk)

The EA has also developed guidance for schools to enable them to support children looked after during this pandemic given their particular circumstances. Further information can be accessed via the EA website: <https://www.eani.org.uk/school-management/health-safety/covid-19-coronavirus>

### **Will provision for vulnerable children include holidays?**

Where possible, we would encourage schools to continue to look after vulnerable children throughout the Easter holidays and bank holidays.

## **Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)**

### **Are all children with SEN covered in the 'vulnerable children' category?**

No. Only children with a statement of SEN are covered in the vulnerable category. However, some children with SEN may fall into the other categories of vulnerability.

For those with a statement of SEN, where there is no other viable option, then parents should contact schools to discuss arrangements and whether the school can provide a safe environment for their child.

### **What support is available for children with SEN, including autism, at home?**

All schools have made arrangements for sustained remote contact and learning which is reflective of pupil age, developmental stage and SEN and can include online learning platforms, sensory resources which have been delivered to homes, pastoral and assembly online sessions and other creative approaches.

The EA SEN - Pupil and Early Years Support Services and Middletown Centre for Autism remain open and operational. They are working hard to continue to deliver high quality support to children and young people with SEN, including autism, and their parents remotely at this difficult time.

The EA is also working to move many of its resources for EA SEN Pupil and Early Years Support Services online: <https://www.eani.org.uk/services/pupil-support-services>

## **Are children with SEN undergoing/awaiting statutory assessment defined as vulnerable children?**

No, unless they fall into one of the other categories.

If the EA has not issued a statement of SEN for your child, they will not automatically fall within the definition of 'vulnerable children' for the purposes of attendance at an education setting during the COVID-19 outbreak.

However, their educational setting and the EA have the discretion to undertake a risk assessment and offer support if it is required.

## **Information for Parents of Vulnerable Children**

### **As a parent of a vulnerable child do I have to send them to school?**

It is important that decisions in the best interests of vulnerable children are taken on a case by case basis.

In circumstances where a parent does not want to bring a child who is considered vulnerable to an education setting and/or where there are concerns regarding shielding or physical health conditions, the health and/or education authorities should explore the reasons for this, directly with the parent, and help to resolve any concerns or difficulties wherever possible. The number of social interactions in the school or pre-school environment will be reduced as there are fewer children attending, and classroom social distancing is being practised.

### **Which schools are currently open?**

The Department provides a daily updated list of those schools which are open at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/departments-education-releases-covid-19-coronavirus>

### **Will there be a stigma attached to having to attend an education setting?**

Many of the children attending school will be doing so because their parents are key workers. There should be no stigma attached to that, and vulnerable children will not be identified separately.

### **What about additional pressure on families with children at home – will that increase risk?**

Where children are at risk, a referral to Health authorities should be made by the Designated Teacher. Health authorities are also ensuring that services to groups of vulnerable children, including those with a social worker, will be maintained.

### **Will I be penalised if I do not send my child to school?**

No, parents will not be penalised if they do not send their child to school. You will be encouraged to send your child to school if it is agreed that it is the best place for them. You should, where possible, follow the advice of the education and health professionals.

### **Do children have to attend Special Schools?**

Many children and young people who attend special schools can safely remain at home; however, there may be some instances where continued access to special school settings provides a safer option.

It is important that decisions are taken in the best interests of the child on a case by case basis. Children and young people at special schools will be risk-assessed by their school and other relevant professionals to decide whether they need to continue to attend school in order to meet their needs, or whether their needs can safely be met at home. It is recognised that for many parents and children, respite care is not available during this time. You may therefore wish to send your child to school on a part-time basis to be agreed with the school to provide you with some respite care.

The number of social interactions in the school will be reduced as there are fewer children attending, and classroom social distancing is being practised.

Unless they are children of key workers, it will be for schools to decide on whether a child with a statement of SEN can access the special school during the COVID-19 period. This has to be balanced against the assessed needs of the child, staffing levels and other health and safety considerations.

### **My child has a statement of SEN and a specific medical condition – can they attend school?**

Parents should discuss arrangements for their children with their school. The school will advise you if it is able to provide a safe environment for your child.

### **What about support for children who receive therapies in special schools?**

Parents have been given points of contact to direct any specific Allied Health Professional (AHP) queries and issues that may arise during this period.

Each AHP service area has developed and provided parents/carers with resource packs including home treatment programmes where appropriate to help meet the children's assessed needs. Digital solutions for sharing information with parents/carers via online apps, Page tracker, linkages with special schools websites etc, have been scoped and utilised where possible to ensure therapy advice and online guidance is available for families. Ongoing engagement is taking place with other Health and Social Care (HSC) and EA colleagues to ensure integrated and joined-up working.

This is an evolving situation and the provision offered to these children will be kept under on-going and careful review.



