

CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)

ANALYSIS OF GOVERNMENT'S PLANS FOR THE FULL OPENING OF POST-16 AND FE COLLEGES IN THE AUTUMN

Introduction

On 2 July, the government published detailed [guidance for Post-16 and FE colleges](#) for the autumn term. This document is an attempt to analyse and explain some of the key messages and 'asks' in the guidance. It is not a comprehensive summary of everything in these documents, nor a detailed planning framework, but rather an exploration of what colleges 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 Post-16 and FE colleges in thinking through the actions they need to take between now and the start of the autumn term.

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 colleges 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 sets out the actions that colleges must take in terms of 'prevention' and 'response to any infection'.

Many of the actions are largely familiar to colleges from the guidance you've been following this term: handwashing, enhanced cleaning, etc and the requirements around minimising contact between groups 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 colleges have previously been asked to do. In the spring and summer terms, colleges 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, colleges are being asked to reintroduce as much as possible 'education as usual', with additional precautions to make this as safe as possible.

Groups, including for adult learners

Essentially, colleges are being asked to invite all learners into college in September, including adult learners, and to keep all learners in the smallest groups possible. There is, however, no stipulation on group size. What is important here is that colleges are able to choose the configuration that works best for them. And there is no perfect solution. What colleges are being asked to do is to find a workable compromise which enables 'education and training as usual' to go ahead as much as it can, while also minimising contact between learners as much as possible.

The other concept that may be helpful here is that of 'permeable groups'. That is not a phrase that's used in the guidance, but it may be a useful way of considering the practicalities. Realistically, however carefully colleges try to keep learners in their chosen group, it is obvious that they can't be in that group all the time. Many will travel to and from college with learners in other groups (more on transport below). Many will need to attend after college activities with different learners or spend time on work placements.

What's important here is that the guidance recognises this, and allows for it, but still encourages colleges to keep learners in consistent groups where they can. In other words, the fact that a learner may sometimes need to mix with learners from other groups 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 groups. There are no strict requirements on distancing in the guidance or set distances that must be observed. The principle is that both learners 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, learners and staff working in, for example, an open learning area, where everyone recognises that social distancing is difficult, should be encouraged to keep some distance between each other.

One of the more challenging aspects of the guidance is the assertion that all teachers and other staff can operate across different groups. This is clearly necessary to enable colleges 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 groups, they should try to keep their distance from learners and staff as much as they can. The guidance states 2 metres if possible. 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 learners across different groups.

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 college. 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 colleges and schools to plan their approach to implementing groups (or 'bubbles' in schools) without knowing what additional transport might be provided.

The principle here, then, is again one of pragmatism. Colleges are being asked to consider whether they could stagger start and finish times to reduce the number of learners arriving and leaving college at the same time, and/or to start and finish college 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 colleges 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.

Financial issues

The government has stated that colleges and skills providers should plan on the basis that from September, all learners should return to their programme / take up a new programme on site. The funding and audit requirements are the same for face-to-face and remote or online learning. The funding guidance allows for remote learning subject to this being realistic, supervised, timetabled and incurring a recognised cost as set out in the funding guidance for 2020-21. Guidance is provided about evidencing remote learning to count towards planned hours.

To help manage financial implications, the government has stated that it will continue to pay providers their scheduled monthly profile for the remainder of 2019-20, will keep this under review for 2020-21 and notify us of changes.

Other concerns

We know there are many other concerns that members have about these documents – in terms of both logistics and the expectations they set out around teaching and learning, assessment, accountability and other aspects of the education and training system next year. We will continue to engage urgently and constructively with the government to address these concerns.

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