

COVID-19 (Coronavirus): Information for Parents and Carers

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Dear Parents and Carers,

We are pleased to publish this first edition of what will be a regular question and answer bulletin as we move through the next phase of the national response to COVID-19. This has been developed in response to a request from the Suffolk Parent Carer Network (SPCN) and we would like to thank them for providing us with the first set of questions and concerns that have been raised through the network. You can fill out an SPCN survey asking families about what support they need during this pandemic [here](#), and we will continue to answer questions from SPCN in future editions. We also welcome direct questions from families via email at localoffer@suffolk.gov.uk or via our [Local Offer Facebook Page](#).



All of us are facing challenges as a result of lockdown and we don't underestimate the difficult balancing act that you will be managing as parents and carers, particularly in supporting your whole family at this time. We are doing our best to maintain all our services over this period and we are still completing new assessments and expecting annual reviews to continue virtually wherever possible.

Over the last few weeks we have been working closely with every school and setting that support pupils who have Education, Health and Care Plans to make sure each family is receiving regular contact from staff and that there is a plan in place with your child's school or setting to meet their needs through the lockdown period and the coming months. We have asked all education providers to complete an EHCP risk assessment for each child, and this should have involved a discussion with you as their parent/carer. Where a school or setting has raised a concern about their ability to put a plan in place that meets the needs of your child, we are following this up.

If you have particular concerns about the offer that is being made to your child with an EHCP, please contact your school or setting to discuss this further in the first instance. However, if after this you are still worried, please contact our COVID helpline for parents on 01473 263985 to raise your concerns. While some services have had to suspend their offer, we are still doing our best to support you and your child.

Finally, I wanted to thank you all for the kind words and encouraging feedback that we have had from so many of you during this period. Our staff are working long hours, often with their own challenging circumstances, and it has been very heartening that so many of you have taken the time to drop us a note of thanks or share a kind word.

With thanks and best wishes on behalf of the Suffolk SEND Partners,

Judith Mobbs
Assistant Director, Inclusion and Skills

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Q1: Should I send my child back to school?

Since 23 March, most schools have remained open for the children of critical workers and for those children who were considered particularly vulnerable. Mainstream primary schools were asked to reopen to children in Years R/1/6 from 1 June, and to some year groups in secondary settings from 15 June. For special schools, year groups were not specified; rather children are being gradually invited to return as appropriate.

In all cases, parents will receive information from their child's school about the arrangements made. Every school is different; therefore their plans to re-open will be different. We recognise that there is understandably much anxiety about returning to school. Schools are working hard to ensure it is safe for children to return. Risk assessments are being carried out to determine how the school will re-open safely, and children's welfare and safety is most important.

It is important for children to understand that school will look different during this time. If you or your child have any particular concerns, we encourage you to discuss these with your school, so that you feel confident making the decision that is right for your family.

Q2: If I don't send my child back to school what will happen?

At the present time there will be no legal action taken against any person if they choose not to send their children to school. However, we would encourage all parents/carers to send their children to school when informed by the school that they can return safely.

Q3: What provision will there be when my child goes back to school?

The provision a child receives when they go back to school will be dependent on the needs of the individual child. It will also be dependent on the school's processes in place to re-open safely.

At the start of lockdown it was important there was a care offer for children of key workers and vulnerable children. The gradual re-opening of schools to some year groups from 1st June indicates the need now to ensure that as many children as possible return to school to receive an education. This means that schools will be aiming to offer learning in small groups, or 'bubbles', to the best of their ability. Children will remain in their 'bubble' with their adult(s), so learning is going to be different for a while and will focus on developing skills whilst also supporting children's social and emotional well-being. Every school will have a risk assessment which states what they can provide whilst also keeping children safe. The risk assessment will look at the number of staff available to a group of children, the spaces available in school so that social distancing can be managed, and which elements of the school curriculum can be safely delivered. This will be different in each school and schools should be communicating their offer via their website and other communications with families.

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Q4: What emotional support will be available for children when they go back?

Children and young people have experienced a lot of change during this pandemic and the unpredictable nature of the current situation can be very hard to cope with for many people. Emotional support is therefore really important and this is a focus for all services and for education settings currently in planning for children and young people's return to education over the coming weeks and months.

There are a wide range of resources available for children and young people, families and schools, as well as offers of support from our Psychology and Therapeutic and Specialist Education Services. These range from whole school approaches through to planning for individual children and young people who require additional support - for more information visit www.suffolklocaloffer.org.uk or click [here](#).

Q5: What will the transition arrangements be for children this year?

Where children are starting school or moving to a new school in September, transition will currently need to look different to how it usually does. There are lots of resources to support families and schools with transition arrangements available on www.suffolklocaloffer.org.uk, including information about supporting children and young people to manage their emotions and cope with change.

Schools and colleges are already communicating with families via email and post, and are also developing ways of supporting transition using 'virtual' strategies. There are many ways this can happen, such as sharing photographs of the new school, virtual tours, and meetings via telephone or ICT.

