



**Permanent Secretary**

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Dame Meg Hillier MP  
Chair, Public Accounts Committee  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA

1 August 2021

Dear Meg,

**3rd PAC Report of Session 2020-21 – COVID 19: Support for children's education**

**Recommendation 1 - The Department should carry out a systematic lessons-learned exercise, to evaluate its response to the pandemic and identify departmental specific lessons. It should then write to us, setting out its main findings.**

Thank you for setting out the Committees recommendations following the Public Accounts Committee hearing on 25 March 2021. I am writing to update the Committee regarding the lessons learned from our response to COVID-19.

We are committed to looking at lessons learned across DfE to improve our approaches and deliver the best outcomes for children and learners. We do so regularly and systematically. At this stage, with the pandemic not yet over, our focus is on rapid-cycle improvement through practical test, learn and improve approaches, rather than big set-piece exercises. This is essential in supporting us in building back stronger and improving operational delivery.

We have built on our experience and feedback from stakeholders, including the NAO, to learn lessons and improve our response. For example, our Free School Meals (FSM) provision and improvements to our National Voucher Scheme to support children eligible for FSM since the first lockdown; or the fact that we improved our approach to working with stakeholders which prompted us to move to a more user-oriented approach to guidance and increase our communications during 2021 attendance restrictions, acting throughout on previously provided feedback.

Given that the response to the pandemic has been so deeply interconnected across Government, we feel it is important to take forward the PAC recommendation in a way that is consistent and developed collaboratively with broader evaluation of the pandemic response across Government. This will ensure we can create richer lessons learned, across the whole response.

This will of course form part of the COVID-19 inquiry in 2022, and we are engaging with Cabinet Office officials to ensure we are appropriately involved in any cross-government lessons learned activity ahead of that date. Once activity is confirmed, we will ensure that DfE is appropriately involved.

Thank you for taking the time to question us on such important issues. We hope the above addresses any further queries that you had, and I look forward to our future engagements.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Acland-Hood', written in a cursive style.

**SUSAN ACLAND-HOOD  
PERMANENT SECRETARY**