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Guidance

Public health guidance to support exams from January 2021

Updated 18 December 2020

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Updates to this guidance include:

- setting out our expectation that schools and colleges will run exams from January 2021 onwards
- removing references to the autumn 2020 exams as these have now been completed

This guidance is for:

- school and college senior leaders
- heads of other types of exam centre offering vocational and technical qualification (V.T.Q) exams from January 2021
- exams officers and other staff involved in exam delivery
- local authorities and multi-academy trusts (MATs)

It applies to all types of exam centre, including:

- state-funded schools
- further education, sixth form and specialist colleges
- independent training providers
- independent schools
- adult and community learning providers
- private exam centres

The term 'schools and colleges' in this guidance is used to refer to all types of exam centre.

This guidance:

- applies specifically to the conduct of exams from January 2021 onwards
- supplements and clarifies other existing guidance

This guidance sets out arrangements that schools, colleges and other exam centres should implement when delivering exams from January 2021 onwards to enable them to progress in a way which significantly reduces the risk of coronavirus (COVID-19). You should read this alongside:

- guidance on schools and colleges' responsibilities for the exams from January 2021 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/responsibility-for-autumn-gcse-as-and-a-level-exam-series/centre-responsibility-for-autumn-gcse-as-and-a-level-exam-series-guidance>)
- guidance for households with possible or confirmed coronavirus (COVID-19) infections (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-households-with-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection>)
- further education (FE) providers: return in January 2021 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/further-education-fe-providers-return-in-january-2021>)
- schools and childcare settings: return in January 2021 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/schools-and-childcare-settings-return-in-january-2021>)

Schools, colleges and other exam centres should follow the public health advice in the:

- guidance for full opening: schools (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools>)
- further education (FE) operational guidance (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-further-education-provision>)
- guidance for full opening for special schools and other specialist settings (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-for-full-opening-special-schools-and-other-specialist-settings/guidance-for-full-opening-special-schools-and-other-specialist-settings>)
- safe working in education, childcare and children's social care settings, including the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safe-working-in-education-childcare-and-childrens-social-care/safe-working-in-education-childcare-and-childrens-social-care-settings-including-the-use-of-personal-protective-equipment-ppe>)

We expect the majority of exams that take place from January 2021 onwards, ahead of the summer 2021 exam series, to be **V.T.Q** exams. In the case of **V.T.Q** exams, you should also follow the guidance specified by the relevant awarding organisation.

Spring term 2021 exam contingencies

When exams will run and the impact of local restrictions

The January exam series begins with **V.T.Qs** due to start on Monday 4 January 2021. We know that not all awarding organisations offer **V.T.Q** exams in January. Some will offer exams in February and March instead of a January exam series, or as well as a January exam series. This guidance is applicable to those exams too unless communicated otherwise. We will consider whether we need to update this guidance ahead of summer examinations for **V.T.Qs**, and GCSEs, AS and A levels.

It is our expectation that schools and colleges will run exams from January 2021. We also expect schools and colleges in areas under local restrictions to run exams. Where candidates are travelling to or within an area under local restrictions to take exams, they should refer to the local restrictions tiers guidance (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/local-restrictions-areas-with-an-outbreak-of-coronavirus-covid-19#areas-with-local-restrictions>). Candidates should expect to be able to travel for the purpose of taking exams. Travel into or out of tiers for the purposes of education and training, including exams and assessments, is allowed.

Alternative sites and invigilation support

The Department for Education (**DfE**) exam support service (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/responsibility-for-autumn-gcse-as-and-a-level-exam-series/dfc-exam-support-service-autumn-exam-fees-sites-and-invigilators>) will continue to help schools and colleges to book sites and invigilators where required for exams in scope. We expect schools and colleges to pay fees for all students who were due to sit exams in the summer, rather than passing the cost on to students or their families.

V.T.Qs and other general qualifications at level 1/2, level 2 and level 3, where students received grades in summer 2020 and there is a scheduled assessment opportunity for the qualification in either the autumn 2020 or spring term 2021 series, are in scope of the exam support service. Support can also be claimed for functional skills qualifications where the apprenticeship training provider usually delivers the exams to the apprentice in their workplace. Other **V.T.Qs** are not in scope.

Information on how to make claims for exams (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dfe-exam-support-service-claiming-costs>) is available.

