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England

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Addendum: National Child Measurement programme 2020 to 2021 Operational Guidance

COVID-19: considerations for delivery of the NCMP

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Introduction

This addendum to the National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP) Operational Guidance 2020, provides local commissioners and providers with information on the considerations and adjustments required to help enable the safe delivery of the NCMP during the COVID-19 pandemic in the 2020 to 2021 school year. This addendum is designed to be read alongside the [NCMP Operational Guidance 2020](#) and includes links to published national COVID-19 guidance and information including [Restarting Public Health Programmes for school-aged children](#).

The NCMP is a mandated public health function of local authorities and provides robust public health surveillance data on child weight status and obesity prevalence. Additionally, through sharing of results with parents, the programme offers the opportunity for local authorities to engage with families around their child's health and wellbeing.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting school closures, children's measurements in the NCMP were stopped in March 2020. Evidence shows that adults with COVID-19 who are living with overweight or obesity are at an increased risk of serious COVID-19 complications and death (1). Changes in adult health behaviours such as increased snacking on foods high in added fats and sugars and reduced levels of physical activity during lockdown have been reported (1).

Although evidence on the effect on children's eating and physical activity behaviours is limited, concerns exist that extended school closures may have exacerbated childhood obesity prevalence due to food insecurity and reduced opportunities for children participating in physical activity (2). Tackling child and adult obesity is a renewed and strengthened priority for the government, as is shown in its recently published strategy (3).

NCMP data (4) consistently show that the prevalence of obesity doubles between Reception and Year 6 (from around 10% to around 20%). More than a fifth of children in Reception and more than a third of those in Year 6 are living with overweight or obesity. There are significant inequalities in terms of obesity prevalence in children from the most deprived compared with the least deprived areas, and between children from different ethnic groups.

Children living with obesity are more likely to be ill, be absent from school due to illness, experience health-related limitations and require more medical care than healthy weight children. They are also more likely to suffer from type 2 diabetes, asthma and musculoskeletal pain and experience mental health problems such as depression. Additionally, children with obesity are 5 times more likely to suffer from obesity as adults (5).

Restarting the NCMP in 2021 is important because it will provide population-level data to help understand how COVID-19 has impacted child weight status, including obesity prevalence and

inequalities. It will also provide an opportunity for local authorities to engage with parents and families who may need support to achieve and maintain a healthier weight by providing advice and information about services and programmes in their area.

Recommencing the NCMP

The NCMP will restart from January 2021. Where a local authority feels they are in a position to restart the NCMP earlier than January 2021, it is advised that this decision is agreed with the Director of Public Health, Director of Children's Services, commissioners, NCMP providers and schools.

The NCMP IT system for the 2020 to 2021 collection year is now open to allow data entry. Local authorities will be notified in advance of the final date for submitting data for the 2020 to 2021 school year.

Public Health England (PHE) does not expect local authorities to undertake catch up measurements in the 2020 to 2021 school year for year 1 and year 7 children who could not be measured in the 2019 to 2020 school year.

Due to a shorter collection period and the additional pressures of COVID-19, PHE is aware that the 2020 to 2021 NCMP dataset may not meet all the data-quality thresholds. PHE will work to maximise the value of the statistics that can be generated from the national dataset.

Local authorities should plan to carry out NCMP measurements and submit data for as much of the 2020 to 2021 eligible population as possible. Where local authorities are required to make prioritisation decisions, the following should be considered:

The higher the participation rate, the more representative the data. PHE would recommend that efforts are made to achieve a minimum of an 80% participation rate to ensure data are robust. However, feedback to parents and engagement with families remains an important part of the NCMP and local authorities should consider this element of the programme as well as the data capture and monitoring.

Where high participation rates from all schools are not achievable due to ongoing impacts of COVID-19, consideration should be given as to whether to prioritise the surveillance or feedback and engagement elements of the programme locally:

- a focus on measuring in a mix of schools which best represent the schools in the local authority (considering ethnicity and deprivation) will ensure a good representative estimate for monitoring purposes
- a focus on measuring in wards and/or schools with historically high obesity prevalence rates will identify the highest number of children with overweight and

obesity, and provide an opportunity to offer support to these children through engagement with their parents

For practical and monitoring purposes, it is advisable that measurement are undertaken in both Reception and Year 6 children.

