



Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP
Minister of State for School Standards

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Catherine McKinnell MP
Chair of the Petitions Committee
House of Commons
London
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8 April 2020

Dear Catherine,

Thank you for your letter of 30 March to the Secretary of State about COVID-19. I am replying as I attended the Petitions Committee Session on 25 March 2020.

School Closures and Exams

Keeping children, young people, and those who work with them safe is our first priority. We are experiencing unprecedented times and decisions to re-open schools will only be made where health advice indicates it is safe to do so. We are therefore continuing to monitor the situation closely but our priority remains the health and safety of pupils and teachers. We are encouraging nurseries and childminders, schools, and colleges to continue to look after vulnerable children, and the children of critical workers, throughout the Easter holidays.

We are working closely with Ofqual, the independent qualifications regulator, and awarding organisations to ensure candidates are awarded a fair grade that recognises their work to date. If a student does not believe the correct process has been followed in their case, they will be able to appeal on that basis. In addition, if they are unhappy with their calculated grade, they will have the opportunity to sit an exam, as soon as is reasonably possible after schools and colleges open again. Students will also have the option to sit their exams in summer 2021, in line with usual practice.

Ofqual will make every effort to ensure that the process agreed does not disadvantage any particular group of students.. Ofqual will develop a fair and robust process that takes into account a broad range of evidence, including predicted grades, teacher assessment, and prior attainment.

Schooling for children of key workers and vulnerable children

It is important to underline that schools, colleges, nurseries and childminders remain safe places for children. Nevertheless, the fewer children making the journey to school, and the fewer children in childcare, the lower the risk that the virus can spread and infect vulnerable individuals in wider society. We have issued [social distancing guidance](#) to help educational establishments ensure that the risk of virus spread for both staff and children is as low as possible.

'Vulnerable children' include those who have a social worker and those children and young people up to the age of 25 with education, health and care plans (EHCPs). In some cases, EHCPs will have been put in place to help a child with mental health problems. Our guidance makes clear that all children with an EHCP should be risk-assessed by their school or college in consultation with the local authority and parents, to decide whether they need to continue to be offered a school or college place in order to meet their needs, or whether they can safely have their needs met at home. We have also acknowledged that schools and other education providers may also want to support other children who are vulnerable, and would support such action being taken where schools and other education providers are able to do so. Where a child's needs can be safely met at home, they should be, to reduce the risk of infection.

Safeguarding provisions continue to apply, and processes for keeping children safe will remain in place. Schools should work with LAs to monitor the welfare of vulnerable children who are not attending school, and other pupils they might wish to keep in touch with, for safeguarding purposes.

Where schools and colleges are looking after children of critical workers and vulnerable children on site, they should ensure appropriate support is in place. Support for pupils and students in the current circumstances can include existing activity in the school such as counselling services (although this may be delivered in different ways, for example over the phone) or from specialist staff or support services. Guidance providing advice to schools on [mental health and behavior](#) is available, with sources of further support and guidance.

We have [published guidance](#) to support adults with caring responsibilities to support the mental health and wellbeing of their children and young people during the coronavirus outbreak. This includes information for helping young people cope with stressful situations, guidance for supporting children with different types of needs, and for those caring for young people that are accessing mental health provision.

We have made clear in our guidance that schools, colleges, nurseries, and social workers should be agreeing with families whether children in need should be attending the relevant education setting, and then following up on any pupil that they were expecting to attend, who does not. Schools, colleges, nurses and social workers should also follow up with any parent or carer who

has arranged care for their child and the child subsequently does not attend. In all circumstances where a vulnerable child does not take up their place at school, or discontinues, the school should notify their social worker.

Higher Education

I understand the concerns about changes to university tuition, but teaching, learning, and assessment has not stopped. A large number of universities and other organisations delivering higher education are working to ensure that students' education continues through the use of online platforms and other digital delivery. We are working closely with sector representative bodies to understand the impact of COVID-19 and the immediate financial implications for students and the higher education sector. It is important to stress, however, that over the coming weeks and months, the Student Loan Company (SLC) will continue to make scheduled tuition and maintenance payments to both students and higher education institutions. These payments will continue irrespective of institutional closures or whether education has moved online. This has been communicated via the SLC website and via its network of account managers.

Throughout this challenging period we are working closely with SLC to ensure its own systems can cope with the increased numbers of questions and queries from customers and consider the delivery mechanism for any potential changes to student finance policy. It is communicating directly with students and the sector to ensure they are kept up to date on the latest information and official government guidance.

We are encouraging universities and private hall providers to be fair in their decisions about rent charges for student accommodation during this period and a number of large companies, such as Unite, have waived rents for the summer term or released students early from their contracts. The Chancellor has announced support packages for businesses, and any private providers of student accommodation who decide to refund rents should consider those. Students who are tenants with individual private landlords may wish to consider discussing the possibility of an early release from their lease.

With best wishes.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Yan Miao' followed by a stylized surname.