Schools and colleges can also use the [DfE](#) service to book sites and invigilators for other exams and assessments, but these will not be funded by [DfE](#).

Read the [DfE](#) exam support service guidance (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/responsibility-for-autumn-gcse-as-and-a-level-exam-series/dfe-exam-support-service-autumn-exam-fees-sites-and-invigilators>).

Some schools and colleges can book alternative sites, sometimes at short notice, so that exams can run. Schools and colleges can contact the [DfE](#) exam support service to try to find an additional venue.

Preparing for and running exams

Engagement with NHS Test and Trace

You must make sure that you understand the NHS Test and Trace process and that you've read the guidance on how schools should respond to any infections (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools#section-1-public-health-advice-to-minimise-coronavirus-covid-19-risks>).

Your exam centre will need to collect and keep contact information for candidates and invigilators so that you can share it with NHS Test and Trace if needed. This is particularly important for any external visitors, including any non-school staff assisting with exams, and candidates not on roll at the exam centre. Every exam will have a seating plan, so you can add the names of the invigilators and cross reference them to the contact details you hold for candidates and invigilators.

Students taking exams in January 2021 should be encouraged to undertake a test prior to sitting their exam or assessment. However, as testing is not mandatory they should not be refused access to their exam if they have not already been tested.

Arrival and departure of candidates

Candidates should read the safer travel guidance (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-safer-travel-guidance-for-passengers>) before planning their journey to their exam, especially where the exam is being held in a location to which the candidate does not normally travel.

As candidates arrive before the scheduled start time of exams, you will need to keep them separate from other students arriving at the exam centre.

You should identify a location where candidates will wait before the exam that can support social distancing between group 'bubbles' as well as between on-roll and off-roll candidates.

You should also make sure that any candidates who arrive late for the exam follow social distancing measures.

You will need to make sure that there is a plan to manage candidates leaving the exam room and site, particularly as exams may finish at different times. As part of this, you will need to take into account any candidates who need extra time in exams.

These considerations apply wherever the exams are taking place - whether in a school, college, private exam centre or another venue booked specifically for the purpose of taking exams. Where alternative locations are used to run exams, you will still need to manage the arrival and departure of candidates to make sure they maintain social distancing as they wait for exams, including from other members of the public who may be present in entry lobbies.

Cleaning

Exam rooms should be kept clean. Frequently touched surfaces (for example, door handles, individual desks) should be cleaned after every exam with the usual cleaning products, including the backs of chairs where candidates may pull chairs out to sit.

Rooms do not need to be left empty between exams, provided they are cleaned properly each time.

The guidance for cleaning non-healthcare settings (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings>) sets out advice on general cleaning and on cleaning settings when there has been a suspected case of coronavirus (COVID-19).

Set up of the exam room

Desks should not be set up face to face. For GCSE, AS and A level exams, and for some VETs, the minimum distance in all directions from centre to centre of candidates' chairs must be 1.25 metres, following JCQ's Instructions for Conducting Examinations (<https://www.jcq.org.uk/exams-office/ice---instructions-for-conducting-examinations/>). This distance is the minimum that must be maintained for students within a group bubble. For VET exams, you should also follow the guidance specified by the relevant awarding organisation.

All other candidates, whether in different group bubbles, private candidates or those returning to school or college to take exams, should be seated 2 metres apart from each other. These candidates can be seated in the same room.

There is no overall limit on the number of candidates who can sit in a room, as long as desks are correctly spaced. The upper limit to the number of candidates who can take an exam in a room together depends on the desk spacing requirements.

The importance of adequate ventilation should also be considered when selecting the room for exams. Good ventilation is important and you should maximise this wherever possible, for example, opening windows and propping open doors (not fire doors) where safe to do so (bearing in mind safeguarding in particular). For more advice, read the Health and Safety Executive guidance on air conditioning and ventilation during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak (<https://www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/equipment-and-machinery/air-conditioning-and-ventilation.htm>).

Invigilators may walk up and down aisles between desks, but there must also be points in the room where an invigilator can stand at least 2 metres from the nearest desks and see all the candidates in the room.

Face coverings

Candidates and invigilators do not need to wear face coverings during exams, but they may wear them if they wish to.

Candidates and invigilators should wear face coverings in communal areas if the exam centre is in an area of local intervention that requires it, or if you have chosen to use face coverings in communal areas.