Q6: What is happening about home-to-school transport?

Suffolk On Board, our passenger transport service, have done a great deal of work in ensuring that routes can continue to run safely under current Government guidelines. As more and more students return to school and as Government advice continues to evolve, there may be unavoidable changes to your child's usual travel arrangements. Please visit www.suffolkonboard.com/FAQs for the latest guidance.

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Q7: Is my child eligible for a free laptop?

The Local Authority has been allocated some laptops and Wi-Fi dongles by the DfE for children who have a designated social worker. The allocation is enough to provide 1 in 4 eligible children with a laptop and less than 1 in 10 with a Wi-Fi dongle, and it will be for the Social Care teams to decide which children they are awarded to. Similarly, education settings have also been awarded an allocation of laptops for vulnerable children in Year 10 who do not have one. It will be for the settings to decide which children receive them.

These devices come with a cloud based filtering system to provide some safeguarding. The DfE have clarified that the devices remain the property of the organisation awarding them and have also indicated that the limited number of Wi-Fi data dongles will be for a 6 month contract of 3GB per month.

If you are not eligible for this, you may wish to look into making an application to the Family Fund, who provide grants to families on low incomes with disabilities or severe medical conditions to help with the cost of equipment including computers. To find out more, visit www.familyfund.org.uk.

As a result of COVID-19, all 16-19 education providers have been asked to continue to deliver their provision online where possible. There is a Government 16-19 Bursary Fund which can be used to provide necessary equipment to students who cannot afford it, and to help with other essential costs of participating in education. For more details or to apply, please visit the [Gov.uk website](http://Gov.uk) and search for "16-19 bursary".

Q8: Are we eligible for vouchers for free meals during the pandemic?

All families who are currently eligible for free school meals should already be receiving a voucher or meal from their school. Please contact your school if you have not received this.

Families who are currently undergoing assessment for Universal Credit will be issued a pre-payment card which will be topped up weekly until the result of the assessment is known. If the result is that you are not eligible for Universal Credit, top-ups to the card will be stopped, but you will be given two weeks to spend any balance before it is deactivated. If your child is eligible for free school meals but does not currently have a school place, you will also be issued a pre-payment card until a place is allocated. Once an eligible child has been allocated a school place, the school will take over responsibility for meals.

The pre-payment cards can be spent anywhere that accepts Mastercard. All spending is monitored, and if anything other than food is purchased the card will be stopped and we will contact the parent and require them to repay the monies. Suffolk County Council will underwrite any monies spent on those who prove to be not eligible for free school meals after assessment so you will not have to repay it, and we are grateful to Cabinet for their support in this.

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Q9: Is there any financial support available to help me care for my child at home?

The Family Fund provides grants to families on low incomes who have disabilities or severe medical conditions to help with the cost of equipment, goods or services - from washing machines and refrigerators to sensory and educational equipment that they might not otherwise be able to afford. The grants are typically worth £4-500 per family, but vary depending on need. You can find out more at www.familyfund.org.uk.

You may also be able to claim Carers' Allowance if you provide care remotely during the coronavirus outbreak. This includes giving emotional support over the phone or online - visit www.gov.uk/carers-allowance for more information.

For information about financial support for short breaks, please read below.

Q10: What other support is available if we are struggling to cope at home?

Short breaks are part of an existing continuum of services which support children with SEND and their families. Under normal circumstances, they can include day, evening, overnight and weekend activities, and can take place in the child's own home, the home of an approved carer, or in a residential or community setting.

However, in the early stages of lockdown, most of the providers we normally use for short breaks had to close. As time has gone on, we have worked to develop overnight breaks for those families identified as being most in need, and these families have continued to be offered overnight support via Achieving Aspirations, one of our experienced Short Break Providers. We continue to work with our other providers to gradually reintroduce services, and are asking them to be flexible in the way they offer these to be able to continue to meet the needs of families under current guidelines, but we recognise they will not be able to offer full capacity for some time yet.

In Suffolk, personal budgets for short breaks for children aged 18 and under are issued through the Council's short breaks service, Activities Unlimited. Access to the service is via online self-assessment, which can be completed at www.activities-unlimited.co.uk. Qualifying families can use their budgets in a variety of ways to meet their short break needs, and many families are using their budgets to ease current pressure by purchasing items such as garden toys or crafts that can be done at home both with their child with SEND and with the whole family. You can contact Activities Unlimited on 01473 260026 or by emailing info@activities-unlimited.co.uk.

Personal budgets for those over 18 are issued by the Adult Care Service (ACS). If your adult child with SEND is aged 18 – 25, it is likely that they will already have been assessed by ACS under the remit of the Care Act (2014) and may already have a personal budget that can be used for care. If they have not, or if you require a reassessment or additional support, please [contact ACS](#) on 0808 800 4005 or by emailing customer.first@suffolk.gov.uk.