



Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State

Sanctuary Buildings Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT
tel: 0370 000 2288 www.education.gov.uk/help/contactus

Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Your ref: 2020-00xxxxxPOSoS

4th February 2021

I would like to update you on the Department for Education's response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak between 22 December 2020 and 2 February 2021.

January national restrictions

As you will be aware, on 30 December, in response to rapidly rising case rates due to the new, more transmissible variant of coronavirus, the Government pushed back the staggered return for secondary schools and colleges by one week and triggered the education contingency framework to be implemented in areas of the country with very high rates of incidence or transmission of the virus.

During the first week of spring term, beginning on or just after 04 January, we planned for secondary schools and colleges to focus on the rollout of rapid testing to help find asymptomatic cases, make schools and colleges as safe as possible for students to return and to suppress the spread of the virus while protecting public health and saving lives.

We also planned to trigger the contingency framework in areas where rates of incidence or transmission of the virus in a local area required it. This was the case across the capital, for example, where Covid rates have been rising rapidly which is

why London primary schools were required to provide remote learning to all children but vulnerable and critical worker children who could continue to attend school.

However, the Government has always been clear that we would keep the situation under review and ensure that our position is informed by the latest evidence.

Unfortunately, due to a rapid rise in infections, hospital admissions and case rates across the country, and hospitals being under more pressure than they have been at any other point throughout the pandemic, on the 4 January the Prime Minister announced a national lockdown and instructed people to stay at home to control the virus, protect the NHS and save lives.

This meant that all primary schools, secondary schools and colleges were asked to move to remote learning, except for the children of key workers and vulnerable children. It is important to stress that while children are still very unlikely to be severely affected by COVID-19, the Government recognises that schools must be included in the restrictions in order to have the best chance of getting the virus under control as schools can act as vectors of transmission, causing the virus to spread between households when rates are high.

Schools are now required to provide remote education for those learning at home but other settings such as early years and nurseries, alternative provision and special schools will remain open and vulnerable children and children of critical workers can continue to use registered childcare, childminders and other childcare activities.

The time spent outside of the classroom will also mean it is not possible or fair for GCSE and A-level exams to go ahead this summer as normal and I have been working with Ofqual to put in place alternative arrangements.

Following the Prime Minister's announcement, I made a statement to Parliament on 6 January on closure of education settings during national lockdown and outlined plans to support young people, including:

- strengthening minimum standards of remote learning and increasing it from the government's previous minimum expectations. Ofsted will play an important role in holding schools to account for the quality of remote education
- launching a consultation on alternative arrangements for exams
- providing extra funding to support schools to provide food parcels or meals to eligible students and re-opening the national voucher scheme so that in the event schools cannot offer food parcels or provide an alternative local solution, every child can access free school meals while they are learning at home.

Since the introduction of national restrictions I have been aware of reports of schools and colleges seeing more pupils in attendance now than during the first period of national restrictions. We have been clear that during this period primary, secondary,

alternative provision, special schools and colleges will remain open to vulnerable students, children and young people and the children of critical workers only (recognising that the characteristics of the cohorts in special schools, special post-16 institutions, and alternative provision will mean these settings continue to offer face to face provision for all pupils, where appropriate). All other pupils should not attend and should learn remotely. Pupils who are self-isolating should not attend school and clinically extremely vulnerable pupils are also advised not to attend school.

Any schools facing operational difficulties with following the guidance and accommodating the necessary children on site should contact their Regional Schools Commissioner team for support.

Extension of restricted attendance

The above restrictions came into effect on 5 January and were expected to last until the middle of February but following media speculation around returning to schools, on 21 January I made clear that to give schools, pupils and parents time to get ready for the return to school, they would all be given two weeks' notice ahead of them opening to more pupils.

This pandemic has had a terrible impact on the lives of so many people and while Covid rates are falling, it remains of the utmost importance to minimise the spread of the virus in our communities and to take action to respond quickly to the new variant.

