

**CHECKLIST FOR PRINCIPALS
WHEN CONSIDERING OPENING
OR CLOSURE OF SCHOOL**

**PRODUCED BY THE WORKING
GROUP ON SCHOOL
OPENING/CLOSURE
ARRANGEMENTS**

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EXCEPTIONAL CLOSURES - CHECKLIST FOR PRINCIPALS PRODUCED BY THE WORKING GROUP ON SCHOOL OPENING/CLOSURE ARRANGEMENTS

An exceptional closure is unplanned, and is due to unforeseen circumstances such as adverse weather conditions, power failure, or situations which affect the safety of pupils and staff. Exceptional closures require approval from the Department of Education to allow a school to reduce its operational days below the 200 required by legislation.

It is important that each school should put in place (and subsequently review) an action plan during the first term of each school year, before the onset of adverse weather. In doing so, it should consider the Health and Safety guidelines at Annex 3. Assistance can be sought from Health and Safety personnel within the Education Authority (EA).

In times of extreme weather, such as a heavy snowfall, Principals should consider this checklist as far in advance of closure as possible – the night before closure if circumstances allow - and, if necessary, decide to close the school the next day. This will allow early communication with parents and staff and ensure that parents are informed quickly. While it may not be possible for Principals to make such a decision the night before, going through the checklist will help to focus on the key issues to be considered and enable them to come to a decision as early as possible. Decisions the night before can only be taken when all the indications are that adverse conditions will continue overnight. If there are doubts, Principals should defer decisions until early morning.

Local conditions will determine the decision of the Principal (or an agreed deputy such as the Chairman of the Board of Governors or a senior teacher), who will consider a number of agreed criteria for closure. Decisions taken must be applicable to each individual school – not based on neighbouring schools whose conditions may differ.

Issues to consider

The following should be considered in coming to any decision to close for exceptional reasons. The headline items listed below are dealt with in more detail in Annex 1.

- Health and safety questions, including:
 - can pupils and staff access the school building safely?
 - can pupils and staff be evacuated in an emergency?
 - in an emergency, could the Emergency Services access the school?
 - is the area designated for disembarkation from transport safe for pupils?

- Transport – can buses, meal deliveries, etc., reach the school, particularly if the unforeseen circumstances affect a large proportion of pupils?
- If a limited number of staff and pupils can attend, is the Pupil:Teacher Ratio (PTR) acceptable? An indication of the acceptable PTR should be included in the school’s emergency plans for such events.
- Have local weather forecasts and road conditions, including those for areas from which staff will be travelling, been considered?

If a decision is made to close

Communication

- Schools should have in place an agreed plan on communication, not only to advise parents and staff, and keep them informed, but also to advise the EA, the Department of Education, and the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) if appropriate. The school reference number should be quoted in all correspondence. (See Step 4 of Annex 3 for relevant contact details for the EA, the Department and CCMS.)
- Suggested means of communication include use of a texting service, informing the media (television and/or radio), email, or telephone (either calls or a recorded message.)
- Parents must be aware of the means of communication that will be used.
- If possible, update parents/staff at a later time in the day with a view to the “next day” so that all have time to make suitable family arrangements.

- Staff should also be encouraged to keep the school updated on their position (2-way communication is vital.)

Finally, Annex 2 to this checklist provides Principals with a summary of the different types of closure available to their school and deals with the issue of whether or not schools are required to compensate for time lost due to “exceptional” closure.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Schools should consider the Health and Safety guidelines during the first term, before the onset of adverse weather and put in place an appropriate action plan. Assistance can be sought from Health and Safety personnel within the EA.

Overall responsibility for health and safety risk in schools lies with the employing authority, i.e. EA for Controlled schools, CCMS for Maintained schools etc. School Governors are responsible for the day to day management of health and safety in a school. Risk is identified and controlled through Risk Assessment. School Governors and Principals should consult the guidance on Risk Assessment in the schools' Health and Safety Manual – A Manual for Principals and Governors. In addition to this, a number of generic risk assessments and advice on completion are available at each of the EA's' websites.

Controlled Schools

The Health and Safety Officers advise schools on how to conduct risk assessments on hazards, and advise them on remedial action.

Maintained Schools

CCMS is the employing authority for all teaching staff in CCMS schools. The responsibility for management of the premises rests with the Boards of Governors of such schools as set out in Article 23 of the Scheme of Management of CCMS schools. CCMS does not have any dedicated health and safety staff, but EA staff will advise maintained schools in their area, although there is no statutory requirement for them to do so.

Voluntary Grammar, Irish Medium and Grant Maintained Integrated Schools

Health and safety is entirely the responsibility of the school's governing body.

