



Vicky Ford MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families

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Dear colleagues,

I want to express my heartfelt thanks to everyone in the Alternative Provision (AP) sector for all you are doing to support vulnerable young people, the children of critical workers and, of course, your own staff at this very difficult time. I am particularly grateful for the leadership you have shown across the sector, as you deploy the considerable skills and experience of the AP workforce to help local authorities and education settings consider the best ways to protect and support vulnerable young people during this outbreak.

The nature of the current situation, and pace at which things are moving, means there is inevitably a lot of uncertainty. This is why we are also talking to PRUsAP, the AP/SEND CEO Network and a number of individual AP schools, local authorities and MATs to understand the pressures you are facing and to make sure we are focusing our efforts in the right place. I will also be setting up a representative stakeholder group that will enable me to keep in regular contact with the sector during this time. It is of paramount importance that we remain focused on protecting vulnerable young people from harm while understanding the unique challenges facing AP providers and those being faced by all schools as we work to slow the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19).

When referring to vulnerable children, the Government means those with Education, Health and Care Plans and those with a social worker. Local authorities and schools may identify other children they consider vulnerable for other reasons. **For those children with a social worker, our expectation is that they should be in school unless a risk assessment concludes they will be safer at home.** It is vital that all other children should remain at home where it is safe for them to do so.

For AP settings – including Pupil Referral Units, AP Free Schools and AP Academies - our ask is the same as that for all schools: that you continue to work with local authorities and the mainstream schools at which many of your pupils remain registered to consider the best way to support those vulnerable children and those of critical workers who cannot remain safely at home. This should include keeping AP settings open where it is safe and feasible to do so. We are working closely with you to understand the key challenges and to develop further options for how providers and social workers can encourage vulnerable children and young people to attend school, and to ensure our collective public message is as clear as possible on this expectation. We will also be considering with our stakeholder group how local authorities can best support AP schools that may need additional capacity and workforce.

Where possible, we would encourage childcare providers, schools and colleges to continue to look after critical workers' children and vulnerable children throughout the Easter holidays. We expect vulnerable children who have a social worker to continue to attend an education setting during the Easter holidays, so long as they do not have underlying health conditions that put them at severe risk.


The Government has published guidance for schools and local authorities, including specific advice about supporting vulnerable children at this time. Please do keep checking this as it will be updated regularly in response to feedback and as the situation develops further. You can find it here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-schools-and-other-educational-settings>. Please also raise awareness of the DfE Coronavirus helpline we have established for local authorities, providers and parents to get information on the latest Government advice. The number is 0800 046 8687, and lines are open 8am-6pm (Monday – Friday), and 10am – 4pm (Saturday and Sunday).

The AP sector understands well the need to identify and mitigate many of the risks children and young people who are not currently in school may face. I know there is much good practice out there to manage the needs of the most vulnerable children at this time. I want to ask for your help to ensure robust arrangements are put in place across the country, by working with your local authority and by continuing to be highly vigilant in safeguarding vulnerable children whether they are in school or not.

I recognise that many AP settings will be grappling with issues over and above those mainstream schools are facing at this time. This includes the specific needs of the young people you work with and the small sizes of your institutions and classes. In addition, we know that some AP providers are also concerned about school food supply, potential loss of income from short-term summer placements and current Y11 pupils struggling to make a successful transition to post-16 provision this summer. We will issue further advice on these areas as soon as we can by working through my new stakeholder group to ensure we understand and respond to the particular and changing pressures facing the AP sector.

Finally, I would like to thank you again for your continued support, and your patience while we work together to support our vulnerable children and those of critical workers at this time. I am particularly grateful to the AP schools who remain open to serve these young people. To the leaders and staff working in those schools: the Government thanks you. In the period ahead you can be assured my focus, like yours, will be on managing the current situation and keeping vulnerable children safe and supported. I am certain that, by working together, we will achieve this.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Vicky Ford' with a small flourish at the end.

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