



Northumberland County Council

GUIDANCE ON CLOSURE DUE TO ADVERSE WEATHER CONDITIONS OR OTHER UNFORESEEN CIRCUMSTANCES

This advice deals for the most part with adverse weather conditions. Schools will have their own plans that cover other eventualities*.

Introduction

All maintained schools are required by law to open for the purpose of educating their pupils for 190 days (or 380 sessions) in a year. Decisions to close the school should, therefore, only be taken when the safety or welfare of the pupils during their time at the school or travelling to school, is likely to be adversely affected by local circumstances.

There is a presumption against the complete closure of a school due to adverse weather conditions and head teachers must be seen to have explored a range of options in order to maintain an educational provision for children before deciding to close. Due to the size and diverse nature of the County, judgements on the most appropriate action to take can best be formed locally.

Making the decision to close

On the Northumberland County Council website there is access to localised weather warnings. Head teachers should use this website when considering the closure of the school due to adverse weather conditions.

A school ought not to be closed because drives and footpaths are inaccessible. It is the responsibility of the caretaker to create a safe access to the main door and all schools should have an agreed gritting plan. The school is responsible for the costs of creating the safe access and head teachers should ensure that they have sufficient salt for those areas that need to be cleared.

It is at the discretion of the head teacher as to whether school car parks need to be cleared. In the case of large school premises total clearance may not be possible without external assistance and alternative solutions may need to be considered.

The County Council is responsible for the costs of off-site clearance, to include the clearance of roads leading up to and outside of school premises. This may include off site lay-bys and turning areas that are used by home to school transport providers (although it needs to be recognised that some of these are on school premises). Highways Maintenance can be contacted through the council's contact centre on 0345 600 6400.

As a head teacher you should:

- Assess the hazards that adverse weather conditions could bring, identify the measures you already have in place to reduce risk to your pupils and staff and do your best to introduce any extra measures that will enable your school to function as normal despite the adverse weather conditions. Closing the school could be the right decision, where your judgement is that pupils or staff would face significant risks of serious injury in school or travelling to school.
- Consider whether it is feasible for you to either open or keep your school open. Full closure should only be considered in the most exceptional of circumstances. In the main head teachers should consider that partial closure, albeit with a modified curriculum, should be the norm.
- Be mindful that local children who can walk to school should be retained at the school, even when those on transport are not in attendance, provided that there are sufficient staff to provide a modified curriculum for the number of pupils that will remain in the school. Consideration should also be given to provide continuity for those students in exam groups. If it is envisaged that the closure may not be resolved within a couple of days head teachers should be prepared to consider how alternative educational provision can be maintained for pupils.

Where a head teacher feels it is appropriate to close the school during the course of a school day, or not to open the following day, he/she should first contact the **School Admissions Team by telephone or email to discuss the situation (01670 624 889, schooladmissions@northumberland.gov.uk)**.

When closure arises from a property-related problem, like a heating system failure, in addition to informing the School Admissions Team, head teachers should also make direct contact with Property Services (Telephone 01670 624843) to ensure that the problem can be resolved as soon as possible. For general health and safety advice please contact Geoff Goodman, Assistant Health and Safety Adviser, on 01670 623804.

Notification of decision to close the school

Responsibility for notification of a decision to close the school lies with the individual school.

Schools should have set procedures in place in order to inform the following of the decision to close:

- **Parents.** Some schools have found it useful to have a 'round robin' or 'cascade' system of telephone calls to alert as many parents as quickly as possible. Block e-mails and text messages can ensure that parents receive immediate information. Schools will also need to consider the position of children whose parents or guardians are not at home during the day, particularly if transport is sent back at the beginning of the school day or the school is to close earlier than usual.
- **Staff, both teaching and non-teaching.** Where a school remains open staff are expected to make every effort to attend work. Head teachers are expected to remind staff that getting to work is deemed to be an essential journey. However, where individual staff are not able to attend for genuine

reasons head teachers need to deal with them in a sympathetic but consistent manner and, where possible, agree alternative arrangements such as undertaking appropriate professional duties at home, taking annual leave if this is available or making up the lost time as additional hours once the weather improves. Ultimately, if none of the above options are suitable staff can take unpaid leave of absence to cover any lost time.