SEVERE WEATHER WARNING – SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR SCHOOLS

INTRODUCTION

The decision to open a school during periods of severe weather is dependent upon the Principal carrying out a risk assessment.

The risk assessment requires to be thought out in advance of any severe weather so that, when it is required to be undertaken then it is a relatively straight forward process.

This guidance is set out in order to assist the school Principal in deciding whether it is safe to open and continue school during severe weather or whether the school should close.

The guidance is split into 4 key steps:

- Step 1 Preparation
- Step 2 Points to consider when deciding to open a school
- Step 3 Risk Assessment (this includes a blank risk assessment template for completion by the Principal)
- Step 4 Key websites and contacts

Step 1 – Preparation

The following points require to be taken into account when preparing a plan to deal with a possible exceptional closure due to severe weather.

KEY ACTION	SUPPLEMENTARY ACTIONS
<p>Does the school have contact details for all parents/guardians, pupils and staff.</p> <p>Does the school have contact details for the relevant EA emergency on call officers?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the contact details updated regularly? • Do they include Mobile Telephone numbers?
<p>Where fuel oil is required. Ensure that fuel level is checked regularly and appropriate levels maintained.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set a minimum fuel level for a re-order of supply. • Check fuel level frequently during severe weather periods.
<p>Ensure that heating, lighting and water services are regularly maintained.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regularly report maintenance issues to the EA Maintenance Help Desk. • Have the EA's Help desk/ emergency on call officer telephone numbers available.
<p>Maintain sufficient supplies of salt for application to footpaths and driveways.</p> <p>Where mechanical salt spreaders are utilized, are they functioning and available?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Order supplies before the onset of winter. • Have the salt suppliers' telephone numbers available or follow EA procedure to re order.
<p>Maintain stocks of Safety Signs and Hazard Warning Tapes for cordoning off hazardous areas.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Order supplies of Hazard tape (yellow/black or red/white). • Order signs which prohibit access to hazardous areas.

KEY ACTION	SUPPLEMENTARY ACTIONS
<p>Maintain a system for communicating with Teachers, Building Supervisors, Maintenance Help Desk, Catering staff and other supervisory staff. Also schools' transport service.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools should have in place appropriate procedures to ensure that the Principal and staff have an effective means of 2-way communication to determine the level of attendance. • Maintain contact details of the EA's School Transport Service.
<p>Prepare a risk assessment which considers the foreseeable risks at times of severe weather.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the Risk Assessment pro-forma set out in Section C Step 3 – Risk Assessment. • What parts of the school or routes are most susceptible to the effects of severe weather?
<p>Avoiding Slips, Trips and Falls at access points into the school building.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain adequate supplies of mops and wet trip mats. • Increased vigilance from Building Supervisor/staff to ensure points of access are kept in safe condition. • Use of warning cones/signs.
<p>Prepare and maintain local contact details for the following services:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meteorological Service • NI Water • Department for Infrastructure (DfI) Roads • DfI Rivers • NI Direct • EA • CCMS • Department of Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Put each of these services' websites on your favourite folder in the web provider. • Access the sites and become familiar with the layout and where to look for the appropriate information. • Refresh favourites regularly.

Step 2 – Points to consider when deciding to open the school

The decision to open the school or to continue to operate the school is dependent upon the Principal carrying out a risk assessment. The risk assessment needs to be reviewed and updated in the light of changes in the weather and circumstances.

The following points are key considerations when determining whether to open or close the school. They also form an integral part of the risk assessment process and will allow the Principal to prepare a school specific risk assessment.

First Consideration	Other consideration(s)
Is the school building accessible?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the forecasted long-term weather conditions? • Are there any N. Ireland Met Office warnings available?
Are there any areas within the school locality especially impassable or dangerous in times of extreme bad weather?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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 where possible should be identified prior to extreme bad weather to help the traveller to decide their route.
Are vehicle routes into the school grounds passable?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there means to improve access prior to teachers' attendance, or attendance of school buses, parent/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.
Are pedestrian routes on the school grounds passable?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there means to clear these routes, e.g. salt/grit? • If required, can movement to various parts of the school be limited without disruption – ensuring maintenance is concerted to general access routes? • 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. • If open, vehicle parking areas should have a passable pedestrian route to access the school.

