New DfE Ventilation & Air Quality Guidance

25 February 2026

What Every School Leader Needs to Know – And How to Act Today

Today the Department for Education published its refreshed guidance on ventilation and air quality in schools and childcare settings.

This is the clearest, most practical advice yet – and it arrives at exactly the right moment. Poor indoor air quality is linked to higher pupil absences, reduced concentration and lower attainment. Good ventilation changes that.

Here's what the guidance really means for you, the solutions that match your school type, the funding that is already available, and the simple steps you can take now to protect your pupils and make the most of your budgets.

1. **The Guidance in Plain English – What School Leaders Must Know**

Good ventilation is **essential**, not optional. It brings fresh air in, removes stale air, improves alertness, reduces the spread of colds, flu and other respiratory infections, and helps prevent overheating.

Key points for leaders:

- Prioritise **fresh air** through windows, doors and properly maintained

mechanical systems.

- Use **CO_2 monitors** (NDIR type recommended) – one per typical classroom, placed at head height.
    - **< 800 ppm** → Good ventilation (you can close windows in winter if needed).
    - **800–1,500 ppm** → Improve ventilation.
    - **> 1,500 ppm** → Take urgent action.
- Keep mechanical systems serviced – clean or replace filters on schedule.
- **HEPA air cleaning units** are permitted **only** where you genuinely cannot achieve adequate fresh air in the short term, or in areas with high external pollution. They reduce airborne pathogens but **do not** count as ventilation and **do not** lower CO_2 levels. They must not be used as an excuse to keep windows closed or to delay proper ventilation improvements.
- Carry out a risk assessment, document your actions, and actively manage your buildings.

The message from DfE is supportive and realistic: you don't have to overhaul everything overnight – but you do need to act on the data.

2. Practical Solutions Matched to Your School Type

A recent Airflow survey (February 2026) found that **only 21% of UK schools** have installed smart ventilation systems. The remaining 79% are the ones that will benefit most from today's guidance.

School Type	Biggest Challenges	Recommended Priority Actions (all DfE-compliant)	Expected Benefits
Primary/ Nursery	High pupil density, older buildings, window-only reliance	CO_2 monitors + staff training Quick natural ventilation routines Targeted mechanical extract HEPA only where CO_2 stays high	Fewer winter bugs, calmer classrooms, better concentration

School Type	Biggest Challenges	Recommended Priority Actions (all DfE-compliant)	Expected Benefits
Secondary/ Post- 16	Larger spaces, higher occupancy, existing mechanical systems	Whole-site CO_2 mapping + smart controls MVHR upgrades Demand-controlled ventilation	Energy savings + improved exam performance
LA Maintained & VA	Smaller budgets but steady SCA/DFC funding	Network of CO_2 monitors + filter upgrades via frameworks	Easy compliance and low-cost wins
Academies & MATs	Access to CIF and larger estates	Full smart ventilation + heat-recovery systems as part of condition works	High return on capital funding
SEND/ Specialist	Noise sensitivity, medical needs	Quiet HEPA units + enhanced natural ventilation + acoustic design	Inclusive, low-disruption air quality

DfE's clear rule: Fix ventilation first. Use HEPA only as a temporary bridge or supplement.

3. Funding Routes That Are Open Right Now (February 2026)

You do not need a new central scheme – the money is already flowing.

Funding Stream	Who Can Access	Status February 2026	Ventilation Eligible?	Next Step
CIF 2025–26	Academies, VA, sixth-form	£470m allocated to 656 schools – works happening **now**	Yes (heating/vent/overheating)	Check your outcome letter or the published list
SCA + Devolved Formula Capital	LA-maintained & larger MATs	Annual grants – spend this financial year	Yes	Add to next estates meeting
Renewal & Retrofit Programme	Selected schools (no bid)	Pilot launches **April 2026** (£710m total to 2029–30). First 50 schools in East Midlands, Yorkshire & Humber, South East contacted directly	Yes – core focus	Watch your inbox from April
Facilities Supplies Framework	All settings	Live now	Yes – monitors, HEPA, full installs	Fastest compliant route

Funding Stream	Who Can Access	Status February 2026	Ventilation Eligible?	Next Step
PSDS & local energy grants	Where decarbonisation applies	Projects running 2025–2028	Yes (heat recovery)	Combine with ventilation works

4. Why Acting Sooner (Not Later) Really Matters

Timescale	What to Do	Why It Helps
Now – Easter 2026	Order CO_2 monitors, run baseline audits, update risk assessment	Gives you solid data for funding bids and summer planning
April – July 2026	Complete minor works and smart system installs	Ready for September return
Summer 2026	Major mechanical or HEPA installations	No disruption to pupils
Before November 2026	Full winter-ready plan in place	Avoid the usual spike in absences

Act in the next 4–6 weeks and you will be ahead of the curve when the next funding conversations begin.

Your Simple 5-Step Action Plan

1. Share today's DfE guidance with your SLT and governors.
2. Check your current CO_2 levels this week (it only takes minutes).
3. Book a no-obligation ventilation walk-through with a trusted supplier.
4. Identify which funding stream you can use.
5. Build the works into your 2026–27 estate plan.

Pupils deserve to learn in fresh, healthy air. Today's guidance gives you the perfect moment – and the clear route – to make it happen.

This is an independent, expert editorial produced to support school and childcare leaders across England. All information is taken directly from the DfE guidance

published 24 February 2026 and current public funding sources.