



Baroness Berridge of the Vale of Catmose

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the School System
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Baroness Armstrong
House of Lords
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Dear Baroness Armstrong,

Many thanks for your query following the UQ repeat on 14 May regarding plans for the wider opening of open schools. I understand you were not able to ask your question during virtual proceedings, and have received your follow-up query through my office about the position for vulnerable and disadvantaged children, and what extra the government can do to reassure parents and staff as schools start to re-open again.,

Protecting vulnerable children and young people has always been and continues to be our top priority. We are aware that attending school can be a key protective factor for some vulnerable children– that is why schools, colleges and early years settings have remained open for them throughout the coronavirus outbreak. We too want to see an increase in the number of vulnerable children attending school and therefore we have written to every education provider and every local authority in England – reiterating our expectations and our guidance – both to encourage attendance and to ensure that we are monitoring those who are not attending.

We are closely monitoring the attendance of vulnerable children and young people in schools and other settings and the number of those attending is increasing. On 21 May 75,000 of the children in attendance were classed by schools as vulnerable. We estimate that represents around 15% of all vulnerable children – up from just 5% in early April. This is a positive trend and we expect that upward trend to continue now that primary schools are starting to open up to whole year groups..

It's important to note that vulnerable children are only expected to attend provision where it is appropriate for them to do so. Decisions about that depend on an assessment of need and risk, carried out between the school/provider, parent/carer, local authority, and other relevant partners. Social workers may decide that some children and young people are at less risk at home or in their placement (due to underlying health conditions, for example); or a school/local authority may decide that the needs of a child with an EHC plan can be met more safely at home.

We have put in place additional measures to keep vulnerable children safe when not in school. Our new Regional Education and Care Teams (REACTs), comprising of Department for Education officials and re-deployed Ofsted inspection teams, are working with local authorities directly to ensure the systems and processes for maintaining contact with vulnerable children are robust in every local authority in England. We have supported local authorities with an additional £3.2 billion to help them meet additional demands on them at this time, including on their children's services.

We are continuing to support Childline and are working with the NSPCC to expand and promote the adult helpline by providing them with £1.6 million of funding. This means children have someone to call and more adults will be able to raise concerns and seek advice about the safety and wellbeing of any child that they're worried about.

We've also committed over £100 million to support vulnerable children to access remote education and social care services. We are providing laptops and tablets to vulnerable children who would otherwise not have access and are preparing for examination in Year 10, those receiving support from a social worker, including pre-school children, or are a care leaver.

Where care leavers, children with a social worker at secondary school and disadvantaged children in Year 10 do not have internet connections, we will be providing 4G wireless routers to them so that they can learn at home.

The government is also ensuring every school that wants it has access to free, expert technical support to get set up on Google for Education or Microsoft's Office 365 Education, and offering peer support from schools and colleges leading the way with the use of education technology.

We want to get all children back into education as soon as the scientific advice allows because it is the best place for them to learn, and because we know it is good for their mental wellbeing to have social interactions with other children, carers and teachers. We also recognise, as already mentioned, that this is the best place for vulnerable children to be.

The Prime Minister confirmed on 28 May that all five tests are being met and as a result we have moved forward with the wider opening of schools from 1 June. Primary schools are welcoming back children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 6, while nurseries and other early years providers are welcoming back children of all ages.

Secondary schools, sixth forms and colleges will also provide face-to-face contact for Year 10, Year 12 and equivalent 16-19 further education students to help them prepare for exams next year. It is expected this will begin from 15 June, with a quarter of these secondary students in at any point.

To prevent the spread of coronavirus, schools and other settings should work through the hierarchy of controls that when implemented will create an inherently safer system, where the risk of transmission of infection is reduced. This includes:

- Minimising contact with people who have coronavirus symptoms;
- Promoting high standards of hand and respiratory hygiene;
- Cleaning touched surfaces more frequently; and
- Minimising contact and mixing as much as possible.

The majority of staff in education settings will not require PPE beyond what they would normally need for their work, even if they are not always able to maintain a distance of 2 metres from others. Details of the very small number of cases when PPE is required are set out in our guidance on implementing protective measures.

Additionally, staff and pupils in all settings will be eligible for testing if they display coronavirus symptoms, as will members of their households. A negative test will enable children and young people to get back to childcare or education, and their parents to get back to work. A positive test will ensure rapid action to protect their classmates and staff in their setting.

We are already providing additional funding to schools, on top of existing budgets, to cover unavoidable costs incurred due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak that cannot be met from their existing resources. Schools are eligible to claim for: increased premises related costs associated with keeping schools open during the Easter and/or summer half-term school holidays; support for free school meals for eligible children who are not in school, where schools are not using the national voucher scheme; and additional cleaning costs over and above existing cleaning arrangements, where schools have suspected or confirmed COVID-19 cases. Schools can claim additional funding based on their size, and will be no more than £75,000 per school.

We have published pieces of guidance to provide reassurance and support to parents and education providers on the matters above:

- Guidance for schools on accessing the additional funding to cover unavoidable costs related to the coronavirus outbreak can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-financial-support-for-schools/school-funding-exceptional-costs-associated-with-coronavirus-covid-19-for-the-period-march-to-july-2020>.
- Guidance for education and childcare settings on implementing protective measures, which can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-implementing-protective-measures-in-education-and-childcare-settings>.
- Public Health England (PHE) guidance on cleaning for non-healthcare settings (including education, childcare and children's social care settings), can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings>.
- Information and guidance for parents and carers about the wider opening of nurseries, schools and colleges from 1 June can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/closure-of-educational-settings-information-for-parents-and-carers/reopening-schools-and-other-educational-settings-from-1-june>.
- Guidance for educational providers and partners on supporting vulnerable children and young people during the outbreak can be found here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-vulnerable-children-and-young-people/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-on-vulnerable-children-and-young-people>.

I hope you find this information useful, thank you for taking the time to write to me on these important matters. I am placing a copy of this letter in the House Libraries.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "ER Berridge". The letters "ER" are large and stylized, followed by "Berridge" in a cursive script. A long, thin horizontal line extends from the bottom of the signature.

ELIZABETH BERRIDGE

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER SECRETARY OF STATE