First Consideration	Other Consideration (s)
Can the Principal gain enough teaching and/or supervisory staff to operate safely?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The emphasis would be to operate safely. • What would be the threshold of staff numbers in respect to expected pupils? • For primary schools, pupils would likely be local, with a greater expectancy of attendance. Schools in rural areas or Post Primary schools may have pupils from a wider area and may be more dependent on school buses or public transport. Therefore numbers may be less – and supervision easier.
Is the school appropriately heated?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are fuel supplies adequate? • Have there been previous failures of the heating system in autumn/winter months? • Is the means for remedial action readily available?
Are water systems working appropriately? (Welfare)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there known faults in times of severe weather? • Are there written records – ensuring methodical checks are made?
Can the level of heating be maintained throughout the school day/week?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At times of severe weather consider running the heating system during periods of closure or holidays. • Is frost protection installed and utilised?
Can people movement be minimised between school buildings, if access and egress is made externally?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If pupil 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government Agencies such as DfI Roads may be able to provide information regarding road clearance, providing assurance of home journeys, or return journeys the following day. Met Office provide flash weather warnings (see Met Office website).
Are maintenance materials and personnel available to ensure the school can eliminate, reduce or isolate risk throughout the school day?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can similar provision be assured for the following day(s)? 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. 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.

Step 3 – Risk Assessment

(a) Generic Risk Assessment – Severe weather - Ice/Snow

The following Generic Risk Assessment provides Principals with a base of information for them to devise their own risk assessment.

This generic risk assessment along with the information in the previous steps should provide the Principal with an awareness of the risks involved. This level of awareness should also contribute to the Principal creating their own risk assessment based upon the specific requirements of the school, its size and the 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.	Principal, teachers, Building Supervisors and/or maintenance staff, pupils.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Principal 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. Regional 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.	Principal, teachers, Building Supervisors and/or maintenance staff.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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. Principal to consider what is reasonable based on locality and staff.
Main entrance into school grounds.	Entrance not possible.	Principal, teachers, Building Supervisors and/or maintenance staff.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Park car outside school until clearance can be made. If not passable by foot, access 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.	Principal, teachers, Building Supervisors and/or maintenance staff, pupils, parents/carers and visitors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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.
Getting appropriate members of staff to open school.	Inadequate supervision	Teachers and pupils.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A means of communicating with school staff in order to establish their attendance on the day of extreme bad weather. • A means to communicate with school bus service, local authority and local bus service operators to establish pupil means of getting to school. • Principal to establish what would constitute appropriate supervision – through dynamic assessment on the day of extreme bad weather. 	The emphasis should be on how to operate safely, not whether a full and normal curriculum could be followed. Primary school pupils are likely to be local, with a greater expectancy of attendance. Schools in rural areas or secondary schools have pupils from a wider area and may be more dependent on school buses or public transport, therefore numbers may be less – and supervision easier.

ACTIVITY	HAZARD	PERSONS WHO MAY BE AT RISK	CONTROLS REQUIRED	FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS
Access to school buildings.	Slips, trips or falls.	Principal, teachers, Building Supervisors and/or maintenance staff, contractors, parents/carers and pupils	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Salting/gritting could be undertaken when snow or ice is foreseeable. • Salt/grit spreading on pedestrian walkways and snow clearance where reasonable. • 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 Principal to determine which walkways should be used and treated first. 	Extreme bad weather is generally forecast, although snow/ice can be worse or less than expected, depending on local geography. If a school's salt/grit stock is low then only main walkways could be treated. Other routes could be signed to prevent use. Treatment of inner areas such as courtyards, yards, or some walkways between buildings may be less of a priority.
Heating and Welfare facilities.	Cold – below permitted work level (16° C / 60.8° F). No sanitary or drinking water.	Principal, teachers, Building Supervisors and/or maintenance staff, contractors and pupils.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constant heating throughout periods of known cold snaps to prevent frozen pipes. • Maintenance of water systems, for example prompt repair of leaks and drips. • Regular maintenance staff checks to ensure heating and water systems are working well. 	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 pupils at break-time.	Pupils and Supervisory Assistants.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No use of yards and other external areas, when snow/ice cannot be easily removed or reduced. • If there are external areas free or generally free of 	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>snow/ice, supervised play/break can be undertaken.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The supervision level should be higher and running prohibited. • Any areas of snow/ice remaining should be avoided and managed. • Pupils should be informed of restrictions. 	<p>If yard space is restricted then staggered breaks could be undertaken. However could this system be appropriately supervised?</p>
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.	Principal, teachers, Building Supervisors and/or maintenance staff, and pupils.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Principal to monitor the weather conditions through the Met Office and local media. • Information may also be gained from the EA. • Further salt/grit could be used on walkways and other areas to minimise for the next day. • Surface water could be brushed to drains to avoid icing up overnight. • Maintain walkways and key roadways. 	<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.</p>

Communication to parents, the EA is vital.

