Dear Robert,

Thank you for your letter dated 7 July 2020 regarding children’s remote learning and education, particularly via the BBC.

As the national broadcaster, the BBC has had a vital role to play in keeping the nation informed, educated, and entertained throughout the coronavirus outbreak. As you recognise, the BBC has increased its educational programming for schoolchildren and students, offering daily videos for schoolchildren at home. On 3 April, the BBC announced that it would bring educational programmes and lessons to every household in the country through its Bitesize Daily service, which is delivered across BBC iPlayer, BBC Red Button, the BBC Bitesize website and app, BBC Four and BBC Sounds. As I said at the time, this is public service broadcasting at its best and will make a big difference to millions of children across the UK while schools are closed.

The Oak National Academy also launched on 20 April, producing at least 180 hours of online lessons per week. This brand-new enterprise has been created by 40 teachers from some of the leading schools across England, backed by government grant funding. By 12 July, 4.7 million unique users had accessed the Oak National Academy website and 16.1 million lessons had been viewed.

While the government has welcomed the efforts of the BBC and others in providing educational content for children, I must make clear that all UK broadcasters, including the BBC, are operationally and editorially independent of government, and the government cannot intervene in their day-to-day decisions, such as what content to broadcast.

I note your suggestion regarding funding and regulatory incentives. In 2018/19 the BBC received nearly £3.7bn in licence fee income, and the current licence fee settlement is agreed until April 2022. The BBC also has a duty ‘to support learning for people of all ages’ as one of its public purposes under the Royal Charter. As the external independent regulator of the BBC, it is Ofcom’s responsibility to hold the BBC to account in fulfilling its mission and public purposes.

I note your recommendation for the whitelisting of certain educational content. Whitelisting is a helpful way to provide families with support to access critical resources where the majority of content is held on one website, and the Department for Education has already worked with major telecoms companies to whitelist the Hungry Little Minds and EdenRed school meal voucher website. Most educational resources including Oak Academy, however, use content that is hosted elsewhere (such as on Youtube or Vimeo) meaning that they will still incur data charges.

To help address this, the Department for Education has just launched a pilot with major telecommunications companies to improve internet connectivity for disadvantaged and
vulnerable families more widely than selected sites. For families who rely on a mobile internet connection, mobile network operators are working to provide access to free additional data, offering them more flexibility to access the resources that they need the most.

The Department for Education has also provided over 200,000 laptops and tablets, and 4G wireless routers, to vulnerable and disadvantaged children. This is thought to have been the biggest and fastest deployment of laptops in the UK - at its peak, 27,000 laptops were delivered through a fleet of couriers in a single day.

While the government is committed to welcoming all children back to school from September, we recognise that there will be an ongoing role for remote education in the event a school is required to close temporarily. Schools are being asked to make preparations for this eventuality, and we are reviewing the need to provide further support where this occurs.

In addition, the government has also announced a catch-up package worth £1bn, including a ‘Catch-Up Premium’ worth a total of £650m to support schools to make up for lost teaching time. Alongside this, we have also announced a new £350m National Tutoring Programme for disadvantaged pupils. This will increase access to high-quality tuition for disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people, helping to accelerate their academic progress and tackling the attainment gap between them and their peers. This package has been designed so that school leaders have the flexibility, discretion and autonomy to decide how they want to use the funding to support their pupils. This includes using the funding for summer schools, should schools choose to do this. The EEF Covid-19 Support Guide also includes advice on summer schools and a link to a Teach First toolkit specifically focused on summer schools, for schools that choose to do this.

Thank you for writing to me on this important subject, and I hope that you find this information useful.

Rt Hon Oliver Dowden CBE MP
Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport