Dear Robert Halfon MP,

Thank you for your letter of 15 July in which you raise a number of important points about support for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) when schools open fully in September, and about the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on them and their families.

The Government has prioritised support for vulnerable children during the pandemic, including those with SEND, by keeping schools open for them. Children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) have been able to access a school place where a risk assessment determined they were as safe or safer there than at home. Data shows that more than 65,000 children with EHCPs attended school on a daily basis throughout July, with attendance peaking at 87,000 on 14 July¹.

As you will have seen, we have recently published new guidance Guidance for full opening: special schools and other specialist settings, and for pupils with SEND in mainstream settings there is Guidance for full opening: schools. Together, this guidance should reassure you in relation to many of your points.

I have also written to headteachers of special schools and, along with Minister Whately, sent a letter to the broader sector to clearly communicate the key messages from this guidance, and to pass on my gratitude for the hard work of the professionals during this time.

The published guidance includes information for headteachers about catch-up provision, wellbeing and support, and remote education where needed. We are asking school leaders and others to work closely with parents and carers to agree the best approach to support individual children to return to and thrive at school. They should use existing flexibilities, including the £1 billion catch-up funding we have announced, to decide how to support pupils with SEND including dyslexia and dyspraxia, rather than a centrally defined approach. We are also working with sector representatives to ensure that the new National Tutoring Programme meets the needs of children with SEND.

We are aware of the risk of potential shortages of educational psychologists and other specialists because of a rise in demand as a result of Covid-19. We are investing £30 million between 2020 and 2023 to support the training of educational psychologists. As a result, 150 more educational psychologists will join the

¹ https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/35d8c378-a05a-4d67-af6a-bde84697514c
workforce this year and a further 203 trainees will start the funded training course in September.

You will also have seen the announcement confirming that core school funding is increasing by £2.6 billion in 2020-21, and will increase by £4.8 billion and £7.1 billion in 2021-22 and 2022-23 respectively, compared to 2019-20. This includes an increase in high needs funding by a further £730 million, or 10%, in 2021-22, which follows the £780 million increase this year, and will bring the total high needs budget to over £8 billion next year.

Nine Regional Education and Children’s Teams have been established during the Covid-19 pandemic to free up local authority time and resource by pooling our knowledge of each local authority and streamlining our interactions with them. Ofsted are part of the teams and offer practical help and advice to local authorities that need it most. Our team of SEND Advisers have been having regular conversations with SEN leaders in all authorities in order to monitor their use of the temporary legislative changes which allowed for flexibility in the delivery of provision in EHC plans. Joint local area inspections by Ofsted and Care Quality Commission are paused during the Covid-19 pandemic, and it is not practicable to make a formal systematic assessment of how each local authority, health body and school has responded to the challenges of the pandemic, because the situation remains changeable. Inspections will resume as soon as it is right to do so. We are aware of variability, though, and will continue to support and challenge local areas, including through our network of SEND Advisers and by sharing examples of good and innovative practice, as we have been doing throughout the Covid-19 crisis.

I do, though, share your concerns regarding the care and support packages that children with very complex needs require. The Secretary of State has written to all Directors of Children’s Services to remind them of their statutory duty to provide short breaks and respite care for families of disabled children and encourage them to do so over the summer. The Government has provided £3.7 billion of unringfenced funding to local government to support them at this time, including within children’s services. I have also had regular discussions with Health Ministers to ensure that children’s health and mental health services are prioritised going forward, to support a successful full return to school. Last month, we announced extra mental health support for pupils and teachers to respond to the impact of coronavirus on mental health and wellbeing. This will include a programme to develop mental health and wellbeing expertise among school staff and a wider PHE-led package of support for young people, including online resources designed by health and education experts.

In relation to transport arrangements, the advice for passengers on public transport to adopt a social distance of two metres or a ‘one metre plus’ approach will not apply from the autumn term on dedicated home to school transport as these journeys are consistent and children and young people will not be mixing with the general public. This helps to limit contact with others and therefore the spread of infection. However, we are recommending transport providers follow a PHE-endorsed system of controls and measures to reduce the chances of infection such as distancing, seating plans, face coverings where appropriate and enhanced cleaning practices. Further guidance on school transport will be published shortly.
We have agreed our response to the Select Committee’s report of last October which was shared with the ESC on Monday 20 July. I am committed to delivering real improvements to the SEND system, and both I and the SEND Review team are very grateful for the comprehensive evidence that the ESC provided. To build a system fit for the future, we have had to take time to reflect on the impact that the pandemic has had on the SEND system. We will publish the findings of the SEND Review as soon as it is practical to do so, and want to work with children, young people, their families and sector experts to ensure that our reforms are right for the post-pandemic context.

Yours sincerely,

Vicky Ford MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families