



2020-0040796POSoS

**Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP**  
Secretary of State

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12<sup>th</sup> November 2020

Thank you for your letter of 23 July regarding safeguarding, relationships and sex education (RSE), and coronavirus (COVID-19).

We have been clear that the Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) statutory safeguarding guidance has remained in force throughout the COVID-19 response period and that schools and colleges should continue to have regard to it.

Our COVID-19 safeguarding advice, which supported schools to continue to have regard to KCSIE through the initial COVID-19 response phase, made clear the importance of all staff continuing to identify and where appropriate report harm and abuse, including where pupils were learning from home.

As you rightly identify, unfortunately, there will be some pupils who will return to school having been exposed to a range of adversity and trauma and in some cases increased welfare and safeguarding risks. Where such harm and abuse has not yet been identified it will be critical that schools are able to respond effectively.

To help schools prepare for the return of all their pupils, we have published advice in the autumn returning guidance, including suggesting that schools should consider revising their child protection policy, led by their designated safeguarding lead to reflect the return of more pupils. We also suggest that designated safeguarding leads, and deputies, should be provided with more time, especially in the first few weeks of term, to help them provide support to staff and children regarding any new safeguarding and welfare concerns and the handling of referrals to children's social care and other agencies where these are appropriate, and that agencies and services should prepare to work together to actively look for all signs of harm.

Our stand-alone advice covering child on child sexual violence and sexual harassment that you have helpfully previously contributed to, will also be important to assist schools in managing any report of sexual violence and sexual harassment. Both this advice and KCSIE provide detailed information on schools' legal responsibilities, advice on identifying abuse, managing reports of abuse, victim support, and provide links to specialist advice and support. Both are also very clear on the gendered nature of some forms of abuse.

Ensuring that vulnerable children remain protected is our top priority. Local authorities (LAs) have the key day-to-day responsibility for delivery of children's social care but we are considering all options to ensure they can continue to deliver services effectively. LAs know their children, families, and communities well and are best placed to make decisions about how to best manage children's social care services during the current national emergency.

The government has set out significant support for services benefitting vulnerable children and their families. This includes:

- Allocating additional funding of £3.7 billion for LAs, helping them meet additional demands including within children's social care services.
- £1.6 million to expand and promote the NSPCC's helpline, offering advice and support on how to raise concerns about children at risk.
- £7 million funding to Barnardo's to set up the 'See, Hear, Respond' service to help children and young people in England who are experiencing harm and increased adversity and are not being seen by social care or other key agencies. Services include online support, face to face interventions and support for reintegration into education.
- Additional funding worth £26.4 million directly to support charities, many of whom help support vulnerable children.
- More than £12 million for 14 innovation programme projects tackling increased risk, for example from domestic abuse and supporting teenagers at risk of exploitation.

Domestic abuse has a devastating impact on children and young people. Growing up in a household of fear and intimidation can impact their wellbeing and development, with lasting effects into adulthood. Children exposed to domestic abuse are more likely to experience mental health difficulties, be excluded from school and become victims of domestic abuse in later life.

It is essential that social workers provide effective support to children and families affected by domestic abuse. Our children's social care reform programme is working to improve social work practice across the country through initial education, continued professional development and tougher professional regulation.

The government's landmark Domestic Abuse Bill continues to make progress through Parliament. This includes the first ever statutory definition of domestic abuse and accompanying guidance to stress the impact of domestic abuse on children. It also establishes an independent Domestic Abuse Commissioner who will be required to consider the impact of domestic abuse on children, and the services available to them.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is child abuse and it is illegal. It cannot be condoned or ignored on the basis of it being a 'cultural tradition'. The government is determined to eradicate FGM here and abroad. Services, including schools, should safeguard children from this abuse as from any other form of abuse.

We want to support all young people to be happy, healthy, and safe. We want to equip them for adult life and to make a positive contribution to society. That is why, we are making relationships education compulsory for primary school-aged pupils, RSE compulsory for secondary school-aged pupils, and health education compulsory for pupils in all state-funded schools from this September. We believe it is important that the statutory duty to implement the new subjects still comes into force from this September, however, considering the current circumstances faced by our schools, my department is reassuring schools that they have flexibility over when they discharge their duty within the first year of compulsory teaching.

To ensure teaching begins as soon as possible, schools are encouraged to take a phased approach, if needed, when introducing these subjects. Schools should consider prioritising curriculum content on mental health and wellbeing, as knowledge on supporting your own and others' wellbeing will be important.

In primary schools, age-appropriate relationships education will involve supporting children to learn about what healthy relationships are and their importance, as well as how to develop mutually respectful relationships in all contexts, including online. Children will also be taught the importance of permission-seeking and giving in relationships. In secondary schools, this will broaden to become age appropriate RSE and include factual knowledge around sex, sexual health and sexuality, set firmly within the context of relationships. We expect young people to learn what a positive, healthy relationship can look like, about consent and how to keep themselves safe in a variety of situations. Pupils will also be taught the key aspects of the law relating to sex, sexual consent, sexual exploitation, abuse, grooming, coercion, harassment, and domestic abuse and how these can affect current and future relationships. These subjects complement health education and as part of a comprehensive programme and whole school approach, this knowledge can support safeguarding of children.

My department is committed to supporting schools in their preparations and will be publishing advice on how to implement the RSHE curriculum, alongside teacher training materials to help all teachers increase their confidence and quality of teaching. The RSE school support package will be published on GOV.UK, and will also feature case studies, an implementation guide and helpful advice for schools about selecting appropriate classroom resources.

This support will cover all the teaching requirements in the statutory guidance, including online modules on how teachers teach about respectful relationships, being safe, and families and people who care for me.

Ofsted's school inspection handbook sets out that inspectors will consider the provision for relationships education, RSE and health education as part of a wider judgment of pupils' personal development.

We know we will need to continue to reflect and reiterate safeguarding duties as we all continue our response during the COVID-19 period and we will do all we can to continue to support schools to keep all children safe as they return.

I was grateful to receive your kind offer to discuss these issues further. My office is aware of your request and will be in touch if I am able to do so in the near future. I look forward to continuing working with you.

Thank you for writing on these important matters.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Gavin Williamson', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

**Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP**  
**Secretary of State for Education**