



Vicky Ford MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families

Sanctuary Buildings 20 Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT
tel: 0370 000 2288 www.education.gov.uk/help/contactus

21 July 2020

Dear Colleagues,

The last few months have been an unprecedented and challenging period for all of us but particularly for children and young people with complex special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and their families.

I want to express my sincere thanks and gratitude for the work you, as leaders, have done since the start of the pandemic, you are the glue that holds your school and the community it serves together. I particularly want to pay tribute to those new leaders; what a time for you to take up your first head teacher position! It is truly heart-warming to hear stories of how fantastic leadership is helped communities stay together.

I would also like to thank your teams for the work they have done to ensure that children and young people with complex needs continue to receive the high quality education and support they need. You have all gone above and beyond what is normally expected of you. I am deeply grateful for, and proud of, your tireless work in difficult circumstances. As we move towards the summer holidays, I hope you and your team will take the time to reflect on and take pride in your achievements as well as get some well-deserved rest. Your support in developing our guidance, and in providing feedback from the specialist sector, has been essential to our response. You are truly inspirational people and excellent advocates for the children and young people in your care.

On 2 July, the Secretary of State announced our intention for all pupils to return full time to school from the beginning of the autumn term. This is 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 safe environments.

Full return from September

It is essential that all children and young people return to their school from the start of the autumn term in September. It is particularly important for those with complex SEND so that they receive the high-quality education, professional care and specialist support that they need. From the start of the autumn term, attendance at specialist educational settings will become mandatory again, in line with mainstream primary and secondary schools. Children and young people with SEND should also continue to receive the therapeutic and other specialist interventions they would receive ordinarily.

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.

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, you will receive direct support and advice from your local Public Health England health protection team.

I know from my discussions with key stakeholders, and from feedback from the sector that there are concerns unique to specialist educational settings. Most of these are addressed in guidance, but I would like to offer further reassurance here.

Guidance for special schools

Our starting point is that staff working day in, day out with children and young people with the most complex SEND are best-placed to understand their pupils' 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](#), which we published on 2 July. 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.

I want to address four key issues that I know are of the most concern for special schools – the physical environment of your schools, ensuring the right support is available, the impact of COVID-19 on school budgets and transport to and from schools.

Physical environment of specialist settings

The special school guidance, in common with the [mainstream return to school guidance](#), sets out a 'system of controls' to help reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection. I know that for special schools, maintaining physical distance – including by forming 'bubbles' – can be more difficult, because staff come into closer contact with children and young people. Each special school is unique both in its physical environment and in relation to the needs of its pupils and staff. You 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 will significantly limit mixing and to best meet the needs of their pupils schools may wish to adopt whole school bubbles.

Ensuring children and young people receive the support they need

To ensure that children and young people receive the support they need, 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. We will consider whether any such flexibilities may be required locally to respond to outbreaks.

In addition, I want to signpost our announcement of 1 July which said that out of school settings providing childcare, short break or respite services will be able to open from that date and into the summer holiday. I 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.

Funding impact of COVID-19 on school budgets

I know that many of you are concerned about the costs associated with making sure that your special schools are "COVID-19 secure", coupled with concerns about the recent funding changes for Year 7 catch-up and legacy issues with High Needs Funding block deficits or variabilities.

This year we are allocating £7.2 billion through the high needs funding formula. Every local authority has received an increase of at least 8% per head of the estimated 2-18 population in their area, with many local authorities receiving a higher percentage increase. On 20 July, we published local authorities' core allocations to support children with high needs in 2021-22. Further information is in [the national funding formulae for schools and high needs](#) guidance.

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 best 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.

Transport

I also recognise the importance of transport for children and young people attending special schools, and that their individual care needs and the type of vehicles and journeys may make it harder to reduce mixing and implement other protective measures. You will need to work closely with your local authority and its transport providers to implement measures that best reflect your 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.

I know that there are likely to be some children, young people and families who are concerned about returning to school, so it is important that they understand the adaptations to the usual routine that will be put in place and the support that will be provided to ensure full attendance from September. It is also important that all communications about the return to school are developed in co-production with parents and carers and clear about expectations.

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

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Vicky Ford". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left.

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