This is why on 27 January the Prime Minister confirmed that schools and colleges will not return to full face-to-face education after the February half-term and that the current attendance restrictions will remain in place until 8 March at the earliest.

Children of critical workers and vulnerable children and young people will still be able to attend schools and colleges, including special schools and alternative provision and early years settings also remain open. All other pupils will continue to receive high quality remote education at home.

As the Prime Minister explained, we hope that if the target of vaccinating everyone in the top four prioritisation cohorts by 15 February is met, then those groups will have developed immunity three weeks later, by 8 March and we will therefore look at fully re-opening schools from this date.

The Prime Minister has also committed to providing a catch up programme, involving a further £300m of new money to early years, schools and colleges for tutoring. Going forward we will work in collaboration with the education sector to develop specific initiatives for summer schools and a Covid premium to support catch up.

We know teachers and parents are working tremendously hard to deliver remote education while schools are closed to most pupils and we understand that extended

school and college attendance restrictions will have a huge impact on children's learning. We are therefore determined to work with parents, teachers and schools to develop a long-term plan to make sure pupils have the chance to make up their learning over the course of this parliament.

It is this country's priority to get all children and young people back into face-to-face education and apprenticeship training, but it is crucial we do this at the right time and I want to assure parents, teachers, children and young people that schools, colleges and universities will be the first to fully return as soon as the public health picture allows it.

Support for students impacted by Covid-19

On 2 February the Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan, announced an additional £50 million to support thousands of students with financial pressures caused by the pandemic. This is in addition to the £20 million announced in December, bringing the total to £70 million for this financial year.

I am confident that this new funding will enable universities to help students, including international students, impacted by the pandemic, for example those facing additional costs for alternative accommodation, loss of employment or extra costs to access their teaching online. Universities will distribute the funding and will be able to prioritise the funding to those most in need of help.

As you may know, in recent months many universities and accommodation providers made a decision to offer rent rebates for students who need to stay away from their term-time address. This announcement follows this decision and the Government has encouraged others to join them and offer students partial refunds. We have asked all providers of student accommodation including universities, to make sure their rental policies have students' best interests at heart and are communicated clearly and we will continue to monitor the situation and the impact of the funding.

Funding boost to get more young people into work

On 27 January Apprenticeships and Skills Minister, Gillian Keegan, announced that employers can now apply for a £1000 cash boost to help them take on new trainees,

The new scheme will support young people to gain the skills and experience they need from the start, helping them to get a job, an apprenticeship, or pursue further study. The cash boost, available until 31 July 2021, will help businesses with the cost of providing a high-quality work placement for a trainee, including providing facilities, uniforms or helping with travel costs. Businesses offering new traineeship opportunities will receive the £1,000 bonus for every trainee they take on with up to a

maximum of 10 trainees. Employers can claim the cash incentive for all work placements that have been completed since 1 September.

We know that this highly successful traineeship programme has already helped nearly 120,000 young people get on the path to a great career since 2013. [Recent figures](#) show that 66% of trainees get a job, take up an apprenticeship or go on to further study within 6 months of completing their programme, and this announcement will expand the scheme even further, giving thousands more young people the opportunity to gain the skills they need to start a new career as we recover from the pandemic. I strongly believe that this will support this country and our businesses to fill and create more jobs, giving young people a better start while boosting productivity.

The launch of the incentive scheme follows the announcement in July 2020 by the Chancellor, as part of his [Plan for Jobs](#), of an additional £111 million investment to support the largest-ever expansion of traineeships so more young people have the skills and confidence they need to get on in life.

Ofsted research on remote education during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak

On 25 January Ofsted published an in-depth study on remote education. The key finding makes clear that although remote education is helping to plug the learning gap during the COVID-19 pandemic, pupils' engagement and motivation remain significant challenges for schools and parents.

