Warm and hot weather – key information for senior leadership teams and governing bodies

Impacts of increasingly hot and warm weather for schools

- The optimum temperature for primary aged children to learn is around 20ºC. This increases slightly into secondary and further education and may need to be higher for children who are not mobile[i]. Many Sheffield schools regularly experience much higher temperatures (reports of 30ºC in school buildings are common).
- The UK is already experiencing an increase in the number of 'summer days' (defined as 25ºC+), with this number predicted to reach 29 days per year in Sheffield by 2050[ii]. Many of these days will be during summer exam periods.
- Student behaviour, attendance and learning outcomes are all negatively affected by warm and hot weather, with impacts worsening progressively as temperatures increase. The government estimates that 6.7 days of learning are lost each year per student, and that this is expected to increase as the climate changes.[iii]
- Students with certain disabilities, health conditions, who are living in poverty or who are at risk of neglect or abuse are at greater risk due to heat, and heat has more negative impact on learning outcomes for students living in poverty.
- Hot weather can increase staff absenteeism and reduces productivity.
- Higher temperatures increase the energy requirements of air conditioning systems and so cost for schools.

Expectation on schools to adapt to the changing climate

- DfE guidance for schools on hot weather and heatwaves states that schools should generally remain open during hot weather – and that school leaders should make sure they take the steps necessary to make sure children are safe and comfortable.
- Proactive action to adapt to warm and hot weather is particularly important for schools which have high numbers of students in poverty or are designated as in need, or which are seeking to improve learning or attendance outcomes.

- There is currently no law on maximum working temperatures, however the temperatures in indoor workplaces must be 'reasonable'[iv] and NEU guidance suggests that the maximum appropriate classroom temperature is 26°C[v] (well above the optimum level for learning).
- The DfE's Sustainability Strategy expects schools to have a sustainability lead and climate action plan in place, including plans for adaptation.
- The DfE 2026 Education Estates Strategy aims for education buildings to be resilient to climate change, prioritising low carbon materials and renewable energy to support net zero, and the 2025 Estate Management Standards requires schools aiming for above the baseline standards to have plans to adapt their estate.

What can you do to adapt to warm and hot weather?

It is difficult for many schools to keep buildings, students and employees comfortable throughout all buildings and grounds in hot weather, but there is a lot that can be done to manage temperatures and thermal comfort, and to benefit school priorities, without significant investment.

You can use the Learning in Warm and Hot Weather Toolkit to:

READY your school for warm and hot weather by:

- familiarising yourself with the evidence about hot weather, learning and protecting vulnerable students
- carrying out an audit of how hot weather affects your school and its improvement plan priorities
- creating a heat adaptation plan
- adapting plans, timetabling, lesson planning, policies and procedures

REDUCE heat in your buildings and grounds by:

- making operational changes
- considering investments that have quick returns on investment
- planning adaptation into capital works and asset planning

RESPOND to student needs and extreme weather events by:

- effectively implementing plans and protocols
- listening and acting on student and families' concerns
- communicating with students and families in a timely and accessible way

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[i] The relationship between classroom temperature and children's performance in school - ScienceDirect
[ii] State of the UK Climate - Met Office
[iii] Summary of findings in relation to 3 climate risks: overheating, flooding and water scarcity - GOV.UK
[iv] Workplace health, safety and welfare. Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations 1992. Approved Code of Practice and guidance - HSE
[v] Hot weather and classroom temperature | National Education Union