## **Schools – Clustering / Children from Other Schools**

### **Can schools work together to provide a service for vulnerable children?**

The option of having schools cluster within areas has been developed, in an attempt to organise provision on an area basis.

It should be recognised though, that for some of our vulnerable children, the key to their success in school can often be in maintaining the relationships they have in their existing school. Vulnerable children should therefore be placed in the school in which they are registered where possible.

A clustering arrangement, particularly for primary school children, placing them in an unfamiliar environment may present challenges and could potentially be interpreted by them as not only unfamiliar but also unsafe and a rejection from those they have relationships with in their own school. This would be common for those children presenting with trauma and attachment difficulties. Additional support can be provided by the EA, for example by the Children Looked After Champion mentioned above.

### **Can I accept vulnerable children who are registered pupils at another setting, including in another phase of education?**

You may accept children into your school or pre-school setting whether or not they are normally enrolled at your school or pre-school if you can do safely and in compliance with the Public Health Agency (PHA) guidelines. Pre-school settings are not suitable environments for older children.

If schools wish to accept vulnerable children who are registered pupils at another setting, this needs to be done in conjunction with the EA so that accurate registers of children's whereabouts are maintained. Further details will be provided shortly.

**Will I receive additional funding if I accept vulnerable children who are registered pupils at another setting?**

If a setting incurs additional costs arising from exceptional or emergency situations, the school should contact the EA, as funding authority, in the first instance.

## **Child Protection**

**What child protection and safeguarding measures will be in place for pupils during this time?**

In the main, existing safeguarding and child protection arrangements will continue to apply through Circular 2017/04 “Safeguarding and Child Protection – A Guide for Schools”.

The EA’s Child Protection Support Service (CPSS) has developed a modified version of this circular which covers roles and responsibilities for lead persons and this will be available on the EA’s website.

If necessary, schools should seek advice from the EA’s CPSS on 02895 985 590.

## **Health & Wellbeing**

**Are counselling services still available for vulnerable children?**

Counselling will be provided by the EA’s Independent Counselling Service for Schools (ICSS) for post primary pupils via telephone or secure online video calling. Counsellors will be made available on the same day each week as they would normally have been in the young person’s school. Referrals will be made through the school’s key contact as normal, who will then liaise with the school counsellor as appropriate. The key

contact will provide the counsellor with the young person's contact details to facilitate the session(s). The EA, Schools and ICSS Providers will be communicating the interim arrangements to pupils and their parents. Further advice and contact details of the EA ICSS can be found at: <https://www.eani.org.uk/covid-19-questions-and-answers>

The Department also has a range of support linked to the Counselling Service at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/imatter-programme>

### **Can staff administer medicine to children or take temperatures?**

Existing guidance to schools on supporting pupils with medication needs continues to apply. The guidance can be accessed at:

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/support-pupils-medication-needs>

Schools should exercise judgement when accepting pupils from other schools and be fully informed by parents of pre-existing conditions and medication needs to determine if a safe environment can be provided.

## **Health & Safety**

### **Is there guidance on what constitutes 'social distancing' in schools?**

Guidance is available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/implementing-social-distancing-education-settings-ni-coronavirus-covid-19>

### **Will a nurse or a medical professional be available/contactable?**

Not all schools will have a nurse or medical professional. Schools should seek medical advice from the PHA if necessary.

### **How will First Aid be covered if no First Aiders volunteer?**

All schools are advised to have at least one trained first-aider on the premises at all times during school hours. Further guidance can be found at:

<https://www.eani.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-10/First-aid.docx>

### **Do schools need Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)?**

The EA can provide emergency supplies to those schools that find themselves short of supplies. The EA will be able to provide either a collection or delivery service if schools need supplies.

Individual schools will need to contact the EA's Covid-19 operations centre 8am to 8pm. The number is: **028 38368186**.

### **How can my school access hand soap, sanitizer etc?**

The EA can provide emergency supplies to those schools that find themselves short of supplies. The EA will be able to provide either a collection or delivery service if schools need supplies. Individual schools will need to contact the EA's Covid-19 operations centre 8am to 8pm. The number is: **028 38368186**.

### **What should I do if a child displays symptoms of Covid-19 whilst in school?**

If anyone becomes unwell with a new, continuous cough or a high temperature in an educational setting, they should be sent home and advised to follow the home isolation advice on the PHA website

If a child is awaiting collection, they should be moved, if possible, to a room where they can be isolated behind a closed door. Ideally, a window should be opened for ventilation. If it is not possible to isolate them, move them to an area which is at least two metres away from other people.

If they need to go to the bathroom while waiting to be collected, they should use a separate bathroom if possible. The bathroom should be cleaned and disinfected using standard cleaning products before being used by anyone else.

If a member of staff has helped someone who was taken unwell with a new, continuous cough or a high temperature, they do not need to go home unless they develop symptoms themselves. They should wash their hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds after any contact with someone who is unwell.

