



Department
of Health &
Social Care

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21 July 2020

DfE/DHSC MINISTERIAL LETTER TO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE WITH SEND, THEIR FAMILIES AND THOSE WHO SUPPORT THEM

To all children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), their parents/carers and families, and others who support them.

As we approach the summer holidays, we felt it important to write to you again in advance of the full return to school in September.

We want to express our sincere thanks for the key role that you have all played in the nation's response to dealing with the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. It has been our overarching aim to ensure that children and young people with SEND continue to receive education and support throughout this time, but we recognise that this is likely to have been delivered differently than normal.

We want to update you on the actions that need to be taken to ensure that all pupils return to their schools from September, and respond to some of the concerns and questions that you have raised.

We recognise that some children with SEND will have additional health and behavioural vulnerabilities and may have been advised to shield in the early stages of the pandemic, and so a return to a more normal life might feel a big step. We want to assure you that we recognise this challenge and we are doing everything we can to support a safe return.

Below we:

- explain the importance of all pupils returning to school from September
- signpost our guidance to help educational settings prepare for the full return of pupils; and
- address the key concerns that have been shared with us about all pupils returning.

Learning lessons from the pandemic

Good practice has emerged as result of our response to the pandemic, which we are committed to building on as we move to the next phase of our response. For example, we understand from key stakeholders that there has been an improvement in collaboration between education and health care services in many areas. We will seek to identify and share this best practice where we can.

Once again, we want to express our thanks for everything you have done and are continuing to do as we respond and recover, together, from the pandemic.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Helen Whately', enclosed in a light blue rectangular box.

Helen Whately MP
Minister of State for Care

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Vicky Ford', with a horizontal line extending from the end.

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

Full return to schools from September

We start from a belief that all children and young people should return to school full time to receive face-to-face education and support. This is particularly important for those with SEND. We recognise your concerns but we are clear that the benefits of being back in the classroom far outweigh the very low risk of contracting the virus, and schools can take action to reduce that risk even further.

On 2 July, the Secretary of State for Education announced the government's intention for all pupils to return full time to school from the beginning of the autumn term. This means that, from September, children and young people with SEND should continue to receive the therapeutic and other specialist interventions they would receive ordinarily.

We are adopting this approach because the scientific advice indicates that the prevalence of COVID-19 has decreased, the NHS Test and Trace system is up and running, and we are clear about the measures that need to be in place to create safer environments within schools.

Children should continue to shield until 31 July. From 1 August, following the pausing of guidance, children will be able to return to school in line with their peers and school terms. Any child may need support in adjusting as they become accustomed to life back in school. Some pupils no longer required to shield but who generally remain under the care of a specialist health professional may need to discuss their care with their health professional before returning to school. More generally, where a pupil is unable to attend their setting because they are complying with clinical or public health advice, we expect settings to be able to immediately offer them access to remote education.

We know that some of you are concerned that the level of transmission is not yet low enough or that children and young people will not be able to adhere to protective measures that are put in place. We can reassure you that we have not taken this decision lightly, and it is based on the latest available evidence. The latest advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) shows that children are at a lower risk than adults, and are no more likely to transmit the disease. This is supported by recent data from the Office for National Statistics.

It is important to note that all staff, children, young people and their families will continue to have access to testing if they develop COVID-19 symptoms, and your school will be provided with a small number of easy to use home testing kits for those who might not otherwise receive one. If an individual tests positive, schools will receive direct support and advice from their local Public Health England health protection team.

Guidance for educational settings

To support the full opening of schools, we have published a suite of guidance outlining the steps that educational settings need to take to ensure that children and young people SEND return to full-time provision from September:

- [Guidance for full opening: special schools and other specialist settings](#)

- [Actions for early years and childcare providers during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#)
- [Guidance for full opening – schools](#)
- [What FE colleges and providers will need to do from the start of the 2020 autumn term](#)

Our starting point is that staff working day in, day out with children, young people with SEND and their families are best-placed to understand individual needs and the adjustments that need to be made before the full return in September. This knowledge and expertise underpins the guidance for special schools and other specialist settings. The guidance provides a framework, approved by Public Health England, setting out the high level actions that all schools must undertake before the start of the autumn term.

