



Vicky Ford MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families

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2nd September 2020

Letter from Minister Ford to children and young people with SEND, their families and carers, and those who work to support them

As minister with responsibility for special educational needs, I wanted to write to you about support for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) to return to school.

Return to school

I am extremely grateful to those working in schools and colleges for the preparations they have made to ensure all children and young people can get back into the classroom, with many returning for the first time since March. I recognise that for children and young people with SEND, and their families and carers and those who work tirelessly to support them, this is a particularly challenging and anxious time.

Returning to education is vital for the education of all children and for their wellbeing – time out of school is detrimental for children's development, particularly for disadvantaged and vulnerable children. All children and young people value the structure and routine of regular attendance as well as the support and strong positive relationships provided by their school or college. It is critical that all children can once again benefit from a full time five day a week on-site education.

I do recognise, though, that the return to school may be more difficult for some children and young people, particularly those who have had to shield, received their education remotely without full access to specialist support, or been exposed to a range of adversity and trauma including bereavement, anxiety and in some cases increased welfare and safeguarding risks. Schools and colleges should work with children and young people with SEND and their families and carers so that they receive the education, therapeutic/specialist support, and reasonable adjustments that they need. The prolonged period of absence from schools and colleges may contribute to disengagement with education upon return to school, resulting in anxiety which could lead to increased incidence of poor behaviour. School leaders should be mindful that disruptive behaviour might be the result of unmet educational or other needs and consider whether a multiagency assessment is necessary.

The Whole School SEND (WSS) Consortium have produced a handbook to support educational professionals to successfully re-engage pupils with learning after a period of disruption. They have also produced a COVID-19 SEND Review Guide to help schools reflect on their provision before September and a leaflet to support families and carers ask questions to schools to support successful returns. These resources are available on the [SEND Gateway](#) and webinars are hosted on [WSS's YouTube page](#) shortly after being delivered. Details of future training sessions are held on the [events page](#) of the SEND Gateway. You can opt to join Whole School SEND's [community of practice](#) when you sign up for an event to receive notifications about future training and resources as they are published.

Behaviour policies

To assist all school leaders and staff in welcoming back all pupils, we have developed [a tool for mainstream schools to support the re-engagement of pupils](#). To further support schools, our full opening guidance advises that [schools](#) and [specialist settings](#) should update their behaviour policy to reflect the new protective measures, as well as any new rules and routines.

In the event that a pupil's behaviour warrants disciplinary action, the normal rules apply and the disciplinary powers, including exclusion, that schools currently have remain in place. Permanent exclusion should only be used as a last resort and must be lawful, reasonable, and fair. Where a child with a social worker is at risk of exclusion, their social worker should be informed and involved in relevant conversations. Any disciplinary exclusion of a pupil, even for short periods of time, must be consistent with the relevant legislation. Headteachers should, as far as possible, avoid permanently excluding any pupil with an Education, Health and Care Plan. Pre-empting that a pupil may commit a disciplinary offence, and thus not allowing a pupil to attend school is an unlawful exclusion.

Ofsted will continue to consider exclusions, including the rates, patterns and reasons for exclusion and to look for any evidence of off-rolling. **Off-rolling is never acceptable**. Ofsted is clear that schools placing pressure on parents to remove their child from the school (including to home educate their child) is a form of off-rolling. Elective Home Education should always be a positive choice taken following a discussion between parents the school, and the local authority about how the needs of the child might best be met. This is particularly important where vulnerable children, children in need, and those at greater risk of harm are involved.

Risk assessments

It may be necessary to undertake individual risk assessments to understand the level of additional support a child or young person may need. These can help reassure pupils, families and carers, and staff that it is safe for the pupil to be welcomed back to school. Risk assessments should inform a plan of action which focuses on supporting attendance and engagement and identifies what additional support children and young people need to make a successful return to their full time education. Such an assessment would also be useful if children and young

people have to self-isolate or if a local outbreak of Covid-19 requires a school or college to return to more limited attendance.

Face coverings

To provide further reassurance, we have also updated our guidance on face coverings. Schools and colleges will have the discretion to require face coverings in indoor communal areas where social distancing cannot be safely managed, if they believe that it is right in their particular circumstances. In [areas of national government intervention](#) where the transmission of the virus is high, in education settings where Year 7 and above are educated, face coverings should be worn by adults (staff and visitors) and pupils when moving around indoors, such as in corridors and communal areas where social distancing is difficult to maintain.

However, we have been clear that some individuals are [exempt from wearing face coverings](#), including people who cannot put on, wear or remove a face covering because of a physical or mental illness or impairment or disability or people who are speaking to or providing assistance to someone who relies on lip reading, clear sound or facial expression to communicate. The same exemptions will apply in education settings, including for staff providing specialist interventions and therapies, and we would expect teachers and other staff to be sensitive to those needs. More information on face coverings can be found [here](#).

Specialist and visiting practitioners

Settings should minimise the number of visitors where possible, however, visiting specialists such as therapists, clinicians, peripatetic teachers and other support staff for pupils with SEND should provide interventions as usual, including moving between settings as required. Visitors may also include NHS staff, such as those delivering vaccinations as part of the national childhood immunisation programme, which are essential for children's health and wellbeing. Such specialists will be aware of the PPE most appropriate for their role.

Mental health and wellbeing

There will be some children and young people with SEND who will return to school with additional social, emotional and mental health needs. NHS mental health services remain open and have adapted to provide ongoing support to children and young people who need it. NHS mental health trusts are ensuring ongoing access to 24/7 crisis lines to support people of all ages.

The Wellbeing for Education Return programme will provide £8 million of funding, training, and resources for local authorities to equip education staff with resources, training and ongoing advice and support to promote children and young people's wellbeing and mental health. This will link to and include resources sensitive to and supportive of children and young people with SEND.

Aerosol generating procedures

There are a small number of children with complex needs that require aerosol generating procedures (AGPs) to be undertaken. Schools, health and local authority partners need to work together on how the [current guidance](#) applies in their setting and to the specific children they are working with in order to enable them to return to school safely. We have heard examples of good practice locally and are working with PHE and NHS England to establish whether any changes to the guidance or further information about practice principles are needed. It is important that schools communicate clearly with parents on progress towards supporting children who need AGPs to return to school safely.

Hospital schools

There may be other reasons where any child or young person may be absent from school, including those with SEND. Where children and young people are receiving hospital education on hospital sites then should continue to be supported, including through remote learning support as necessary, to minimise the impact of their hospital stay on their education.

Once again, we would like to thank you for the hard work that you have done to prepare for the full return of children and young people for the new school year.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Vicky Ford", enclosed in a thin black rectangular border.

Vicky Ford MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families