**What if the school is advised that a child who recently attended has been diagnosed with Covid-19?**

Maintain hygiene within the school environment and ensure all staff and children wash their hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds. General interventions may include increased cleaning activity to reduce risk of retention of virus on hard surfaces, and keeping property properly ventilated by opening windows whenever safe and appropriate.

**What if the school is advised that a family has moved to self-isolate because a close contact of a child who recently attended has been diagnosed with Covid-19?**

Maintain hygiene within the school environment and ensure all staff and children wash their hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds. General interventions may include increased cleaning activity to reduce risk of retention of virus on hard surfaces, and keeping property properly ventilated by opening windows whenever safe and appropriate.

# Provision of Transport and Food

## **Will school transport be provided for vulnerable children, including those with statements of SEN?**

The EA will review transport on a case by case basis to ensure that transport is not a barrier to attendance for vulnerable children, including those with statements of SEN. This service can be accessed by emailing [eve.bremner@eani.org.uk](mailto:eve.bremner@eani.org.uk) with the following details:

- Name of Child/Young Person;
- Date of Birth (DoB),
- Address;
- Field social worker/parent/carer details (name address, mobile and email address);
- School/Provision enrolled;
- Form of transport taken until now (if known).

## **Will free school meals be provided for vulnerable children?**

Information on Free School Meals is provided at:

[Information on direct payments scheme for families eligible for free school meals](#)

[FAQs for free school meals payment scheme - 31 March 2020](#)

[Ministers take action in relation to Free School Meals payment - 26 March 2020](#)

## **How will the medical needs and allergies of children be known if schools are providing meals for children from other schools?**

Schools should seek information on medical needs and allergies from parents of children who do not normally attend the school and carry out a risk assessment to determine whether they can provide a safe environment for those children.

## **Special Schools**

### **Are special schools to open?**

Special schools should be open for those children of key workers where there is no other viable option and children with a Statement of SEN where it is deemed in the best interests of the child to be in school. This will depend on a risk assessment undertaken by the school which deems it can offer a safe environment for the child.

Special schools will continue to work in partnership with parents and/or legal guardians to ensure that the best interests of children take precedence.

### **Why are Special Schools required to open?**

Children and young people who attend special schools may have complex needs that are best supported in special schools.

Special schools will need to consider the needs of their pupils, working closely with their parents, and undertake a risk assessment for each child or young person.

### **Do children have to attend special schools?**

Many children and young people who attend special schools can safely remain at home; however, there may be some instances where continued access to a special school setting provides a safer option.

It is important that decisions are taken in the best interests of the child on a case by case basis. Children and young people at special schools will be risk-assessed by their school and other relevant professionals, to decide whether they need to continue to attend school in order to meet their needs, or whether they can safely be met at home. It is recognised that for many parents and children, respite care is not available during this time. You may therefore wish to send your child to their special school on a part-time basis to be agreed with the school to provide you with some respite care.

The number of social interactions in the school will be reduced as there are fewer children attending, and classroom social distancing is being practised.

Unless they are children of key workers, it will be for schools to decide on whether a child with a statement of SEN can safely access the special school, during the COVID-19 period. This has to be balanced against the assessed needs of the child, staffing levels and other health and safety considerations.

### **My child has a statement of SEN and a medical condition – can they attend school?**

Parents should discuss arrangements for their children with their school.

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This is an evolving situation and the provision offered to these children will be kept under on-going and careful review.

### **What should be done about infection control in Special Schools?**

We know that this is a worrying time for parents and for staff working with children with complex needs.

It is important that decisions are made based on risk assessments, for both the child and staff, based on the latest public health and medical advice/guidance available.

Leaders of special schools are well-placed to make judgements about what is needed in their settings.

The EA can provide emergency supplies to those schools that find themselves short of supplies. The EA will be able to provide either a collection or delivery service if schools need supplies.

Individual schools will need to contact the EA's Covid-19 operations centre 8am to 8pm. The number is: **028 38368186**.

# Modification of SEN Statutory Duties

## Why have the statutory duties in relation to SEN been modified?

The Coronavirus Act 2020 (hereafter “The Act”) received Royal Assent on 25 March. Under the Act, the Department has the power to issue a Notice disapplying or modifying any one or more of the provisions listed in Part II of the Education (NI) Order 1996 and the Education (Special Educational Needs) Regulations (NI) 2005 for a specified period.

The Department issued the Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No. 3) Notice (Northern Ireland) 2020 on 9 April 2020.