It also finds that many schools are doing a good job of mitigating children's learning loss but at the same time keeping pupils motivated remains a challenge.

We understand that remote education has its own challenges. It is encouraging however to see that following the department's recent guidance strengthening expectations around remote education, a large proportion of schools in England feel that they are doing well at mitigating children's learning loss through remote education.

It is also positive to know that many school leaders do not see remote education as a barrier to curriculum delivery and believe learning opportunities, levels of pupil engagement and expectations should be the same as when delivered face-to-face.

Free School Meals

On the same day as our discussion at the Education Select Committee on 13 January, the Department responded to social media photos of lunch parcels delivered to families. I confirmed that if parents were and continue to be concerned

about the standard of the lunch parcel they receive, that they can contact DfE's Helpline on 0800 046 8687. I met school catering firms to make clear that the poor examples of lunch parcels we have seen are unacceptable. All parcels must meet the standards we have set out in guidance.

One of the catering companies involved, Chartwells, has apologised and admitted the parcels in question were not good enough. Their Managing Director has assured the Department that they took immediate action to stop further deliveries of poor-quality parcels. They will ensure schools affected are compensated and will provide additional food to eligible children in line with our increased funding.

The National Free School Meal voucher scheme went live on 18 January and schools can choose this option if they prefer. The options to support children eligible for free school meals are through lunch parcels, vouchers arranged locally, or the National Voucher Scheme. The scheme will cover the period Monday 18 January to Friday, 12 February. Schools can now order the national vouchers which can only be used for food and groceries from participating supermarkets, including Morrisons, Iceland, Asda, M&S Food, Tesco, Sainsbury's, Waitrose, Aldi and McColl's.

Exams

The Department and Ofqual launched a joint consultation on 15 January, outlining detailed proposals for alternative arrangements for awarding general, vocational and technical qualifications in summer 2021.

The consultation explained how students rely upon grades to continue to the next stage of their education or training, or into employment. It also commented that grades must reflect what a student knows, understands and can do, and they must be widely understood and respected.

In place of exams in summer 2021 we proposed that a student's grade in a subject will be based on their teacher's assessment of the standard at which they are performing. This consultation sought views on our proposal, including how teachers should be supported to make their assessments fairly and consistently. We proposed that all students who do not believe their grade reflects the evidence of the standard at which they were performing can appeal.

Ofqual and the Department for Education asked to hear the views of students who were due to sit their exams, their parents and carers, their teachers, school and college leaders and others who have an interest, including further and higher education providers, and employers.

The consultation was launched on 15 January and closed on 29 January and we are now in the process of analysing the feedback which will be available to download at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-how-gcse-as-and-a-level-grades-should-be-awarded-in-summer-2021>

Testing for primary and nursery schools

Following on from our launch of rapid asymptomatic COVID-19 testing in secondary schools and colleges on 4 January, we announced on 18 January that staff in primary, school-based nurseries and maintained nursery schools are also being offered the opportunity to take part in regular asymptomatic testing. A rigorous system of controls has been applied to enable the safest possible environment. The testing programme is an important addition to supporting leaders to maintain the continuity of education throughout the pandemic.

All primary schools, school-based nurseries and maintained nursery schools started to receive home testing lateral flow device (LFD) kits from 18 January. Testing is not mandatory for staff and staff do not need to provide proof of a negative test result to attend school or nursery in person, although participation in testing is strongly encouraged. The full guidance on asymptomatic testing for staff in primary schools and nurseries has been updated and can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-asymptomatic-testing-for-staff-in-primary-schools-and-nurseries>.

Position statement regarding daily contact tracing in schools from Public Health England (PHE) and NHS Test and Trace

School and college leaders are playing a key role in setting up COVID-19 testing. Testing remains a vital part of our plan to suppress this virus, and the widespread rollout of regular testing using rapid lateral flow tests is already proving beneficial in finding people with coronavirus before they develop symptoms.

