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Opening schools in extreme bad weather

Guidance for schools

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Information

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Opening schools in extreme bad weather

Audience	Headteachers and local authorities.
Overview	Advice about what to consider when deciding if a school should close or stay open during extreme bad weather.
Action required	For headteachers and local authorities to consider the advice provided in this document.
Further information	Enquiries about this document should be directed to: Debra Froud Schools Management and Effectiveness Division Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills Welsh Assembly Government Cathays Park Cardiff CF10 3NQ Tel: 029 2080 1409 e-mail: SMED2@wales.gsi.gov.uk
Additional copies	This document can be accessed from the Welsh Assembly website at www.wales.gov.uk/educationandskills or from the Governors Wales website at www.governorswales.org.uk This is a joint publication from the Welsh Assembly Government and the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA).

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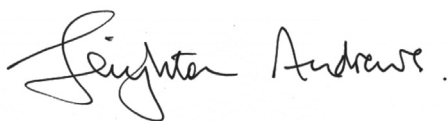
Ministerial foreword

We are pleased to publish *Opening schools in extreme bad weather* which provides practical guidance about risks schools face when it snows or is icy. Every winter brings the possibility of snow and ice. Extreme bad weather can cause widespread and prolonged disruption. Schools are often affected and it can be difficult to maintain an education service.

We have taken the step of publishing this joint guidance because we know that headteachers are in the invidious position of having to decide whether to keep schools open. Such decisions are best taken locally because the circumstances of each school can be different. Conditions can change quickly and many factors will influence decision making.

Opening schools in extreme bad weather gives headteachers practical advice about what to consider if you are faced with having to decide whether to keep a school open in periods of extreme bad weather. It includes generic risk assessment material which can be adapted to suit every school's circumstances. The approach is very much grounded in common sense and being proportionate, with emphasis on actions headteachers can take that can keep a school open.

We trust that *Opening schools in extreme bad weather* will be a useful touchstone and offer reassurance that acting reasonably and sensibly, and applying sound risk assessment principles, will enable headteachers to determine risks and to confidently make the best decisions for schools.



Leighton Andrews AM
Minister for Children, Education
and Lifelong Learning



Councillor Peter Fox
Education Spokesperson
for the Welsh Local
Government Association

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to provide headteachers with advice about the issues to consider when deciding whether a school should close or stay open during extreme bad weather. The document includes examples of the issues that schools may face and suggestions for ways in which to tackle them.

Since headteachers are required to make dynamic risk assessments at the time of extreme bad weather, provided here are both a generic risk assessment, to forearm headteachers with a detailed awareness of the potential hazards, and a general risk assessment template for recording the specific details that will have informed a decision to close or open an individual school.

The document is split into sections to cover issues relevant to opening a school, keeping a school open and preventative considerations. Guidance is provided in a question and answer format.

Furthermore, Annex A provides an overview of the legal standpoints that should be considered when making a dynamic assessment and decision. It should not be considered a substitute however for seeking your own legal advice from the local authority or other qualified person.

Annex B and Annex C provide generic risk assessments that headteachers can adapt. A web-link to further health and safety guidance and useful websites is at Annex D. Anyone using these should consult with the school's insurer to ascertain the insurer's requirements as to a risk analysis. Governing bodies should also take an insurer's requirements into account if setting a policy or guidelines for the headteacher.

The information contained here should assist headteachers in deciding whether it is safe to open a school during extreme bad weather, or whether the school should close. It should be borne in mind that teachers and other staff in schools look after their learners in place of the parent/carer (in loco parentis). This means that whilst they are in their control and care they are under a legal obligation to treat and take such care of them as a careful parent/carer would. This duty clearly applies where the learners are on school premises. The duty will also apply when learners are travelling to and from school on a school bus. In the case where learners are travelling to and from school on an ordinary bus service (not a school bus), then there is no obvious reason why that duty should apply. However, much may

depend on the particular circumstances. For example, if the school were to provide 'bus escorts' on an ordinary bus service then a court may regard that as indicative of the fact that the local authority and/or the school have accepted responsibility for the care of learners on that bus. The duty will also apply when learners are attending a school trip away from school premises.