(b) Generic Risk Assessment – Severe weather - Ice/Snow

You may now consider the following activities to complete the risk assessment using the generic risk assessment and the guidance in the previous sections. The list is not exhaustive and can be added to when taking into account other school specific issues and activities.

(c) Risk Assessment Template

ACTIVITY	HAZARD	PERSONS WHO MAY BE AT RISK	CONTROLS IN PLACE	FURTHER CONSIDERATION FOR IMPLEMENTATION
Travel/transport to/from school				
Access within the school				
Supervision of activities				
Heating and Welfare Facilities				
Maintenance of school premises				

STEP 4 – KEY WEBSITES AND CONTACTS

NI Met Office			www.metoffice.gov.uk
DfI Roads			www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/topics/roads
NI Water			www.niwater.com
NI Direct			https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/school-terms-and-school-closures
Police Service for Northern Ireland		0845 600 8000	www.psni.police.uk
NI Fire and Rescue Service		Insert your local contact	www.nifrs.org
EA	<u>Belfast Region</u> Paula Maguire <u>Western Region</u> Stephanie Murphy <u>North Eastern Region</u> Nigel Freeburn <u>South Eastern Region</u> David Nevin <u>Southern Region</u> Michelle Mullan	paula.maguire@eani.org.uk Tel: 028 9056 4112 schoolsoffice-omagh@eani.org.uk Tel: 028 8241 1285 nigel.freeburn@eani.org.uk Tel: 028 9448 2233 david.nevin@eani.org.uk Tel: 028 9056 6275 michelle.mullan@eani.org.uk Tel: 028 3751 2492	

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ORGANISATION	NAME OF CONTACTS	CONTACT DETAILS	WEBSITE
Department of Education	Tackling Educational Disadvantage Team	attendance@education-ni.gov.uk Tel: 028 9127 9543	www.education-ni.gov.uk
CCMS	Alison Russell	Alison.Russell@ccmsschools.com Tel: 028 9201 3014	www.onlineccms.com
DfI Rivers	DfI Rivers HQ	rivers.registry@infrastructure-ni.gov.uk	https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/topics/rivers-and-flooding

TYPES OF SCHOOL CLOSURE

Optional Days

Schools are required to be in operation for 200 days per year while full-time teachers are required to be available for work on 195 days. The difference between 200 and 195 are called Optional Days.

The 5 optional days may be taken as occasional closings during school terms, or as an extension to the Easter, Christmas or summer holiday periods, according to the circumstances of individual schools.

However, optional days are also intended to cover a school having to close during the year in special circumstances such as:

- the death of a person connected with the school (other than a member of staff, pupil or another person working at the school); or
- a planned specific event, for example, the need to move premises, undergoing building work, a Church holiday etc.

Training Days (known as “Baker Days”)

Of the 195 days that full-time teachers are required to be available for work, no more than 190 of these days should involve teaching children in a classroom situation. The remaining 5 “Baker” days are used for training purposes.

School Development Days (SDDs)

Schools may avail of School Development Days (SDDs) during the school year. SDDs provide additional non-contact time to devote to school improvement and school development matters. It is expected that SDDs will be used for school/staff development work taking place during the hours of the normal school day. The number of such days available to schools is notified by way of a separate DE Circular – <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/school-development-days> .

Exceptional Closure Days

The Department has developed a new online application for schools to apply for an exceptional closure. Exceptional Closures require approval from the Department of Education, to allow a school to reduce the number of days on which it is operational to below 200. Where the closure is foreseen or planned - for example, if a school is to be used as a polling station, schools will be able to apply for advance approval to close. However, where the closure is unforeseen - for example, in periods of extreme weather, such approval will be sought retrospectively.

If approval is given for Exceptional Closure a school's entitlement to Optional, Training ("Baker") and School Development Days is not affected.

Exceptional Closures will only be approved when the closing of a school is outside the control of the school authorities, for example, due to: -

- the death of a member of staff, pupil or another person working at the school;
- flooding or burst pipes;
- electricity failure;
- an exceptionally heavy snowfall; or
- use as a polling station for parliamentary/local government elections.

Schools can access the new application at the following link:

<http://apps.education-ni.gov.uk/appExclos/default.aspx>

Do schools have to compensate for exceptional closures?

The Department expects schools to have due regard to the impact of exceptional closures on pupils' learning and would encourage schools to do all they can to recover lost teaching time due to exceptional circumstances, particularly where the number of operational days fall below 185. For example, where schools have planned to take their full 5 School Development Days, they could reconsider these days in light of the number of exceptional closures during the year.