PHE can offer further support for local authorities where prioritisation decisions are required.

NHS-Digital and PHE will publish data-quality information alongside data reported at local authority level. This information will explain if any increases or decreases in the trends for obesity prevalence appear to be due to prioritisation of measurements in high risk areas.

Using this document

Table 1 outlines key considerations and adjustments for delivering the NCMP to account for COVID-19, arranged by chapter of the NCMP Operational Guidance 2020. Local procedures and policies will also need to be considered. Please also refer to [Restarting Public Health Programmes for school-aged children](#).

Table 2 outlines key updates regarding COVID-19 to supporting information and letters that are required to deliver the NCMP.

This document has been developed in collaboration with the PHE COVID-19 Children, Young People and Schools Cell, and was accurate at the date of publication, 4 November 2020.

For further support and guidance, local authorities and providers can contact:
ncmp@phe.gov.uk.

Table 1. Considerations and adjustments for delivering the NCMP arranged by chapter of the NCMP Operational Guidance 2020

Operational guidance chapter	Considerations and adjustments to account for COVID-19	Links to relevant COVID-19 guidance
<p>2. Overview of NCMP deliverables</p>	<p>Consider revising the start date for measurements (dependent on when the local authority plans to recommence NCMP and agreements with local schools) and be aware that this may need to change depending on the local situation of the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>The other deliverables and timings may vary depending on the COVID-19 pandemic. PHE will communicate any changes and specific dates, such as the deadline for submitting data, to local authorities as appropriate.</p>	
<p>3. Planning the measurements</p>	<p>PHE recommends that national and local COVID-19 guidance is referred to in order to inform the planning of NCMP measurements and to ensure that they are completed safely.</p> <p>Considerations for local authorities</p> <p>1. Risk of lower than usual participation rates due to a combination of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • higher than usual levels of schools opting out due to restrictions on visitors during the COVID-19 pandemic • more parents than usual not allowing their children to participate in the programme due to the perceived infection risk • low attendance rates due to closure of school groups (bubbles) • increasing number of home-schooled pupils compared with previous years 	<p>COVID-19: infection prevention and control (IPC)</p> <p>Actions for schools during the coronavirus outbreak (includes ‘The system of controls: protective measures’)</p> <p>RCPCH COVID-19 guidance for community settings</p>

Operational guidance chapter	Considerations and adjustments to account for COVID-19	Links to relevant COVID-19 guidance
	<p>To help mitigate the risk of the first 2 points above, the specimen pre-measurement template letters for headteachers and parents have been modified to include information on safely delivering the NCMP in school during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Table 2).</p> <p>2. Consider allowing additional planning time and engagement with schools to account for the logistics of taking measurements in the COVID-19 altered school environment including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • infection control procedures • rooms (or outside spaces) required and organisation of the spaces for waiting and measuring of children • scheduling school visits to ensure all eligible children are measured • time required to follow additional procedures as outlined in the school’s risk assessment for visitors • delivering the NCMP at the same time as other school health programmes, for example, vision and hearing screening <p>3. Consider the implications for the NCMP provider workforce including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the additional time required for planning and engagement with schools (as above) • consideration will be required to limit the number of NCMP staff visiting the school to undertake measurements, and where possible limit the overall number of visits to the school, whilst ensuring all eligible children are measured. This will require close liaison with 	<p>Restarting Public Health Programmes for school-aged children</p> <p>Safe working in education, childcare and children’s social care settings, including the use of personal protective equipment (PPE)</p>

Operational guidance chapter	Considerations and adjustments to account for COVID-19	Links to relevant COVID-19 guidance
	<p>the schools and possible adjustment to the NCMP provider workforce planning in comparison to typical NCMP collection years</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consider option of one (maximum 2) NCMP measurement staff per school group (bubble) • consider the requirement for additional time associated with use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and cleaning of measurement equipment (see ‘Doing the measurements’ for more detail on these requirements) <p>4. Consider the implications for providing the workforce with PPE and cleaning materials for infection control while taking measurements at schools:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensure adequate supplies of PPE and cleaning materials are ordered in advance • work with the school to ensure PPE can be safely disposed of after use <p>5. Consider engaging with parents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • parents may require additional reassurance regarding infection control measures • the national specimen pre-measurement letter to parents has been amended to include wording to explain the infection control procedures that will be implemented when their child is measured. Local authorities can edit 	

