

Schools, colleges and early years settings to close

After schools shut their gates on Friday afternoon, they will remain closed until further notice except for children of key workers and vulnerable children, as part of the country's ongoing response to coronavirus.

Examples of these workers include NHS staff, police and supermarket delivery drivers who need to be able to go to work to support the country's fight to tackle coronavirus. Vulnerable children include those who have a social worker and those with Education, Health and Care Plans – a legal document that describes a child's special educational needs and the support they require.

Children who do not fall into these groups should remain at home with appropriate care.

Where schools are unable to look after these children, local authorities will work with the Department for Education's regional teams to ensure an alternative option is available in the same area.

Nurseries, private schools and sixth forms should also follow this guidance. We will provide financial support for these settings as required.

Where possible, we would encourage settings to also look after key workers' children and vulnerable children throughout the Easter holidays.

The scientific advice shows that these settings are safe for this small number of children to continue attending – but asking others to stay away will help us to slow the spread.

To lift the pressure on schools themselves and to allow them to focus on supporting those children who need it most, Ofsted will cease all inspections of schools and colleges with immediate effect.

We will not go ahead with primary school assessments or secondary exams this summer, and we will not be publishing performance tables.

We will work with sector and Ofqual to ensure children get the qualifications they need.

We recognise that many special schools and residential settings will need to continue to look after their pupils.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

Fighting Coronavirus and protecting the vulnerable and our NHS are the Government's top priorities right now. That's why we are asking schools, nurseries and colleges to close – except for vulnerable

children and the children of key workers.

We are facing increasingly extraordinary circumstances, but by asking schools to support our key workers and vulnerable children I am confident we will help beat this virus.

I am deeply grateful for the civic spirit and dedication of everyone working in education, and I will continue to provide my full support throughout this crisis.

To support children eligible for free school meals, schools will be able to purchase meals or vouchers for supermarkets or local shops.

The government has also confirmed that the total value of vouchers offered to each eligible child per week will exceed the rate it pays to schools for free school meals, recognising that families will not be buying food in bulk and may therefore incur higher costs. The final amounts will be confirmed shortly.

Effective immediately, schools will be able to order vouchers directly from supermarkets or shops in their communities to be emailed or printed and posted to families, and they will have their costs covered by the Department for Education. Guidance for schools will be published shortly.

We know that many universities and other higher education institutions are already taking necessary steps to keep their staff and students safe. We are confident vice-chancellors are making the right decisions and the Department for Education continues to support them in doing so.

To support nurseries at this time, the Chancellor has also decided that they will also now be eligible for a business rates holiday for one year. That means non-local authority providers of childcare will pay no business rates in 2020-21, from 1 April.

Local authorities will be fully compensated for the cost of this measure. We are applying the Barnett formula to this additional support in England.

Guidance for local authorities on the application of the holiday will be published by MHCLG shortly.