



**Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP**  
Minister of State for School Standards

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Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP  
Chair of the Education Select Committee  
House of Commons  
London  
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14 April 2020

Dear Robert

During the Education Select Committee call on 25 March, I offered to write to you to provide further information on how we are protecting the most vulnerable children and young people during this period of school and college closure. I have also included some further information about continued provision of food for children eligible for a free school meal and about local partnership working between local authorities (LAs) and voluntary organisations.

#### Protecting Vulnerable Children

We remain committed to ensuring the safety and protection of vulnerable children and young people throughout this period of social distancing to suppress the transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19). Therefore, while schools and colleges are closed to most children, we have made exceptions for those with a parent who is a critical worker and for vulnerable children.

The definition of critical worker includes people working in schools, colleges, nurseries, childminders and pupil referral units so that parents working in these sectors can continue to provide these crucial services. Those working in children's social care are also included in recognition of their important role in protecting the safety, health and wellbeing of vulnerable children and young people.

In relation to current school and college provision, the definition of vulnerable includes children and young people with a social worker, those who have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). We have also given flexibility for the LA, school or college to include other children they consider particularly vulnerable and want to support. Many children with an EHCP can be safely

looked after at home, and we recommend all children with EHCPs should be risk assessed by their school or college, in consultation with the LA and parents, to decide whether they need to continue to be offered a school or college place, or whether they can safely have their needs met at home.

For those children and young people with a social worker, we are clear that they should continue to attend school or college, where it is safe for them to do so, and we have set this out in guidance published on gov.uk, which can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-vulnerable-children-and-young-people>.

LAs have the main day-to-day responsibility for children's social care, but schools should ensure they have a process in place to check on the welfare of any vulnerable child who does not attend, unless this has been agreed in advance by their social worker. If parents do not want to bring their child to school, and their child is considered vulnerable, the social worker and school should explore the reasons for this, directly with the parent, and help to resolve any concerns or difficulties wherever possible. We are closely monitoring attendance of vulnerable children and are considering what more can be done to support attendance, including for example through Virtual School Heads who already work with looked after children.

We continue to work closely with the Association of Directors of Children's Services, the Local Government Association and individual LAs to develop further options for how schools and social workers can support vulnerable children, and to ensure our collective public message is as clear as possible. We are already identifying and sharing examples of good practice. In North Lincolnshire for example, we know that SEND, inclusion and social care teams are working together to ensure that schools know who their vulnerable children are and can confirm whether those children are attending school. When children are absent, the LA's social workers are risk assessing each vulnerable child and contacting each family to encourage attendance. In Essex social workers have written to all children in need and children in care to explain how they will remain in contact with children during this period of school and college closure. Social workers in Essex have also written to care leavers to provide them with practical information and guidance about how to manage any issues that arise including financial advice and support with mental health.

The department has also recently formed 9 'Regional Education and Children's Teams' (REACT) to co-ordinate our engagement with LAs across education and children's services.

The REACT teams are led by the Regional Schools Commissioners and include Ofsted's Regional Directors and policy teams from across DfE covering children's social care, early years, special educational needs and disabilities, further education, and regional delivery. REACT teams will hold two weekly meetings, to pool intelligence and collectively assess risks across LA areas, identify common themes or live issues to feed back to policy teams, and provide additional support and guidance to LAs.

## Provisions in the Coronavirus Act 2020 for Social Workers

We are also taking steps to increase the number of social workers available to support vulnerable children and young people. Through the Coronavirus Act we are able to bring retired social workers back onto the register of social workers held by the regulator, Social Work England. This will allow those with the skills and experience to return to practice and support the social care sector. Social Work England has now reinstated the professional registration of 8,000 former social workers so they can fill vital roles in local communities across England in this critical situation.

On 2 April we launched, alongside Social Work England and the Local Government Association, *Social Work Together*. This is a campaign to help social workers register their interest to return to practice with LAs. A website has been launched, which can be accessed at [local.gov.uk/social-work-together](https://local.gov.uk/social-work-together) which connects those offering their expertise to local employers.

## Free School Meals

We have recently launched a national scheme to enable schools to issue vouchers to all families eligible for free school meals. This national scheme allows schools to order a voucher of £15 per week and send the e-code to the parents or carers to use in a range of supermarkets. Schools will not have to pay for these vouchers as the costs for this scheme will be picked up centrally by DfE. Further information on free school meal provision can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance/covid-19-free-school-meals-guidance-for-schools>.

## Partnership Working

The Department for Education encourages schools, LAs, health organisations, social care teams and the wider voluntary and community sector to work together collaboratively to support our most vulnerable children at this difficult time. I know the voluntary sector has a depth of expertise about working with vulnerable children and is a vital local partner. I am pleased that charities and voluntary organisations are already playing an important role and I know LAs will continue to work closely with them. This assistance is greatly appreciated.

With best wishes.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Yours sincerely Nick Gibb'.

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