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Secretary of State

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I would like to update you on the Department for Education's response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak between 25 February and 2 March 2021.

Awarding qualifications in 2021

You will recall that in January the Department and Ofqual conducted a two-week consultation, seeking the views of teachers, students, parents and employers to provide a clear direction on the alternative arrangements for GCSEs, AS and A levels in 2021, and on the approach for vocational and technical qualifications (VTQs) and other general qualifications.

The consultation received a record number of responses, with over 100,000 in total from students, parents, teachers, school and college leaders and other stakeholders, and reflected widespread support for the approach based on teacher assessment to determine grades. Over half (52%) of all responses came from pupils.

This is why following the outcomes of the consultation, on 25 February I announced that students will receive grades awarded and determined by teachers and based on what they have been taught with fairness and flexibility at the heart of the

Government's plans to ensure young people get to their next stage of education or training.

I recognise that young people have shown incredible resilience over the last year, continuing with their learning amidst unprecedented challenges while the country battles with this pandemic and I strongly believe that those efforts deserve to be fairly rewarded.

To achieve this, teachers will be able to draw on a range of evidence when determining grades, including the optional use of questions provided by exam boards, as well as mock exams, coursework, or other work completed as part of a pupil's course, such as essays or in-class tests. No algorithm will be used.

To support teachers in making their judgements, exam boards will provide detailed guidance before the end of the spring term. Teachers will then submit grades to exam boards by 18 June, allowing as much teaching time as possible before making their assessments.

Results days for GCSE, A level and some vocational qualifications will be moved forward from the week of the 23 August and will now take place in the week of 9 August. These earlier dates will allow for some additional time for appeals to be completed, so students reliant on those outcomes to achieve their university offer have the best chance of accessing a place.

I acknowledge that staff across education sectors have been going above and beyond to support young people through the pandemic, and the guidance published by exam boards will be designed to minimise any additional burden this year's awarding process may place on teachers and staff.

I also recognise that many students need their VTQs to enter into work, making exams and practical assessments in these courses essential for the students to progress to the next stage, and so it is right that these continue. Students studying VTQs will also receive grades assessed by teachers rather than sitting exams. Exams and assessments will continue in VTQs where they are needed for students to demonstrate the necessary professional standard in an occupation.

To ensure as much fairness as possible schools, colleges and other educational settings will conduct multiple checks, such as checking consistency of judgements across teachers and that the correct processes were followed. At the same time, exam boards will conduct their own checks, through a combination of random sampling and more targeted scrutiny where they identify cause for concern and every student will have the right to appeal their grade.

The consultation outcomes have been published and can be accessed at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-how-gcse-as-and-a-level-grades-should-be-awarded-in-summer-2021> and <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-alternative-arrangements-for-the-award-of-vtqs-and-other-general-qualifications-in-2021>.

Back to school campaign

On 27 February the government launched its #BackToSchool campaign to reassure parents and students that schools and colleges are ready for their return on 8 March.

As outlined in my last letter to you, students will begin returning to the classroom on 8 March, backed by a robust testing programme for secondary schools and college students and all staff, a process which is already well-established with more than four million tests conducted across schools, colleges and universities since January.

I recognise the benefits of being back in school or college to young people's education, development, and wellbeing. The #BackToSchool campaign highlights those and sets out the extra testing capacity and the strengthened safety requirements available to primary and secondary settings.

I believe that parents, carers and pupils will visit the campaign site and be reassured that we have a range of protective measures in place so that we can get children and young people back to school safely.

Rapid COVID tests available to households with children of school age

I have always emphasised that getting all children back in the classroom from 8 March is a hugely important step in helping them recover from the impact of the pandemic and that it will bring huge benefits to their education and wellbeing.

As we cautiously ease restrictions in England, starting with the return of schools, we need to be sure that each COVID-19 case is found as quickly and as easily as possible.

As laid out in the roadmap, secondary school and college students will now be tested twice a week, receiving three initial tests at school or college before transitioning to twice weekly home testing. Primary school children will not be regularly asymptotically tested due to low levels of transmission between younger aged children but will continue to need to come forward for tests if they have symptoms.

In addition to this, on 28 February the Government confirmed that twice-weekly testing using rapid lateral flow tests will be given for free to all families and households with primary, secondary school and college aged children and young

people, including childcare and support bubbles, to help find more COVID-19 cases and break chains of transmission. Twice-weekly testing will also be offered to adults working in the wider school community, including bus drivers and after school club leaders.

With about a third of individuals with coronavirus showing no symptoms and potentially spreading it without knowing, targeted, regular testing will mean more positive cases within households are found and prevented from entering schools and colleges, helping to keep educational settings safe.

I am confident that testing family members will provide yet another layer of reassurance to parents and education staff that schools are as safe as possible, building on the massive increase in testing for secondary school and college students, and strengthened requirements around face coverings in areas where social distancing cannot be maintained.

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 28 February, I can confirm that 1,217,194 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 9 data indicates that 183 pupils out of every thousand were in school with over 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 9 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-9>

The Department's analysis for week 8 data indicates that there were an estimated 453,000 children attending early years childcare settings on Thursday 18 February, which is approximately 43% of the usual daily level. Data for attendance in early

years settings during the COVID-19 outbreak for week 8 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-8>

Other key updates

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

The Department has updated Coronavirus (COVID-19) school and college performance measures guidance, outlining our approach to school and college accountability, performance tables and data during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. The guidance can be found at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-school-and-college-performance-measures>

The Department 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 has updated the guidance on what all special schools and other specialist settings will need to do during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. the guidance can be found at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-for-full-opening-special-schools-and-other-specialist-settings>

The Department has updated higher education operational guidance and the guidance for HE providers with information on the return of students for the spring term. The publication can be found at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-reopening-buildings-and-campuses>

Ofsted has published its research and analysis video with research findings on remote learning and what has worked well for some children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). The video can be accessed through:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/remote-education-and-send>

Ofqual and Chief Regulator, Simon Lebus, published an article explaining in detail the arrangements for awarding qualification in 2021. The authored article can be found at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/how-qualifications-will-be-awarded-in-2021>

Ofqual launched an open consultation on regulatory arrangements for the awarding of vocational and technical and other general qualifications in 2020-2021. The new regulatory framework will be called the VTQ Contingency Regulatory Framework (VCRF) and the consultation closes on 11 March 2021. It can be accessed at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/regulatory-arrangements-for-the-awarding-of-vocational-and-technical-and-other-general-qualifications-in-2020-2021>

Ofqual launched an open consultation on Conditions and Requirements for GCSE, GCE, AEA and Project qualifications in summer 2021. The consultation closes on 11 March 2021 and can be accessed at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-the-general-qualifications-alternative-awarding-framework>

I hope you find this information useful.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'G. Williamson', with a large circular flourish at the end.

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education