Operational guidance chapter	Considerations and adjustments to account for COVID-19	Links to relevant COVID-19 guidance
	<p>this section to include any relevant local infection control information (Table 2)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • where possible, this letter should be sent electronically to minimise handling of paper resources 	
<p>4. Doing the measurements</p>	<p>PHE recommends that national and local COVID-19 guidance is referred to in order to ensure that NCMP measurements are carried out safely.</p> <p>Measurement room</p> <p>It may be more practical to use the allocated classroom for each group (bubble) to take NCMP measurements. In such cases, the classroom should be well ventilated, with an area for measurements screened off to allow every child to be measured away from view of their peers and teaching staff. It is important to also be aware that in such an environment, the rest of the class group (bubble) are likely to be able to hear conversations.</p> <p>Infection control</p> <p>Programmes should be delivered in line with the school’s safety control measures. This includes robust hand and respiratory hygiene and enhanced cleaning arrangements.</p> <p>If the school has allocated a separate communal area (such as the school hall) in which to do measurements, infection control measures (wiping or cleaning surfaces) will need to be adhered to between</p>	<p>Accessing supplies of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) COVID-19: cleaning of non-healthcare settings outside the home</p> <p>COVID-19: infection prevention and control (IPC) (includes ‘Appendix 2: Routine decontamination of reusable non-invasive patient care equipment’)</p> <p>Restarting Public Health Programmes for school-aged children</p> <p>Safe working in education, childcare and children’s social care settings, including the use of personal protective equipment (PPE)</p>

Operational guidance chapter	Considerations and adjustments to account for COVID-19	Links to relevant COVID-19 guidance
	<p>measuring children from different groups (bubbles). See COVID-19: cleaning of non-healthcare settings outside the home.</p> <p>Measuring equipment should be cleaned frequently. See Routine decontamination of reusable non-invasive patient care equipment.</p> <p>Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) It is not possible to measure a child’s height and weight whilst maintaining 2 metres distance, therefore, NCMP staff undertaking measurements need to adhere to local guidance in place and ensure that PPE is used as appropriate.</p> <p>All used PPE needs to be safely disposed of as part of controlling the infection.</p> <p>Consider the effect of the measurement experience on the child when the practitioner is wearing PPE. It may be helpful for the practitioner and/or school staff to explain the reason for PPE and for the practitioner to introduce themselves to the child before commencing measurements.</p>	
<p>5. After the measurements: result letters and proactive follow-up</p>	<p>NCMP feedback PHE strongly advises against individual NCMP feedback letters being sent via pupil post. This helps avoid the possibility that a child opens the letter in an unsupervised environment. This also aligns with COVID-19 guidance regarding minimising the handling of paper-</p>	<p>Actions for schools during the coronavirus outbreak</p> <p>Restarting Public Health Programmes for school-aged children</p>

Operational guidance chapter	Considerations and adjustments to account for COVID-19	Links to relevant COVID-19 guidance
	<p>based resources. Continue to post NCMP feedback letters to a child’s parent or carer.</p> <p>Consider amending NCMP feedback letters to include additional support for families (Table 2). It is advisable to review availability and access to local services and programmes which are usually offered but may be limited or paused due to COVID-19 restrictions.</p> <p>Proactive follow-ups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consider staff availability • conduct via telephone • consider that other services and programmes in the local care pathway for onward referral/ signposting may have limited availability or additional restrictions due to COVID-19 • consider the impact lockdown has had on families’ health behaviours and how this may influence parent or carers reaction to receiving NCMP feedback 	
<p>6. Data upload and validation</p>	<p>Due to a shorter collection year and the additional pressures of COVID-19, PHE are aware that the 2020 to 2021 NCMP dataset may not meet all of the data quality thresholds. PHE will work to maximise the value of the statistics that can be generated from the national dataset.</p>	

