STOCKPORT
METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

Winter Preparedness Guidance for Schools

Purpose

This guidance helps schools prepare for and respond to winter disruption, including severe weather, infectious illness, transport difficulties, site safety risks and potential closure. It should be read alongside the Department for Education (DfE) emergency planning and response guidance, which recommends maintaining emergency and business continuity plans for severe weather and other emergencies.

What schools need to do

- **Before winter:** review plans, check premises and staffing arrangements, and test communications.
- **During disruption:** assess local conditions, staffing and pupil needs; put suitable measures in place and communicate decisions.
- **Following disruption:** review the response, identify lessons and update plans.

1. Key Principles

During periods of adverse winter weather:

- Schools should endeavour to remain open wherever it is safe and practicable to do so.
- Decisions should be based on dynamic risk assessment rather than weather forecasts alone.
- The safety and welfare of pupils, staff and visitors should be the overriding consideration.
- Assess individual safeguarding and support needs, including those of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).
- Communicate promptly and consistently with parents and carers, staff, transport providers and the local authority.

2. Pre-Winter Planning Checklist

Senior leaders should complete an annual winter preparedness review before the start of the winter season.

Site and Premises

Review gritting and snow clearance arrangements.

Ensure adequate stocks of:

- Salt/grit
- Snow shovels
- Wet floor signs
- Emergency lighting supplies

Inspect:

- Boilers and heating systems
- Pipe insulation
- Roofs and drainage systems
- External lighting
- Emergency generators (where applicable)

Identify priority pedestrian routes for clearance.

Review arrangements for contractor access during severe weather.

Schools should anticipate increased risks from slips, trips and falls caused by snow, ice and wet surfaces.

Business Continuity

Review and update:

- Critical Incident Plan
- Business Continuity Plan
- Emergency Contact Lists

Confirm contact details for:

- Staff
- Parents and carers
- Governors

- Local authority or multi-academy trust (MAT)
- Transport providers
- Utility suppliers

Test mass communication systems.

Review remote education arrangements against Section 11.

3. Weather Monitoring

Schools should monitor warnings and guidance from the Met Office, the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) and the Environment Agency, alongside local authority alerts and transport reports. These sources cover risks including storms, flooding, snow, ice and extreme wind.

UKHSA weather-health alerts provide early warning when adverse temperatures are likely to affect health and wellbeing.

Environment Agency flood warnings provide information by text, phone or email about flood risks from rivers, the sea or groundwater.

A weather warning or alert does not automatically mean a school should close. Alerts help schools understand the risks and decide what extra action may be needed.

Attention should be paid to:

- Snow
- Ice
- Freezing rain
- High winds
- Flooding
- Extreme cold

Risk assessments should be reviewed whenever weather warnings escalate.

4. Site Safety During Winter Conditions

Snow and Ice

Schools should:

- Grit priority routes before arrival and departure times.

- Restrict access to unsafe areas.
- Ensure playground inspections are completed before use.
- Consider temporary route diversions.

Heating Failures

Where building temperatures cannot be maintained at safe and reasonable levels, leaders should consider:

- Partial site closure
- Relocation of teaching spaces
- Temporary closure

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) advises employers to assess risks arising from cold working conditions and ensure suitable measures are in place to protect occupants. HSE temperature in the workplace

5. Staff Availability

Winter weather may significantly affect staffing levels.

Schools should:

- Establish minimum staffing requirements.
- Identify vulnerable staff.
- Identify staff who may struggle to travel.
- Consider temporary redeployment of staff.
- Allow remote working for appropriate roles where possible.

Decision-making should consider:

- Safe supervision ratios
- Availability of first aiders
- Availability of designated safeguarding leads (DSLs) and safeguarding personnel
- Catering and premises staffing

6. Supporting Pupils During Cold Weather

Schools should assess individual needs rather than assume that all pupils within a group require the same support.

Individual Health and Additional Needs

Particular consideration should be given to:

- Early years children
- Pupils with SEND
- Clinically vulnerable pupils and those with underlying or complex health conditions

When assessing cold-weather risks, schools should take account of advice from parents, carers or clinical teams. Younger children and those with underlying or complex health conditions may be more vulnerable to cold weather. See the UKHSA and DfE cold-weather guidance for teachers and education professionals.

