

Analysis of government's plans for the full opening of schools in the autumn

Introduction

On 2 July, the government published detailed guidance for the [full opening of schools](#) from the beginning of the autumn term. At the same time they also released guidance for [special schools](#), [further education and skills providers](#) and [early years and childcare providers](#).

This document is an attempt to analyse and explain some of the key messages and 'asks' in the guidance for schools. It is not a comprehensive summary of everything in this document, nor a detailed planning framework, but rather an exploration of what schools are being asked to do, and why they are being asked to do it.

ASCL has also produced a [planning checklist](#) to support members in thinking through the actions they need to take between now and the start of the autumn term. We are also working on further support for members in special schools, FE colleges and early years settings.

Public health 'musts'

Since the first Covid-related guidance was published in March, we have been urging the government to be clearer about whether the actions they are asking schools to take are for public health reasons, or for educational or economic reasons. Members have made it clear that what you need are clear public health parameters within which you must operate, and flexibility within those parameters to make this work in your own different contexts.

This guidance does exactly that. The first section sets out what the government calls the 'system of controls' – the set of actions that schools **must** take. These are grouped into 'prevention' and 'response to any infection'.

Many of the actions in the 'prevention' section are largely familiar to schools from the guidance you've been following this term: handwashing, 'catch it, bin it, kill it', enhanced cleaning, etc. The main differences are in the requirements around minimising contact and maintaining social distancing wherever possible.

It might be helpful to think of the guidance on contact and distancing as a paradigm shift from what schools have previously been asked to do. In the spring and summer terms, schools have been asked to follow very detailed safety guidelines, and to do their best to provide as effective an education as possible within those guidelines. From the autumn onwards, schools are being asked to reintroduce as much as possible 'education as usual', with additional precautions to make this as safe as possible.

'Bubbles'

Thinking about the guidance in this way helps to make sense of what it says about 'bubbles'. Essentially, schools are being asked to keep pupils in the smallest groups possible while still providing the education they need. In a one-form entry primary school where most teaching is done in single classes, class-sized bubbles are likely to be an effective grouping. In a large secondary school, where pupils are set in some subjects from Year 7 onwards and choose their options at the end of Year 9, year-group-sized bubbles will probably be needed. In a small alternative provision setting, where teaching may not be based on traditional year groups, a whole school bubble may be the only sensible option.

What's important here is that schools are able to choose the configuration that works best for them. And there's no perfect solution. Any attempt to keep groups of pupils from mixing is likely to lead to some compromises – whether that's not being to hold whole school assemblies in a primary school, or having to rethink vertical tutor groups in a secondary school. What schools are being asked to do is to find a workable compromise which enables 'education as usual' to go ahead as much as it can, while also minimising contact between pupils as much as possible.

The other concept that may be helpful here is that of 'permeable bubbles'. That isn't a phrase that's used in the guidance, but it may be a useful way of considering the practicalities. Realistically, however carefully schools try to keep pupils in their chosen group, it's obvious that they can't be in that bubble all the time. Many will have siblings in other bubbles. Many will travel to and from school with children in other bubbles (more on transport below). Many will need to attend after school clubs with different children or spend time in inclusion units.

What's important here is that the guidance recognises this, and allows for it, but still encourages schools to keep pupils in consistent groups where they can. In other words, the fact that a child may sometimes need to mix with children from other bubbles doesn't negate the benefits of keeping them in a single consistent group most of the time. This isn't perfect, but it is still likely to reduce transmission of the virus, and so is worth doing.

Social distancing

The thinking on social distancing in this document is also worth spending a bit of time on. Essentially, distancing needs to be considered as part and parcel of the planning around bubbles. There are no strict requirements on distancing in the guidance or set distances that must be observed. The principle is that both pupils and staff should be encouraged to keep some distance between themselves and others if possible, but this becomes more important the more people they are mixing with. So, children and staff working in Reception, for example, where everyone recognises that social distancing is impossible, need to be protected by being kept in smaller bubbles. Pupils in Year 10, who need to be in larger bubbles for educational reasons, should be encouraged to keep some distance between each other and from adults.

One of the more challenging aspects of the guidance is the assertion that all teachers and other staff can operate across different bubbles. This is clearly necessary to enable schools, particularly secondary schools, to provide anything like a normal timetable – but it's obviously likely to cause concern to some staff. The guidance suggests that, to protect staff moving between bubbles, they should try to keep their distance from pupils and staff as much as they can – ideally 2 metres. This won't always be achievable, but it's important to attempt to do this as much as possible, particularly for staff who may be working with a large number of pupils across different bubbles.

Transport and staggered starts

One of the aspects of this guidance that is most problematic, and is causing significant concern, is around transport to and from school. The government recognises the challenges involved in this and has set up a dedicated group of people to continue working on this over the next few weeks. We have made it clear to them, however, that it is extremely difficult for schools to plan their approach to implementing bubbles without knowing what additional transport might be provided.

The principle here, then, is again one of pragmatism. Schools are being asked to consider whether they could stagger start and finish times to reduce the number of pupils arriving and

leaving school at the same time, and/or to start and finish school at a different time to enable more journeys to take place outside of peak hours. There is a clear recognition in the guidance, though, that this may not be feasible, and that schools can only do what they can do. Our advice to members is therefore to consider different start and finish times if you can, but to accept that it may not be possible.

Other concerns

We know there are many other concerns that members have about this document – in terms of both logistics and the expectations it sets out around curriculum, assessment, accountability and other aspects of the education system next year. We flagged some of these up in the [press release](#) we issued when the guidance was published, and will continue to engage urgently and constructively with the government to address these concerns.

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