



Petitions Committee

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Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education
20 Great Smith Street
Westminster
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30 March 2020

Dear Gavin

I am writing because of the enormous public interest in coronavirus, which has resulted in more than fifty e-petitions on coronavirus being published to date, signed by over two million people. We are receiving hundreds of petitions on coronavirus on a daily basis, which show there is a lot of anxiety and concern about the support available to people affected by the outbreak, and the Government's response to the outbreak.

Following the large number of petitions on coronavirus we asked the people who had signed these petitions what questions they most wanted answers to. On Wednesday we held an evidence session with representatives from the Department for Health and Social Care, the Department for Education, and the Department for Work and Pensions, putting many of these questions to Ministers and the Deputy Chief Medical Officer. We are extremely grateful that your Department was able to provide a representative to answer our questions, but I'm sure you will understand that there was not time to ask all of the questions that members of the public would like to be answered.

I am therefore writing to ask you to respond to the following questions, which came through most strongly from our public engagement:

School closures and exams

What is the likely duration of school and college closures?

What will happen to the school year? Will summer holidays be cancelled so that children can catch up?

What options will be available to students who are dissatisfied with their calculated exam grades?

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to have grades under-predicted, and young people with mental health problems tend to achieve less well academically than their peers. How will the Government and Ofqual ensure that the process for awarding grades is fair and does not disadvantage young people, including young people with a mental health problem?

Schooling for children of key workers and vulnerable children

Is it safe for children of key workers and vulnerable children to go to school?

What provision is being made for key workers' children over the traditional Easter break and for future breaks?

The UK Parliament Teacher Ambassadors have asked what plans the Government have to ensure that schools are able to continue to support the mental health and wellbeing of their pupils, or will alternative provisions be made? How will safeguarding be carried out for those vulnerable children who are not in school?

The Government has announced that schools will remain open to vulnerable children, including those with a social worker or Education, Health and Care Plan. Does this apply to children and young people with a mental health problem, who are considered vulnerable by their school and who can't safely remain at home?

Higher education

Should university students be expected to pay tuition and accommodation fees if their universities aren't functioning as normal?

What conversations has the Government had with the Student Loans Company about how they can support students through this period?

Given the constantly evolving nature of the current situation, I would be grateful if you could provide a response to the above by Friday 3 April, so we can make these available to the public as quickly as possible.

I hope we will be able to continue the dialogue as the situation progresses and particularly as the usual parliamentary mechanisms for raising these issues have become more restricted. This might involve further sessions with Ministers and officials, and asking your Department to provide updated answers to the public's latest questions at regular intervals.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Catherine". The script is cursive and fluid, with a large initial 'C'.

Catherine McKinnell MP
Chair of the Petitions Committee