Where schools have to close, they should consider what distance learning or self-study arrangements can be made for learners in Years 10–13 in order to minimise disruption to learning for examination courses.

Opening a school

The decision to open a school during extreme bad weather conditions, or whether closure is required, is dependent on the headteacher undertaking a dynamic risk assessment. 'Dynamic' means that the risk assessment should be updated as often as weather conditions or circumstances change. This assessment would not necessarily be written down, but thought out using the criteria in the following table to make an informed decision.

The timing in which a dynamic risk assessment is required – determining closure or opening – is quite limited, hence the need for it to be thought out rather than written. However, foreknowledge of the generic risk assessment and its constituent parts would enable the headteacher to devise their own general risk assessment. Both or the latter should be able to assist the headteacher in making the right decision on the day.

First consideration	Other consideration(s)
Is the school building accessible?	What are the forecasted long-term weather conditions? Are there any Met Office warnings? www.metoffice.gov.uk
Are there any areas within the school locality especially impassable or dangerous in times of extreme bad weather?	Consideration should be given to getting to and from the school. In the case of one-way traffic systems, the route into school may be a lesser gradient than the route away. There may be locations on the journey where snow/ice is known to cause early closure of roads or rail. Alternative routes can be found prior to extreme bad weather to help the traveller to decide their route when required.
Are vehicle routes into the school grounds passable?	Is there means to improve access prior to teachers attendance, or attendance of school buses, parents/carers' vehicles, etc.? Is parking possible outside the school grounds until remedial action has been taken to make the area passable? If a main pedestrian route, inside the school grounds, is through a vehicle parking area then vehicles should be excluded. There may be a need for signage to this effect.

First consideration	Other consideration(s)
<p>Are pedestrian routes on the school grounds passable?</p>	<p>Is there means to clear these routes, e.g. salt/grit?</p> <p>If required, can movement to various parts of the school be limited without disruption – ensuring maintenance is concerted to general access routes?</p> <p>Can priority be made in respect to slopes, steps or ramps, or can these areas be restricted from use? Outside metal staircases should also be avoided unless appropriately treated.</p> <p>If open, vehicle parking areas should have a passable pedestrian route to access the school.</p>
<p>Can the headteacher gain enough teaching and/or supervisory staff to operate safely?</p>	<p>The emphasis would be to operate safely, not whether a full and normal curriculum could be followed.</p> <p>What would be the threshold of staff numbers in respect to expected learners?</p> <p>For primary schools, learners would likely be local, with a greater expectancy of attendance. Schools in rural areas or secondary schools may have learners from a wider area and may be more dependent on school buses or public transport. Therefore numbers may be less – and supervision easier.</p>
<p>Is the school appropriately heated?</p>	<p>Is there enough fuel for the day? Have there been previous failures of the heating system in autumn/winter months – and is the means for remedial action readily available?</p>
<p>Are water systems working appropriately? (Welfare)</p>	<p>Are there known faults in times of varying weather?</p> <p>Are there written records – ensuring methodical checks are made?</p>

Keeping a school open

First consideration	Other consideration(s)
Can the level of heating be maintained throughout the school day/week?	If required, could the low overnight temperature be raised without impeding the effectiveness of the system?
Can people movement be minimised between school buildings, if access and egress is made externally?	If learner numbers are low, can classes be grouped together? Can these areas be cleared and maintained to limit the restriction?
Restriction of outside play would limit the snow/ice from becoming compacted, and therefore more dangerous.	If conditions are not dangerous outside play may be possible. However supervision may have to be higher. Could play or breaks be staggered to ensure appropriate supervisory levels? If any snow or ice is present prohibit running.
Can the school grounds be maintained to effect opening the following day?	Pedestrian walkways should be a priority, over vehicle parking, but in the long term parking areas inside the school should be treated, or cleared of snow. Persons who have parked in the school grounds should be aware of the priority and told to take care in this area. Signs could be placed to remind these persons. Maintenance should be a priority where pedestrian walkways also coincide with vehicle areas. Alternatively, restrictions could be made on pedestrians, or cars stopped from entering that area.