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/notice-coronavirus-act-2020-temporary-modification-education-duties-no3-notice-northern-ireland-2020>

The Notice modified Articles 6 to 21B of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 (duties in relation to special educational needs); and regulations 5 to 22 of the Education (Special Educational Needs) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005 (duties in relation to assessments and statements). The effect of the modification is to change any duty (in relation to special educational needs) to a duty to make the best endeavour (to meet the duty), where the ability to meet the duty has been hindered by the outbreak of coronavirus in Northern Ireland on the following:

- The Education Authority;
- Schools;
- Boards of Governors of schools;
- the Health and Social Care authorities; and
- parents.

The Notice lasts 28 days and can be revoked or amended if the situation changes before that. A further Notice may be issued after 28 days by the Department in respect of the same duty or duties, if required.

# **Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS)**

## **Why are EOTAS settings open?**

Significant numbers of children receiving education in EOTAS meet the definition of vulnerable.

## **Are all EOTAS settings open?**

At present the EA is keeping its 25 post-primary EOTAS Centres open to all young people who need to attend due to parent/carer being a key worker or because they need/request support under the “vulnerable” young person category. Centres are operating a staff rota and are only in the Centre if young people are attending.

Risk Assessments are in place when staff and pupils are accessing a Centre.

## **What if Post-Primary EOTAS can't stay open?**

Where it is not possible for any post-primary EOTAS setting to remain open to support this small group of vulnerable children, the EA will assess the safeguarding needs of those children on a case by case basis, working with social workers and other agencies to make appropriate arrangements for any vulnerable children that will be affected by their EOTAS setting closing.

Pupils will be given the option of attending another Centre if necessary.

Additionally, online learning platforms are being used and developed for delivery to young people, alongside work packs being provided and updated for all pupils.

Contact will be made with families/carers and the young people by telephone and email on a regular basis, according to their needs

### **Will this put EOTAS staff and young people at risk?**

The cohort of vulnerable children in EOTAS is small but they may be at high risk of harm if they are not in an education setting.

The scientific advice shows that education settings are safe for this small number of children to continue attending - but asking others to stay away will help to slow the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19).

## **Shielding**

### **Is there advice for extremely vulnerable people (shielding) in relation to COVID-19?**

Guidance for extremely vulnerable people is available at:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-vulnerable-people>

## Useful Contacts and Information Links

### **DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION**

#### **COVID-19 (coronavirus)**

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/departments/education-releases-covid-19-coronavirus>.

### **FREE SCHOOL MEALS**

[Information on direct payments scheme for families eligible for free school meals](#)

[FAQs for free school meals payment scheme - 31 March 2020](#)

[Ministers take action in relation to Free School Meals payment - 26 March 2020](#)

### **SUPPORTING PUPILS WITH MEDICATION NEEDS**

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/support-pupils-medication-needs>

### **INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE FOR EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS**

[Implementing social distancing in educational settings - 3 April 2020](#)

[Guidance to schools on cluster arrangements - 31 March 2020](#)

[Letter from Minister of Education to schools on cluster arrangements - 31 March 2020](#)

[Letter from Education Minister to education sector - 24 March 2020](#)

[FAQs for schools opening for children of key workers - 24 March 2020](#)

[Education Minister's update on school closures – 23 March 2020](#)

[Statement from Education Minister on Covid-19 response – 20 March 2020](#)

[Letter from Permanent Secretary Derek Baker to principals – 20 March 2020](#)

[Letter from Education Minister to education sector – 19 March 2020](#)

[Education Minister releases guidance for educational settings – 16 March 2020](#)

[Latest guidance on Covid-19 \(coronavirus\) - 25 February 2020](#)

## **SAFEGUARDING AND CHILD PROTECTION – A GUIDE FOR SCHOOLS:**

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/circular-201704-safeguarding-and-child-protection-schools-guide-schools>

Support linked to the Counselling Service at

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/imatter-programme>

## **EDUCATION AUTHORITY**

Covid19 helpline (8am to 8pm) - 028 3836 8186.

KEY WORKERS SUPPORT SERVICE - <https://www.eani.org.uk/key-workers>.

EA's Child Protection Support Service - 028 95 985590.

First Aid - <https://www.eani.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-10/First-aid.docx>

Pupil Support Services <https://www.eani.org.uk/services/pupil-support-services>.

### **MIDDLETOWN CENTRE FOR AUTISM**

[www.middletownautism.com](http://www.middletownautism.com)

### **NI Direct**

**Coronavirus (COVID-19): advice for vulnerable people is available at:**

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-vulnerable-people>

### **PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCY**

For general health advice relating to Covid-19:

[Public Health Agency website.](#)

## **List of Abbreviations**

**AHP** – Allied Health Professional

**CPSS** – Child Protection Support Service

**DE** – Department of Education

**EA** – Education Authority

**EOTAS** – Education Otherwise Than At School

**HSC** – Health and Social Care

**ICSS** – Independent Counselling Service for Schools

**PHA** – Public Health Agency

**PPE** – Personal Protection Equipment

**SEN** – Special Educational Needs