Practical Support

Consider barriers affecting pupils experiencing poverty or inadequate heating at home. Schools should:

- Encourage suitable winter clothing.
- Monitor pupils attending without appropriate clothing.
- Consider access to hardship support where required.
- Review outdoor activity arrangements.

Safeguarding and Welfare During Disruption

Assess the safeguarding risks pupils may face if they cannot attend school. Review how existing support and safeguarding arrangements will continue during disruption or closure, alongside the arrangements in Section 11.

7. Preventing Winter Illness

Some illnesses circulate more in autumn and winter. The DfE blog on reducing the spread of illness this winter sets out seven practical steps to support pupil and staff health. The following advice covers communication with families, hygiene, ventilation, cleaning, vaccination messaging and attendance monitoring.

Communicating with Parents and Carers about Illness

The NHS Is my child too ill for school? guidance supports decisions about attendance. Most mild illnesses, such as a runny nose, sore throat or slight cough, do **not** require absence unless the child has a temperature. Parents and carers know their child best; schools can help them make informed decisions through the following actions.

- Share the NHS Is my child too ill for school? guidance on the school website and in communications with parents and carers before the winter illness season.
- Use the DfE Guide to communicating with parents about attendance and its ready-made, evidence-based resources, including:
    - an animation on school absence due to illness
    - an NHS poster on illness decisions to share with parents and carers and support staff conversations.
- Explain the measures the school is taking to reduce illness, using the advice in this section, and share the DfE tips for keeping children healthy at school with parents and carers.
- Encourage parents and carers to book medical appointments outside school hours where possible. Where this is not possible, pupils should attend before and return after the appointment if they are well enough. Pupils can attend appointments in school uniform.

Hand Hygiene

Hand hygiene is one of the most effective ways to prevent the spread of germs, particularly those that cause diarrhoea or vomiting. Schools can:

- Ensure liquid soap and handwashing facilities with warm water and paper towels are available and accessible.
- Include handwashing routines before meals, after using the toilet, touching animals and on entrance to the classroom/after playtime.

Respiratory Hygiene: Catch It, Bin It, Kill It

Schools should encourage pupils and staff to follow these everyday respiratory hygiene habits:

- Catch it: Use a tissue to cover your nose and mouth when you cough or sneeze. If there's no tissue, cough or sneeze into your elbow, not your hands.
- Bin it: Throw the used tissue straight into a bin.
- Kill it: Wash hands with soap and water after coughing, sneezing, or touching used tissues. Try not to touch your eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands.
- No spitting: it spreads germs.

Ventilation

Good ventilation can help remove air containing virus particles and reduce the spread of respiratory infections, including colds, flu and COVID-19. Schools should balance ventilation with maintaining a comfortable temperature. Practical measures include:

- Let fresh air in: open windows and doors whenever possible (note: fire doors must be kept closed).

- Reduce draughts in colder weather: open high-level windows instead of low ones to minimise cold draughts, or air rooms by opening windows and doors between lessons and at breaktimes.

- Use CO_2 monitors: if available, use CO_2 monitors to help manage ventilation and identify poorly ventilated areas.

- Consider air cleaning units where necessary: where it is not possible to maintain an adequate supply of fresh air, consider using an air cleaning unit until ventilation improvements are made. Air cleaning units are not a substitute for ventilation and should not delay any necessary remedial work.

Where spaces are mechanically ventilated, systems should be maintained to ensure their continued operation.

See the DfE guidance on using CO_2 monitors and air cleaning units in education and care settings.

Cleaning

Regular cleaning helps reduce the spread of germs on surfaces. Schools should:

- Focus on high-touch areas like door handles, desks and toilets, as well as food preparation areas.
- Ensure cleaning schedules are followed consistently.
- Provide tissues and bins in classrooms and liquid soap by handwashing facilities and encourage their use.
- Consult the UKHSA guidance on preventing and controlling infections for cleaning practices and hand and respiratory hygiene.

Reinforcing Everyday Hygiene

Pupils and staff benefit from regular reminders about hygiene and illness prevention. Schools can:

- Explain why windows are opened during colder weather and how fresh air supports classroom ventilation.