We have consistently been guided by experts, and as part of our testing approach we rolled out daily contact testing in schools on the advice of NHS Test and Trace and Public Health England (PHE).

Both NHS Test and Trace and PHE have now reviewed that advice, and concluded that in light of the higher prevalence and rates of transmission of the new variant, further evaluation work is required to understand the impact of daily contact testing, instead of self-isolation for those who have been in contact with a case, to make sure it is achieving its aim of breaking chains of transmission and reducing cases of the virus in the community.

In light of that assessment, we are pausing daily contact testing in all but a small number of secondary schools and colleges, where it will continue with detailed evaluation to inform any future resumption and to make sure nobody in the remaining settings is put at any risk. Regular testing of staff should continue and will increase to

twice weekly as further reassurance and to break chains of transmission during this period. Full details of the statement can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/daily-contact-testing-in-schools-statement-from-phe-and-nhs-tt-about-next-steps/position-statement-regarding-daily-contact-testing-in-schools-from-phe-and-nhs-test-and-trace>

To help the public understand what this means in practice the Department has published a set of 'Questions and Answers' which can be accessed at:

<https://dfemedia.blog.gov.uk/2021/01/20/pausing-daily-contact-testing-and-self-isolation-of-pupils-and-teachers-your-questions-answered/>

New interim Chief Regulator of Ofqual

On 22 December Simon Lebus was appointed as interim Chief Regulator of Ofqual, replacing Dame Glenys Stacey from 1 January 2021. Mr Lebus will be in post until 17 September 2021.

Mr Lebus has worked in the education sector since 2002, most notably as Chief Executive of Cambridge Assessment between 2002 and 2018. He now has a non-executive portfolio. I am confident that Simon's knowledge and experience will be crucial as we work to make sure young people taking exams and qualifications in 2021 have the best possible chance to succeed.

Dame Glenys will continue to provide support to Ofqual as Chair of a committee of the board focusing on exams and assessments in 2021. Dame Glenys's commitment and support over the last four months as acting Chief Regulator has been invaluable, in particular, regarding the exceptional measures that have been put in place for exams next year. She will also continue to support work on exams from January, as Chair of the 2021 committee of Ofqual's board.

Update on the rollout of devices

On 18 January 2021, the House resolved that I should keep Parliament updated on work the Department is undertaking to ensure that every learner has the resources required to learn remotely.

As of 2 February, I can confirm that 927,689 devices have been delivered since the start of the scheme. We have also partnered with the UK's leading mobile operators to provide free data to help disadvantaged children get online as well as delivering 4G wireless routers for pupils without connection at home.

We are publishing information weekly and I will include further information in future updates. Full data on laptops and tablets is available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/laptops-and-tablets-data>

Attendance

The Department's analysis from week 5 data indicates that 149 pupils out of every thousand were in school with 99% of state funded schools open to children of critical workers and vulnerable children. Data for attendance in education and early years settings during the COVID-19 outbreak for week 5 can be found here: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/2021-week-5>

The Department's analysis from week 4 data indicates that 141 pupils out of every thousand were in school with 99% of state funded schools open to children of critical workers and vulnerable children. Data for attendance in education and early years settings during the COVID-19 outbreak for week 4 can be found here: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/2021-week-4>

The Department's analysis from week 3 data indicates that 139 pupils out of every thousand were in a school with over 99% of state funded schools open to children of critical workers and vulnerable children. Heavy snowfall in northern England affected school open rates on Thursday 14 January. Data for attendance in education and early years settings during the COVID-19 outbreak for week 3 can be found here: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/2021-week-3>

The Department's analysis from week 2 data indicates that 792 pupils out of every thousand were in school with 98.5% of state funded schools open. Data for attendance in education and early years settings during the COVID-19 outbreak for week 2 can be found here: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/2021-week-2>

The Department's analysis from week 50 data indicates that 846 pupils out of every thousand were in school with 99.2% of state funded schools open. Data for attendance in education and early years settings during the COVID-19 outbreak for week 50 can be found here: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-i-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/2020-week-50>

The Department's analysis from week 49 data indicates that 855 pupils out of every thousand were in school with 99.5% of state funded schools open. Data for attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak for week 49 can be found here: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years->

Other key updates

In addition to the above, please see below recent key updates from the Department.