For more information, read the guidance on face coverings in education (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/face-coverings-in-education/face-coverings-in-education>).

Everyone who uses public transport to travel to exams should follow the requirements for wearing face coverings.

Invigilators

Your school or college will have protocols in place for visitors and temporary staff. Invigilators can move between different schools and colleges. They should minimise contact and maintain as much distance as possible from other staff. Further guidance about supply and peripatetic staff is in the school workforce section of the actions for schools during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/guidance-for-full-opening-schools#school-workforce>).

Before the exams, you will need to tell invigilators what they need to do to minimise contact and maintain as much distance as possible from other staff.

Invigilators do not need to wear gloves when collecting exam scripts from candidates but should wash their hands thoroughly and more frequently than usual and particularly after handling exam papers.

Maintaining distance between staff and candidates

You should advise invigilators and other staff to stand alongside candidates when interacting with them, rather than face to face.

For encounters of over 15 minutes, for example, when scribes, readers or other individuals are supporting candidates, staff should maintain a 2 metre distance where possible, for example using a separate room from other candidates. If staff cannot maintain a 2 metre distance, they should avoid close face to face contact and minimise time spent within 1 metre of others. These arrangements may not be possible when working with some candidates who have complex needs, in which case these candidates' educational support should be provided as normal during exams.

If candidates need to leave the exam room and need to be accompanied for more than 15 minutes, staff should maintain a 2 metre distance where possible. If this is not possible, staff should take mitigating measures, such as standing alongside the candidate and considering using a face covering.

Candidate health

The guidance for households with possible or confirmed coronavirus (COVID-19) infections (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-households-with-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection>) applies throughout.

School and college action

Schools and colleges must take swift action when they become aware that a candidate entered for the exams in January 2021 onwards has tested positive for coronavirus (COVID-19). They must follow the guidance outlined in actions for schools during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak>). The guidance explains that schools and colleges can contact the dedicated advice service introduced by Public Health England (PHE) and delivered by the NHS Business Services Authority. This can be reached by calling the DfE helpline on 0800 046 8687 and selecting option 1 for advice on the action to take in response to a positive case.

Candidates with symptoms or who have tested positive

Candidates must not attend the exam centre if they have coronavirus (COVID-19) symptoms or have tested positive in the last 10 days. The most important symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19) are the recent onset of either a:

- new continuous cough
- high temperature
- loss of, or change in, their normal sense of taste or smell (anosmia)

Candidates should stay at home and arrange to have a test (<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/testing-for-coronavirus/>) to see if they have coronavirus (COVID-19).

Candidates will be unable to take exams during their period of isolation. If the candidate is not tested for coronavirus (COVID-19), they must isolate for 10 days from the onset of symptoms.

Where candidates are isolating in line with public health advice

Where a member of the candidate's household or someone they have been in contact with has tested positive for coronavirus (COVID-19), the candidate must isolate for 10 days from the day after the individual tested positive. They cannot take exams during that period.

This also applies if the candidate is asked to isolate following contact with someone with the virus. Candidates cannot take exams during their period of isolation.

Schools and colleges should contact the awarding organisation on the candidate's behalf to determine the next available assessment opportunity.

Candidates in quarantine following certain foreign travel must not attend exams during their period of quarantine. See guidance on travel corridors (<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-travel-corridors#countries-territories-and-regions-with-no-self-isolation-requirement-on-arrival-in-england>) for an up-to-date list of countries where quarantine is not required in England.

Where a candidate has a negative test

Candidates should follow guidance about their coronavirus (COVID-19) test result (<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/testing-and-tracing/what-your-test-result-means/>) when they receive a negative test. The guidance sets out the circumstances where candidates do not need to self-isolate. They can attend exams in these circumstances.

Candidates who are clinically extremely vulnerable from coronavirus (COVID-19)

Candidates who are clinically extremely vulnerable should refer to the shielding guidance (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19#local>).

Reasonable adjustments

Schools and colleges must, under their Equality Act obligations, continue to make reasonable adjustments for candidates with special educational needs and disabilities.

Each VLE awarding organisation will have their own policy on reasonable adjustments, which we expect schools and colleges to be familiar with.

The special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) will need to ensure that the access arrangement is still appropriate, practicable and reasonable.

In the event of a candidate's circumstances changing, the SENCO may (where required) need to produce evidence and process an online application.

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