The above arrangements will also apply if a school is closed for pupils but remains open for staff.

Where a management decision is made to close the school to pupils and staff, heads should direct staff, where appropriate, to undertake appropriate professional duties offsite. Where this is not practical as there is no or insufficient work that can be undertaken offsite during the period of closure then staff will be given paid leave of absence.

It is recognised that head teachers might have fewer staff to supervise pupils in days of adverse weather conditions. Schools should plan for how, if they have fewer staff in the short term, they should continue to supervise pupils and deliver as much of the curriculum as possible.

- **School catering staff.** If a school remains open to children then school meals should continue to be served, provided that school meals staff are available.
- **School crossing patrols.** Crossing patrols need to be advised when a school is closing early or if a school will not be open to pupils. It is the responsibility of the school to do this.

Other things to consider

- **Home to school transport.**
 - Particular care needs to be taken if your school's transport is linked to that of another school.
 - Before you make the final decision to close ensure that the Home to School Transport Team (Telephone 01670 624 839) is aware of your plans, as an early closure may not be the best course of action. You will need to be advised either by the provider or by the Home to School Transport Team.
 - If a transport provider deems it necessary to collect children from school early due to adverse weather conditions you should release only those children travelling with that provider. It may not be necessary to close the school entirely.
 - Before releasing pupils, take into account any feeder journeys where pupils may be dropped off by a bus part way home and need to use a taxi for the remainder of their journey.
 - Where feeder journeys exist you **MUST** ensure that **all** appropriate operators have been contacted.

- Where parents have brought their children into school when transport is not running, they need to be made aware that they will be responsible for getting them home again.
- **Others.** Those which receive meals from your school kitchen or schools which supply school meals to your school.
- **Publicity.** When the decision to close is made before the start of the school day, Radio Newcastle will broadcast the information. Contact numbers for radio broadcasts are printed below along with the relevant Northumberland County Council password for identification purposes.
- **Recording school absence.** Use Code Y for those pupils who are provided with transport (by the school or the local authority), because they live beyond walking distance to the school, and where that transport is not available because of adverse weather conditions. Code Y does not count as absence in the statistics. All other children should be expected to attend and should be recorded as present/absent as normal.

To announce a school closure via the Council

Please email: school.closures@northumberland.gov.uk and make the subject title of the email: **"School closure – (your school name)"**

To verify that this is a valid closure your email ***must*** contain:

- Your name and position at the school
- DfE school number and school name and location
- Radio Newcastle closure password
- Date of closure
- Reason for closure
- A direct contact number so we can quickly speak to you if needed (this will not be made public, so a mobile number would be appreciated because unless your school has staff in attendance the school number is of no use.)
- Website address

We will only use the Radio Newcastle password (BORIS) as authority to post your closure notice.

You will appreciate that during severe weather conditions a large number of schools may be advising the local authority of their intention to close, so it is important that we receive your email as soon as possible.

Your closure notices will appear in the following places:

- County Council: www.northumberland.gov.uk
- Facebook: www.facebook.com/nccalerts
- Twitter: www.twitter.com/northumberlands

Contact numbers for alerting parents of school closure

Metro Radio offer a service for publicising school closure details. Head teachers can register on their website. Metro Radio will issue a password in return, which can be used to input information directly onto the Metro Radio website. To register go to www.metroradio.co.uk/schools

Radio Newcastle – Tel. 0191 244 1450 –
Password **BORIS**

Radio Borders –Tel. 01896 759444 Email: news@radioborders.com

Emergency Planning

In the event of an emergency or weather conditions which affect a large area it is likely that the County Council's Emergency Community Assistance Plan would be activated. Decisions, including the issuing of advice on school closures, would be taken by a team of Emergency Coordinators which would include senior officers from the Children's Services Directorate.

* The Civil Contingencies Office will offer support to schools in the creation of the School Emergency Plan, to help deal with a crisis or unexpected event quickly and in an organised way. Please contact Ben Allan, Civil Contingencies Officer on 01670 621206, Email: eplan@northumberland.gov.uk