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Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP
Minister of State for School Standards

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Rt Hon Sir George Howarth MP
By email: george.howarth.mp@parliament.uk

2 December 2020

Dear George,

Thank you for your email of 17 August, addressed to the Secretary of State, enclosing correspondence from your constituent [REDACTED], regarding the wider opening of schools in the autumn term. I am replying as the Minister of State for School Standards.

I am extremely sorry for the unacceptable delay in responding to your letter and to your constituent's concerns. This has been caused by a significant increase in the number of letters we have received alongside the increased workload for civil servants as we continue to tackle the consequences of the COVID-19 outbreak for the education sector.

Schools have been open for all pupils since the start of the autumn term. The Government continues to prioritise the wellbeing and long term future of our children and young people in keeping schools open, as time spent out of education is detrimental for children's cognitive and academic development.

Following the Prime Minister's announcement on 23 November, schools will continue to remain open to all pupils in all tiers. We aim to ensure that all pupils, in all year groups, remain in school full time. Any restrictions on education would only be as a last resort and may only be initiated following a ministerial decision. We have published a contingency framework to set out how restrictions would be implemented as a containment measure for the rare circumstances in which they are required to address transmission within education settings and the community. This is available at: tinyurl.com/Y5xzn6me.

The Chief Medical Officers (CMOs) and Deputy Chief Medical Officers of England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales set out the evidence of risks and benefits to health from schools opening. They concluded that the risk of long term harm from COVID-19 due solely to attending school is low, while the risk of long term harm from not attending school is high. Schools are a vital point of contact for public health and safeguarding services. A statement from the CMOs is available at: tinyurl.com/Y3764m7v.

On 2 July, we published guidance regarding the wider opening of schools, which is available at: [tinyurl.com/YassJxxb](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/returning-to-schools). The guidance applies to all schools, including school based nurseries and boarding schools. We expect independent schools to follow the control measures set out in the guidance.

The guidance also covers expectations for children with special educational needs and disabilities, including those with education, health and care plans in mainstream schools. Separate guidance is available for early years, further education colleges and special schools. The measures set out in the guidance provide a framework for schools to put in place proportionate protective measures for children and staff. This includes the public health advice schools must follow to minimise the risks of COVID-19 transmission.

Together, this guidance forms a Public Health England (PHE) endorsed system of controls that builds on the protective measures that have been in use throughout the coronavirus outbreak. This system of controls is a set of measures that all schools must implement for prevention and response to infection. When implemented in line with a revised risk assessment, this creates an inherently safer environment for children and staff where the risk of transmission of infection is substantially reduced.

All staff, pupils and their families will continue to have access to testing if they develop COVID-19 symptoms. All schools have been sent an initial supply of 10 home test kits and information about how to order to replenish this supply when they are running out. Schools can contact the dedicated advice service introduced by PHE and delivered by the NHS Business Services Authority. This can be reached by calling the Department's helpline on 0800 046 8687 and selecting option 1. Schools will be put through to advisers who will inform them of what action is needed based on the latest public health advice.

The advice service will carry out a rapid risk assessment to confirm who has been in close contact with the person during the period that they were infectious, and ensure they are asked to self-isolate. If further expert advice is required, the adviser will escalate the school's call to the PHE local health protection team. Based on their advice, schools must send home those people who have been in close contact with the person who has tested positive, advising them to self-isolate for 14 days since they were last in close contact with that person when they were infectious.

School attendance will continue to be mandatory and the usual rules on attendance apply. Parents of school age children have a duty to secure their child's regular attendance at the school where they are registered. A time limited change to social restrictions over Christmas does not require any children to be taken out of school prematurely and schools should not change their holidays or close early this term. Schools and local authorities can issue penalty notices and conduct prosecutions from the autumn term onwards. However, penalty notices and prosecutions will be a last resort and parents will not be penalised if their child's nonattendance at school is as result of following clinical or public health advice relating to COVID-19.

From 2 December, pupils who remain in the clinically extremely vulnerable group should return to school at all local restriction tiers unless they are one of the very small number of pupils or students under paediatric or NHS care, such as recent transplant or very immunosuppressed children, and have been advised specifically by their GP or clinician not to attend school.

The Government may reintroduce more restrictive formal shielding measures for the clinically extremely vulnerable in the worst affected areas, based on advice from the Chief Medical Officer. This will only apply to some areas in tier 3. The Government will write to families separately to inform them if clinically extremely vulnerable children are advised to shield and not attend school. Children who live with someone who is clinically extremely vulnerable, but who are not clinically extremely vulnerable themselves, should still attend school. The guidance on shielding and protecting people who are clinically extremely vulnerable from COVID-19 is available at: [tinyurl.com/Y277sGee](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/protecting-people-who-are-clinically-extremely-vulnerable-from-covid-19).

If an area moves to the local restriction tier 2 or tier 3, in schools where Year 7 and above are educated, face coverings should be worn by adults, including staff and visitors, and pupils when moving around indoors where social distancing is difficult to maintain. It will not usually be necessary to wear face coverings in the classroom, where protective measures already mean the risks are lower.

Outside of local restriction tiers 2 and 3, 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. This approach does not apply to children in primary schools, where the risks to children are lower. The system of controls we have asked schools and colleges to implement will sufficiently minimise risk in classrooms.

Based on current evidence and the measures that schools are already putting in place, such as the system of controls and consistent bubbles, face coverings will not be necessary in the classroom even where social distancing is not possible.

It is critical to ensure that the education provided to children and young people in these challenging times is not only safe, but high quality. Schools should continue to teach an ambitious and broad curriculum in all subjects, with some adaptations to help pupils catch up, alongside the financial support provided through the Government's £1 billion coronavirus catch up package. This funding includes a £650 million catch up premium for state funded primary, secondary and special schools, and a £350 million National Tutoring Programme for the most disadvantaged pupils. Evidence shows that two hours a week of tutoring for a disadvantaged pupil for six to twelve weeks can result in five months of catch up.

We recognise that all children and young people have had their education disrupted as a result of COVID-19. It is our ambition to ensure that all pupils have the chance to make up for this lost education, ensuring that everyone can reach their potential in the long term.

With best wishes.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Neil', written in a cursive style.