Operational guidance chapter	Considerations and adjustments to account for COVID-19	Links to relevant COVID-19 guidance
	<p>Local authorities should plan to record NCMP measurements and submit data for as much of the 2020 to 2021 eligible population as possible.</p> <p>Further support and information will be provided throughout the year.</p> <p>Update March 2021: Local Authorities advised to collect a representative sample (minimum 10%).</p>	
<p>7. Use of the NCMP data</p>	<p>Adjustments may need to be made to the usual format of the NCMP Annual report for 2020 to 2021 published by NHS-Digital.</p> <p>There may be some limitations on local-level data analysis and subsequent reports, including school feedback letters produced by PHE.</p> <p>Further support and appropriate guidance will be issued, as required.</p>	

Table 2. NCMP Operational delivery – supporting information and letters advising COVID-19 updates

NCMP Resource	Purpose and target audience	COVID-19 Updates
<p>NCMP Information for schools</p>	<p>Information for headteachers and school staff on NCMP, sent to schools as part of NCMP engagement and planning for the next measurement year.</p> <p>Details responsibilities of the school and LA, and the steps taken to involve and inform parents or children.</p>	<p>Introduction Updated to include information on the importance of the NCMP re-commencing and reference to national COVID-19 guidance that has been considered to help local authorities safely measure children during the pandemic (points 1.5, 1.6 and 2.2).</p> <p>The role and responsibilities of local authorities Updated to include suggestions for measuring children safely and for infection control (points 3.8 and 3.9).</p> <p>Supporting delivery of the NCMP in your school Updated to include guidance on room requirements for carrying out measurements and protocol for measurement day, liaising with school nurses regarding suitable dates and times as well as the possibility of requiring multiple visits to measure all eligible children (4.1).</p>
<p>Specimen Pre-measurement letter for head teachers</p>	<p>Brief version of NCMP information for schools document (see above). Presents key points from this document in letter format for headteacher.</p>	<p>As above (pages 1 to 2).</p>
<p>Specimen Pre-measurement letter to primary care practitioners</p>	<p>For GPs and other primary care practitioners informing them the NCMP is taking place in their area. Explains how results are calculated, that results are shared with parents and what services</p>	<p>Includes lines to explain how NCMP delivery in the 2020 to 2021 school year aligns with national COVID-19 guidance. Revised section on what services are available in the area for referring families.</p>

NCMP Resource	Purpose and target audience	COVID-19 Updates
	are available in the area for overweight or obese children and the referral routes available to them.	
Specimen Pre-measurement letter to parents	Informs parents of NCMP, how measurements are done and feedback process. Letter also sets out the legal requirements for the programme and the intended uses of the data, including opportunity for parent to withdraw their child.	Includes information on how the measurements will be taken in school to align with COVID-19 infection control guidance (page 1).
NCMP: Guidance for data sharing and analysis	<p>This guidance is designed to support local authorities and other organisations that wish to undertake additional investigation of the data. It covers:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an overview of the NCMP data and analyses provided by Public Health England and NHS Digital • how to access the NCMP dataset • which NCMP data can be shared between organisations • guidance on the appropriate use of the NCMP dataset to comply with data protection and disclosure rules • suggestions for regional, local and neighbourhood analysis • caveats associated with the NCMP data and its interpretation • suggestions for local data quality check 	Depending on the impact of COVID-19, further guidance may be issued at a later date to support the use of the dataset. PHE will provide updates via the usual communication channels.

References

1. Excess Weight and COVID-19: Insights from new evidence. July 2020.
2. Rundle, A, Park, Y, Herbstman J, Kinsey, E & Wang, C 2020. COVID-19 - Related School Closings and Risk of Weight Gain Among Children. Obesity 28 (6).
3. Tackling obesity: empowering adults and children to live healthier lives. July 2020.
4. NHS Digital National Child Measurement Programme.
5. Time to solve childhood obesity: an independent report by the Chief Medical Officer. 2019.

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Published: November 2020

PHE gateway number: GW-1492



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