First consideration	Other consideration(s)
Monitor the weather situation locally and through the media (Met Office).	Local authorities may be able to provide information regarding road clearance, providing assurance of home journeys, or return journeys the following day.
Maintain ongoing communication with school transport companies.	It may be necessary for school buses to arrive earlier than the scheduled time in order to ensure the safe and timely delivery of learners home.
Are maintenance materials and personnel available to ensure the school can eliminate, reduce or isolate risk throughout the school day?	<p>Can similar provision be assured for the following day(s)?</p> <p>Salt/grit spread on walkways or other areas at the end of the day could limit icing. This could also prevent a further snowfall from taking a foothold and re-icing.</p> <p>Slush or water from thawed snow/ice should be cleared as much as possible to prevent re-icing. Iced slush could be more dangerous than the initial fall as surfaces may be uneven and more slippery.</p>

Preventative considerations

First consideration	Other consideration(s)
Is there a written policy for extreme bad weather and school closure?	Is the policy communicated to staff and parents/carers?
The headteacher should have a risk assessment in place which considers the foreseeable risks of extreme bad weather.	Use the generic risk assessment at Annex B or as a guide for the headteacher to create their own general risk assessment. Which locations tend to be affected more than others? What is the experience from previous years? How many learners rely on school transport?
Is there a system for communicating with caretakers, maintenance staff, teachers and other supervisory staff to establish their means of accessing the school at the time of extreme bad weather?	The headteacher should be aware of the location of their staff and be able to communicate with them to determine attendance.
Are there areas of the school that would retain water, snow or ice more than others?	If remedial action cannot be affected to avoid retention of water, snow or ice, can these areas be avoided without impacting on the opening of the school?
Are stocks of salt/grit adequate for the time of year and foreseeable weather?	How easy is it to reorder salt/grit? Are there allocation limits and can any paperwork for re-ordering be prepared in advance? Are alternative suppliers of salt/grit available nearby?
Access points into buildings should have the means for persons to wipe off water, snow or ice from their shoes, boots, etc.	Are there adequate mats and mops? Are there clear and understood arrangements for keeping access points in good order?

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Annex A: Relevant laws

By virtue of the School Government (Terms of Reference) (Wales) Regulations 2000 the headteacher is responsible for the internal organisation, management and control of the school premises. Decisions to open/close schools in extreme bad weather fall to the headteacher, although the head may choose to consult with the local authority and chair of governors for advice before taking a decision. The logic for this policy is that the head is the senior manager on the spot and so is the most suitable person to take a decision, being better placed than a remote decision maker.

Local authorities also have powers to close schools by virtue of the Control of School Premises Regulations 2008 and section 29(5) of the Education Act 2002. Authorities may direct schools (except foundation, foundation special schools and voluntary aided schools) to close on safety grounds. This direction over-rides the opinion of the headteacher. However, local authorities cannot require any schools to stay open or to open.

Local authorities are not allowed to direct foundation, foundation special schools or voluntary aided schools to close. They must, however, comply with and implement the governing body's policies on health and safety. It is a duty of the governing body to carry out a risk assessment and to set up arrangements to manage health and safety in such schools. In respect of community and voluntary controlled schools the local authority is responsible for doing this.

