

Adverse weather conditions – flooding

The recent floods have not only cost the economy billions of pounds but they are also having a major and devastating impact on the lives, and the work, of hundreds of thousands of people. This advice is intended to assist those members working in affected areas. It should be read in conjunction with the NASUWT's advice on adverse weather and mould, both of which are available on the NASUWT website and were previously circulated.

Employers have a legal duty to ensure that the health and safety of all employees are protected. It is not in anyone's interests to ask members to risk their lives or health either during the floods themselves, or in the aftermath.

In areas where flooding still persists

Members in affected areas will already be checking local flood warnings, news bulletins and weather reports.

Under no circumstances should headteachers ask any staff to travel in a flooded area. Members should not drive in flooded areas unless they have to, and should never try to drive through floodwater. Not only is there the possibility that a vehicle may be swept away, but floodwater is also likely to be contaminated with sewage and there may be hidden hazards such as deep potholes or missing drain/inspection covers. Likewise, members should not attempt to walk or wade through floodwater to get to work. It is very easy to be swept away by currents or come into contact with contaminated water. Even in very shallow water there can still be many hazards underneath the surface, such as uncovered holes.

In some parts of the country, a large number of premises, including schools, remain without water supply or electricity, even beyond the area immediately flooded. Members should not be expected to work without an adequate supply of fresh water and sanitation facilities. This is contrary to the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations. Members in affected schools should normally be sent home. No-one should be expected to work in buildings that are flooded.

After the flooding subsides

Death and injury is a serious risk in the aftermath of any flood and there are a number of precautions that should be taken. Following the flooding, NASUWT Representatives should meet with the headteacher to make sure the school is safe to be reoccupied.

While it is understandable that members will want to 'pull together' with others, members should not be put at any further unnecessary risk and no building should be reoccupied until it has been properly inspected and a risk assessment undertaken. In extreme cases, the structure of the building will need to be checked before anyone is allowed in. There must be no expectation that members will assist in the clean-up.

If any members are involved in the clean-up, there should be a risk assessment prior to their involvement and the provision of proper personal protective equipment.

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Before the school is reopened, buildings will not only need to be dried out but they will also have to be cleaned and disinfected. Floodwater contains not only silt but also sewage. All surfaces that have been contaminated need to be properly cleaned and disinfected, as well as dried. The school must be fit for purpose, with adequate heating and sanitation. Under no circumstances should a school reopen where heating systems and/or sanitation is inadequate.

Dampness can promote the growth of fungus and mould, which can cause allergies and breathing problems if inhaled (see also the NASUWT advice on mould).

Where schools use temporary portable gas or oil heaters to dry premises, it is important to ensure they have sufficient ventilation and are kept away from any flammable materials. Under no circumstances should petrol or diesel generators be used indoors, due to the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning. Temporary gas/oil heaters should not be used when pupils are in attendance.

Any electrical equipment that may have been affected by floodwater must not be used until it has been checked and verified as being safe by a competent person. The electricity and gas supply should also not be switched on unless it has been similarly checked.

If any materials, such as chemicals, are stored on the premises, they may also have been affected by water. In some cases, the composition of the material may have changed or hazardous materials may have spilled out.

NASUWT Representatives should ensure that schools have verified that any material that could become dangerous as a result of water damage has been checked and, if necessary, disposed of safely.

NASUWT Representatives should also ensure that external doors, in particular fire exits, have been checked to ensure that they are usable before the building is reoccupied and fire alarms and emergency lighting systems have been inspected by a competent person before the premises are used.

After flooding, rats and other vermin can often be displaced from flooded buildings and will move to other premises in the vicinity. Members in areas that are in, or close to, flooded areas should be particularly vigilant and report any signs of infestation immediately.

Support for members

In flooded parts of the country, there will be schools which have not been directly affected, but members' homes will have been partially underwater or will have had no water or electricity supply. NASUWT Representatives should work with headteachers to make sure that such members are given as much support as possible. This could include access to showers and washing facilities at work, time off, or other support as required.

If there is no NASUWT Representative in your school and you need support to implement this advice or if you have concerns, contact the NASUWT.

Some members may experience severe financial hardship as a result of the flood damage to their homes and property and may be eligible for NASUWT Benevolence Assistance. Contact the NASUWT for further advice.