- Reinforce positive behaviours through classroom routines and visual prompts, such as picture instructions on effective handwashing near sinks and promoting “catch it, bin it, kill it” messaging.

Vaccination Messaging

Where appropriate, schools should support public health messaging regarding seasonal vaccinations.

Hand hygiene, cleaning, ventilation and vaccination programmes can help reduce the spread of seasonal illnesses within school communities. Local information is linked here: Stockport NHS Vaccination Programme 2026–27.

Attendance Monitoring and Staffing Contingencies

- Review pupil and staff absence data for patterns that may indicate increasing illness.
- Review contingency arrangements for the absence of key staff or significant numbers of staff, taking account of Section 5.

8. School Closure Decisions

School leaders should decide locally whether normal opening, modified arrangements or closure is appropriate. Decisions should reflect the principles in Section 1, including the educational and safeguarding implications of pupils being out of school.

Step 1: Assess the Risks

Consider closure where one or more of the following applies:

- The site is unsafe.
- Adequate staffing cannot be secured.
- Heating or utilities fail.
- Travel conditions present significant risks.
- Emergency services advise against opening.

Step 2: Consider Available Mitigations

- Use the site-specific risk assessment to identify practical measures that could enable safe opening.
- Consider local conditions, including staffing, transport and access.
- Assess whether available mitigations, including partial site closure or use of alternative teaching spaces, would manage the risks.

Step 3: Decide on Opening Arrangements

School leaders should close the school or restrict attendance only as a last resort, following assessment of local risks and available mitigations. Closure of another local school does not, by itself, justify closure. If attendance needs to be restricted, schools should prioritise vulnerable pupils, children of critical workers and pupils taking examinations.

Step 4: Record and Communicate the Decision

Record the assessment, decision and rationale. Communicate the outcome promptly using the arrangements in Section 10.

Step 5: Set a Review Point and Plan for Reopening

Set a time to review conditions and provide the next update. Keep disruption as short as possible and follow **Section 9** when closure is necessary.

N.B. If you are considering full or partial closure and would like further advice, please contact: Gordon Leach, School Liaison and Support Manager.

If you have made the decision to make a partial or full school closure, please email or contact Gordon Leach (see above.) Please include full school details including contact numbers and the rationale for closure.

9. During Closure and Reopening

Schools should reopen as soon as it is safe to do so. During closure, schools should consider provision in line with the DfE guidance on providing remote education and the arrangements in Section 11. Provision may include online lessons, recorded teaching, learning resources or independent work at home.

There is specific guidance schools should follow if exams or assessments may be disrupted.

Use the communication checklist in Section 10 to explain remote education provision, access and support to parents and carers.

Schools should not take an afternoon register and then offer large-scale 'optional' early collection of pupils immediately afterwards.

10. Communication During Disruption

Before severe weather, schools should explain how parents and carers will receive updates and that normal attendance is expected unless they are informed otherwise. If arrangements change, communicate promptly and consistently across the channels below, explaining the decision, safety measures and practical implications.

Methods may include:

- Text messaging systems
- Email
- School websites
- Social media platforms
- Local authority communication channels

Messages should include:

- Opening, restricted-attendance or closure status, with the reason for any change
- The review time and when the next update will be issued
- Remote education provision, how pupils can access it and what support is available
- Safety measures and changes to entrances, exits, transport, uniform, outdoor activities or the school day
- Collection procedures
- Emergency contact information

11. Remote Education Contingency

Where pupils cannot attend because of severe weather, schools should consider remote education in line with DfE guidance. Where remote education is provided, schools should:

- Activate the agreed remote education systems.
- Communicate expectations for participation and engagement to pupils, parents and carers.
- Review the welfare and engagement of pupils requiring additional support, in line with existing arrangements.
- Maintain existing safeguarding reporting and escalation arrangements during remote education.

Use the DfE guidance on providing remote education alongside the emergency planning guidance linked in the introduction.

12. Post-Incident Review

Following any winter disruption, schools should undertake a review considering:

- Effectiveness of communication
- Site management arrangements
- Staffing resilience
- Remote education provision
- Safeguarding concerns
- Lessons learned

Incorporate any necessary changes into the school:

- Business Continuity Plan
- Critical Incident Plan
- Winter Preparedness Plan