In respect to the temperature of a school building, by virtue of the Education (School Premises) Regulations 1999 (Circular 15/99), the different parts of the building must be kept to the following temperatures where the external temperature is -1°C :

- in an area where there is lower than normal level of physical activity (e.g. a sick room) an ambient temperature of 21°C should be maintained
- in a classroom where there is the normal level of physical activity associated with teaching, private study or examinations an ambient temperature of 18°C should be maintained
- in an area where there is a higher level than normal of physical activity (e.g. a school gym) the ambient temperature of 15°C should be maintained.

Annex B: Generic risk assessment

Generic risk assessment: extreme bad weather – snow/ice

The purpose of the generic risk assessment is to provide headteachers with a base of information for them to devise their own risk assessment. It can also help headteachers in undertaking dynamic risk assessments at the time of extreme bad weather.

The generic risk assessment only covers the broad activities and/or hazards which relate to extreme bad weather – snow/ice – therefore, there may be factors specific to an individual school which have not been considered.

It should be noted that because of its generality, there is no inclusion of the 'controls in place' as these would differ from school to school. However, 'Controls required' have been provided which would fit the general activity and hazard in the generic assessment. In addition to 'Controls required', 'Further considerations' have been provided for advice, but they are limited and only relevant to the activities and hazards in this generic risk assessment. Headteachers may also get advice from the local authority or Health and Safety Executive.

Because of its generality there are no evaluation values in the generic risk assessment of the levels of severity of injury that could arise or the likelihood of an accident occurring.

This generic risk assessment and the information given in the main guidance document should provide the headteacher with an awareness of the risks involved, and some scope in establishing their manageability. This level of awareness should also contribute to the headteacher creating their own written general risk assessment based on the specifics of a school's location, size and manageability of the issue.

Activity	Hazard	Persons who may be at risk	Controls required	Further considerations
Getting to the school.	Dangerous travel in extreme bad weather conditions.	Headteacher, teachers, caretaking and/or maintenance staff, learners.	Headteacher monitors weather conditions/ warnings www.metoffice.gov.uk No travel should be considered if extreme bad weather warning and advice given for only essential journeys to be undertaken.	Rural location of school and/or majority of school personnel. National warnings may not be accurate at local level, so local media broadcasts may also help.
Travel via known areas of expected road closure or steep gradients.	Dangerous travel in extreme bad weather conditions.	Headteacher, teachers, caretaking and/or maintenance staff.	Prior planning by staff regarding alternative 'main road' routes, or rail, to school location.	Walking may be reasonably expected, when cars or other vehicles cannot make it all the way into the school. Headteacher to consider what is reasonable based on locality and staff.
Main entrance into school grounds.	Entrance not passable.	Headteacher, teachers, caretaking and/or maintenance staff.	Park car outside school until clearance can be made. If not passable by foot, assess other reasonable means into the school.	Signage on main entrance, or other entrances if prohibited from entry due to ice or other obstruction.

Activity	Hazard	Persons who may be at risk	Controls required	Further considerations
Main entrance into school grounds.	Entrance an immediate slip hazard.	Headteacher, teachers, caretaking and/or maintenance staff, learners, parents/carers and visitors.	Clearance of slip hazard, unless alternative route found. Other routes may be prioritised and cause closure of the main entrance. Salt/grit may be adequate, but manual work may also be required to clear snow/ice if this is the main and only entrance.	If entrance is used by both vehicles and pedestrians, salting/gritting may be a priority. Cars may be stopped from entry to give priority to pedestrians and avoid risk.
Gaining appropriate members of staff to open school.	Inadequate supervision.	Teachers and learners.	<p>A means of communicating with school staff in order to establish their attendance on the day of extreme bad weather.</p> <p>A means to communicate with school bus company, local authority and local bus service operators to establish learner means of getting to school.</p> <p>Headteacher to establish what would constitute appropriate supervision – through dynamic assessment on the day of extreme bad weather.</p>	<p>The emphasis should be on how to operate safely, not whether a full and normal curriculum could be followed.</p> <p>Primary school learners are likely to be local, with a greater expectancy of attendance. Schools in rural areas or secondary schools have learners from a wider area and may be more dependent on school buses or public transport, therefore numbers may be less – and supervision easier.</p>