The Department has issued a tenth notice to modify pupil registration requirements for temporary pupils during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. The publication can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/modification-notice-school-registration-legislation-changes>

On 13 January the Department updated the published guidance for schools and local authorities on school meals arrangements during the COVID-19 outbreak. The guidance is about what schools should do to provide free school meals during the national lockdown. The full guidance can be accessed at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance>.

The Department has updated the guidance for higher education providers on student movements in December 2020, the return of students from January 2021 and NHS Test and Trace channels. The guidance can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-reopening-buildings-and-campuses>

The Department has updated the guidance with information for parents and carers about going back to schools, nurseries and colleges in January 2021. The update can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/what-parents-and-carers-need-to-know-about-early-years-providers-schools-and-colleges-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>

The Department has updated the guidance on funding and financial support available for education, childcare and children's social care organisations. The guidance can be accessed at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-financial-support-for-education-early-years-and-childrens-social-care>

The Department has updated the guidance for parents and carers of children attending community activities, holiday or after-school clubs, tuition and other out-of-school settings. The guidance can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-for-parents-and-carers-of-children-attending-out-of-school-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>

The Department has updated the guidance for local authorities, academy trusts and schools on devices and support available to provide remote education and access to children's social care. The guidance can be accessed at:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/get-help-with-technology-for-remote-education-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

The Department has updated the guidance on how schools, colleges, academy trusts and local authorities can access digital devices for children who are learning remotely. The guidance can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/get-laptops-and-tablets-for-children-who-cannot-attend-school-due-to-coronavirus-covid-19>

The Department has updated the guidance with actions for schools during the coronavirus outbreak and what all schools will need to do during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak from the start of the autumn term. The guidance can be accessed at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/actions-for-schools-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak>

The Department has updated the guidance on actions for FE colleges and providers during the coronavirus outbreak following the Public Health England statement on daily contact testing. The update included added information on supporting students with special educational needs in special post-16 institutions. The guidance can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-further-education-provision>

The Department has updated the guidance for schools and local authorities on school meals arrangements during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. The guidance can be accessed at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance>

The Department for Education has updated the guidance on providing apprenticeships during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. The guidance can be accessed at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-apprenticeship-programme-response>

The Department for Education and Cabinet Office have updated the guidance on critical workers and vulnerable children who can access full-time education provision in the case of restrictions on education during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. The full guidance can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-maintaining-educational-provision>

Student Loans Company has updated the guidance on how students should contact them during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. The guidance can be accessed at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/guidance-on-contacting-the-student-loans-company>

Ofsted has published a summary of findings on remote learning from several strands of research activity carried out in 2020, which can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/remote-education-research>

Ofsted has published advice to help school and college leaders and teachers develop their remote education offer, based on research and visits to schools and colleges. The publication can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/whats-working-well-in-remote-education>

Ofsted has updated the operational note for Her Majesty's Inspectors carrying out inspection activity of further education and skills providers from January 2021. The note was updated in light of the national lockdown to clarify that inspection activity will be remote by default until February, to set out how Ofsted will carry out progress monitoring visits and to confirm that it will continue to carry out emergency monitoring visits or inspections if there is significant cause for concern. The full update can be accessed at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/january-2021-further-education-and-skills-providers>

Ofsted has updated its rolling guidance and information relating to coronavirus (COVID-19) for schools, early years, children's social care and further education and skills providers. The update can be accessed at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ofsted-coronavirus-covid-19-rolling-update>

I hope you find this information useful.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'G. Williamson', written over a faint circular stamp.

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education