



Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP
Secretary of State

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Dear Chief Executives,

Since the pandemic began, I have been consistently impressed by the hard work and dedication that staff across Local Authorities have shown in ensuring that children and young people are able to continue attending school and accessing education. Your teams have worked tirelessly with us to help minimise the negative impact of the pandemic on the education of our children and young people in what have been the most challenging of circumstances. Since coming into post as Secretary of State, I have been able to see this tremendous work first-hand and I am extremely grateful for their resilience and commitment.

I recognise the impact that Covid is continuing to have, and this is why control measures such as home testing, increased ventilation and the vaccine offer, are as important as ever to ensuring disruption to education and particularly school attendance is minimised. School attendance should also not be limited through the use of bubbles or isolation of contacts, and I am confident that effective implementation of the control measures remain the best way to manage the effects of the virus.

I know that the pandemic has also exacerbated traditional drivers of non-attendance, such as lack of routine and mental health challenges, and we know that attendance remains below pre-pandemic levels even after we account for absence caused by Covid. As we now move forward, I hope that we can continue to work together in a collaborative way to tackle these. I am keen to make maximising school attendance a top priority across the sector.

As you know, local authorities play a critical role on school attendance and are in a unique position as the key to social care, legal interventions and wider support services. Strengthening the relationships across all your services and facilitating effective cross-agency working is vital to making good progress on school attendance and I want to ask for your support in ensuring that this continues to happen as effectively as possible.

I therefore also ask for your support in ensuring the following actions are being implemented:

- Being clear with parents that ensuring their child attends school is a legal responsibility that has repercussions if not fulfilled. This includes making full use of the parental responsibility measures such as education supervision orders, parenting contracts and fixed penalty notices. During the height of the pandemic, suspending the use of these measures felt most appropriate, but as we push now to maximise school attendance, it is important that they are once again being applied across the country.
- Doubling down on our efforts to break down any barriers between services and build on the excellent multi-agency working and innovation that we have seen during the past 18 months.
- Identifying children of compulsory school age who are not on a school roll, and who are not receiving a suitable education otherwise than at school (for example, at home, or in alternative provision) – ensuring these children are offered and take up a school place.
- Improving joint working between education services and children's social care teams, building on the expanded role of the Virtual School Head for children with a social worker. As you know, the severest cases of non-attendance are almost always a symptom of wider issues and where schools or attendance teams indicate an issue, LAs should consider what further action may be needed, including statutory social care intervention, where appropriate, and how to best support these families so that children can attend school.
- Looking critically at the current ways of working and implement best practice in areas such as data management and communication with schools and parents. The DfE's [best practice advice for improving school attendance](#) is a helpful tool for this and we will soon be running a series of webinars on this as well.
- Identifying pupils at risk of persistent absence and re-engage them directly.

I am delighted that Dame Rachel de Souza has also made the attendance of children and young people in schools and colleges one of her priorities. Her office will be looking to work with you in the coming weeks.

In the medium to longer term, I am keen for us to work together to ensure the lessons learned during the pandemic help us strengthen and improve the school attendance system to ensure the absence facing us today does not become perpetual. As such, I've been clear that attendance and

engagement with education will be a central tenet of my White Paper on the future school system and my officials have recently met with LA heads of service to begin that process.

As you will know, we are investing substantially in our school system and ensuring that children and young people are able to catch up and recover from the negative effects of the pandemic. This includes nearly £5 billion for education recovery, with £1bn of funding to help those pupils most in need of support to catch up by extending the recovery premium for a further two years.

To support and reengage other at-risk pupils we are also investing £45m for new SAFE and AP taskforces, bringing together specialist support in schools and AP settings in serious violence hotspots. We are also appointing a small team of expert attendance advisers who will support some MATs and LAs to improve their approach to attendance.

We remain committed to promoting and supporting mental health and wellbeing support in schools and colleges. We are providing more than £17m this year to build on existing mental health support in education settings, including £9.5m to enable up to a third of schools and colleges to train a senior mental health lead, as part of our commitment to fund training for leads in all schools and colleges by 2025.

We want to ensure that you are able to access all of this support and are keen to help troubleshoot any issues you may have doing so. To ensure our children and young people can benefit from all of the positive initiatives that are being put in place, I hope you agree on the urgency with which we must tackle school attendance issues and that you will support us in doing so. I remain grateful for your continued work and effort and I look forward to working collaboratively for the benefit of our children and young people.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'N. Zahawi', with a large loop at the end of the name.

Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP
Secretary of State for Education