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Activity	Hazard	Persons who may be at risk	Controls required	Further considerations
Access to school buildings.	Slips, trips or falls.	Headteacher, teachers, caretaking and/or maintenance staff, contractors, parents/carers and learners.	<p>Salting/gritting could be undertaken when snow or ice is foreseeable.</p> <p>Salt/grit spreading on pedestrian walkways and snow clearance where reasonable.</p> <p>Whenever possible, slopes, steps, ramps, etc. should not be used. However if appropriately treated, these pedestrian walkways should be no different from a treated path. The headteacher to determine which walkways should be used and treated first.</p>	<p>Extreme bad weather is generally forecast, although snow/ice can be worse or less than expected, depending on local geography.</p> <p>If a school's salt/grit stock is low then only main walkways could be treated. Other routes could be signed to prevent use.</p> <p>Treatment of inner areas such as courtyards, yards or some walkways between buildings may be less of a priority.</p>

Activity	Hazard	Persons who may be at risk	Controls required	Further considerations
Heating and welfare facilities.	Cold – below permitted work level. No sanitary or drinking water.	Headteacher, teachers, caretaking and/or maintenance staff, contractors and learners.	<p>Low constant heating throughout periods of known cold snaps to prevent frozen pipes.</p> <p>Maintenance of water systems, for example prompt repair of leaks and drips.</p> <p>Regular maintenance staff checks to ensure heating and water systems are working well.</p>	If the school premises cannot be heated or provision of water for sanitary use or drinking cannot be made within school hours then the school may have to close.
Keeping the school open.	Slips, trips or falls of learners at break-time.	Learners.	<p>No use of yards and other external areas, when snow/ice cannot be easily removed or reduced.</p> <p>If there are external areas free or generally free of snow/ice, supervised play/break can be undertaken. The supervision level should be higher and running prohibited. Any areas of snow/ice remaining should be avoided and managed. Learners should be informed of the restrictions.</p>	<p>Certain areas could be cordoned off and managed through salting/gritting prior to releasing for use. Melted snow/ice can refreeze so continued attention may be needed.</p> <p>If yard space is restricted then staggered breaks could be undertaken. However could this system be appropriately supervised?</p>

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Activity	Hazard	Persons who may be at risk	Controls required	Further considerations
Keeping the school open.	Further snow or ice, or icing of previous fall.	Headteacher, teachers, caretaking and/or maintenance staff, and learners.	<p>Headteacher to monitor the weather conditions through the Met Office and local media. Information may also be gained from the local authority.</p> <p>Further salt/grit could be used on walkways and other areas to minimise for the next day.</p> <p>Surface water could be brushed to drains to avoid icing up overnight.</p>	Further stock of salt/grit could be organised and/or maintenance undertaken on water or heating systems to ensure they continue to work effectively.

Annex C: General risk assessment template

General risk assessment: extreme bad weather – snow/ice

Please consider the following activities to complete your risk assessment – using the generic risk assessment and the associated guidance. The list is not exhaustive and further activities may mean additional rows be added.

The general risk assessment is a pre-event evaluation of what should be, or could be, in place to ensure the opening of a school in extreme bad weather conditions. Are the controls in place and what more can be done?

Activity	Hazard	Persons who may be at risk	Controls in place	Further considerations for implementation
Travel/transport to school				
Access within the school				
Supervision of activities				
Heating and welfare facilities				
Maintenance of school premises				

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Annex D: Related documents

Further information on health and safety issues, including educational visits guidance, may be found at www.wales.gov.uk/healthandsafety

Other helpful web-links include the following.

- The Met Office www.metoffice.gov.uk
- Health and Safety Executive www.hse.gov.uk
- The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents www.rospa.com