Physical environment for those working with SEND children and young people

Our return to school guidance sets out a ‘system of controls’ to help reduce the risk of transmission. We know that for those working with SEND children and young people, maintaining physical distance – including by forming ‘bubbles’ – can be more difficult, because staff come into close contact with those pupils or students. Schools should work through the system of controls, and put in place the most appropriate measures for their circumstances, without compromising the quality of teaching or care.

Additionally, in considering risk, it is important to remember that the average special school has around 100 pupils, which can be a bubble in itself, and significantly limits mixing. For mainstream settings, we are recommending that children and young people are kept in class bubbles to minimise mixing. Where this is not possible, schools could create group bubbles, which for mainstream secondary schools can be in excess of 100 pupils.

Helping children and young people prepare for their return to school

To ensure that children and young people receive the support they need to return to school, unless the evidence changes, we will not be issuing further national notices to modify the duty on local authorities and health commissioning bodies to secure or arrange the special educational and health care provision set out in a child or young person’s education, health and care (EHC) plan. Our focus will increasingly be on supporting local authorities, health bodies and schools as they work towards full provision being restored for all children and young people with EHC plans. We are calling on local services to prioritise support to children and young people with SEND so that they are able to access their usual therapies and other help they need to be in school. We will consider whether any flexibilities may be required locally to respond to outbreaks.

We have also introduced a catch up package worth £1 billion including a ‘Catch-Up Premium’ worth a total of £650m to support schools to make up for lost teaching time. This funding could be used for specific support such as intervention programmes, extra teaching capacity, Speech and Language Therapists, Educational Psychologists, and access to technology or summer schools. Although

headteachers will decide how this premium is spent, according to the needs of their pupils, our expectation is that this funding will be spent on additional activities required to support children to catch-up. The Education Endowment Foundation has published [National Tutoring Programme Guidance](#) on effective interventions to support schools.

Alongside this, we have announced a new £350m National Tutoring Programme for disadvantaged pupils. This will increase access to high-quality tuition for disadvantaged and vulnerable children and young people, helping to accelerate their academic progress and tackling the attainment gap between them and their peers.

In addition, we have announced that out of school settings providing childcare, short break or respite services will be able to open from 1 July and into the summer holiday. We know that access to these services has been especially challenging over the past few months, and that this has had a significant impact on many families. We updated [Protective measures for out-of-school settings during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#) and [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance for children's social care services](#) to make clear that respite provision for children, young people with SEND and their families should be prioritised now that services have re-opened, particularly over the summer holidays to help prepare for the return to school.

Safety will be a key factor in the wider opening of services and for families looking to access these services again. Local authorities will continue working with their short break providers in order to ensure they operate safely. It is important there is maximum flexibility to enable children to access services once again. For example, by sharing or combining services, and operating at alternative venues where necessary. We know that some services have already been adapted for disabled children and their families who are still required to shield, many of whom are experiencing some of the most profound impacts of this outbreak, and we encourage this vital provision.

Despite the many challenges, we have seen some wonderful practice of short break providers quickly adapting their support for families. The Council for Disabled Children has worked with providers to produce [Short Break Learning Examples](#). These case studies are examples of the effective ways services they are operating safely, and opening more widely, so that children, young people and their families can access vital support with confidence.

Transport to and from school

We recognise the importance of transport for children and young people with SEND and that their individual care needs, the type of vehicles and journeys may make it harder to reduce mixing and implement other protective measures. We are asking all settings with SEND children and young people to work closely with their local authority and their transport providers to implement measures that best reflect your particular circumstances, after undertaking a risk assessment. We are working with the Department for Transport, Public Health England and key stakeholders to finalise new guidance for local authorities on providing dedicated school transport.