

Education Secretary outlines plans to support young people

Support for the continued education of young people has been outlined by the Education Secretary today, following the announcement that attendance at schools and colleges is now limited to all but vulnerable children and children of critical workers.

During the period of national lockdown strengthened remote education expectations will be put in place, with schools expected to provide a set number of hours of high-quality remote education for pupils, supported by further deliveries of laptops and tablets for the most disadvantaged.

With GCSEs and A Levels not going ahead as planned, the exams regulator Ofqual will launch a consultation – alongside the department – on the options for alternatives to the exams to ensure every young person gets a fair grade for their work, with the expectation that teacher assessment will be used.

Families entitled to free school meals will also be offered food parcels or vouchers, funded by the government.

The full package of measures set out by the Education Secretary in parliament today includes:

- Strengthened minimum standards of remote learning: schools will be expected to offer pupils online lessons and a set number of hours of remote education for pupils – increased from the government's previous minimum expectations. Ofsted will play an important role in holding schools to account for the quality of remote education.
- Next steps on exam alternatives arrangements: students will not be asked to sit GCSE, AS and A level exams this summer. The Education Secretary expects Ofqual to consider a teacher assessed system as a replacement for GCSEs, AS and A levels. A consultation will be launched next week and conclude swiftly to give certainty to schools, colleges and students, while also giving them the opportunity to have their say.
- Free school meals: extra funding will be provided to support schools to provide food parcels or meals to eligible students. The national voucher scheme will also re-open so that in the event schools cannot offer food parcels or provide an alternative local solution, every child can access free school meals while they are learning at home.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

The last thing any Education Secretary wants to do is close schools and this is not a decision that the government ever wanted to take. But the closing of schools for the majority of pupils does not mean the end of their education, and the outlook for schools, parents and young people is far more positive than the one we faced last year.

Schools and colleges are much better prepared to deliver online learning – with the delivery of hundreds of thousands of devices at breakneck speed, data support and high quality video lessons available. We are working with Ofqual, headteachers and the education sector to make sure those young people who were due to sit exams can take their next step and progress in education or into the world of work.

We are keeping schools and colleges open to vulnerable children and those of critical workers and I would like to thank all our teachers, support staff and all who work in education as we deal with this evolving situation and know that together we will get through this and be able to reopen all our schools to all pupils.

Given exams will not go ahead this summer, the department, with Ofqual, has worked up a range of contingency options, and the details of the approach will be developed in consultation with the exam boards and the sector. This will be based on teacher-assessment, with training and support provided to ensure grades are awarded fairly and consistently.

Assessments in some vocational qualifications can still take place in January, where schools and colleges judge it right to do so. The department is working with Ofqual on arrangements for those who do not take their January assessments, as well as for vocational and technical assessments scheduled for February onwards.

Statutory key stage 1 and key stage 2 tests and teacher assessments planned for summer 2021, including the key stage 2 tests in reading and mathematics, will not take place.

The department will publish updated guidance for schools regarding remote education, including increasing the number of hours schools are expected to provide for pupils, building on the legal requirements already in place to ensure young people receive high quality remote education.

The government expects schools to have a digital platform, such as G-Suite or Microsoft Education, and should provide at least some of their remote provision via video lessons – this can be done by school-led videos or using other providers like Oak National Academy.

As the government announced in December, Ofsted will carry out monitoring inspection in the Spring term of schools most in need of challenge and support. These inspections will have a strong focus on remote education. In addition, Ofsted can inspect schools – of any grade – where it has

significant concerns about safeguarding or the quality of education being provided, including remote education. Parents should raise concerns about remote education with their school, and can report those concerns to Ofsted if the matter is not resolved.

The government has committed to providing over one million devices to help schools and colleges throughout the pandemic – with over 560,000 of these delivered through 2020. The scale of deliveries has now been increased, with a further 50,000 devices sent to schools across the country on Monday alone. The government will deliver well over 100,000 devices over the course of this week.

The government is working with the UK's leading mobile network operators to provide access to educational sites. Schools can already request free mobile data uplifts for disadvantaged families, via the Department for Education's website.

The level of additional data for families will vary by provider, but for example Three customers will receive unlimited data and EE customers will receive an extra 20 gigabytes per month. Other providers supporting the offer include Tesco Mobile, Smarty, Sky Mobile, Virgin Mobile, Vodafone and O2.

The rapid testing programme for secondary schools and colleges will continue for those on site, with daily testing of close contacts available to students and staff and weekly testing available for staff. Primary staff will be included later in January as planned, and more detail will be set out in due course about reaching all secondary students as they return to face-to-face education.

Lutz Schüler, Chief Executive Officer at Virgin Media, said:

We know how important it is for children to take part in online lessons and remote learning, and we're pleased to be working with the Department for Education by offering free mobile data to Virgin Mobile customers who need it. This is the latest in a series of measures we have taken this year to support our customers during this challenging time.

Elaine Carey, Chief Commercial Officer, at Three UK said:

Education is crucial for everyone in society and it is vital no child misses out. Three UK wants to support those families that need access to connectivity to support their child's learning needs during the pandemic.

Marc Allera, Chief Executive of BT's Consumer brands, said:

Connectivity is essential for children to keep up with learning at

home during the pandemic, particularly while lockdowns and further restrictions have such an impact on the way we all live our lives. As a national champion, BT has a responsibility to help ensure no one is left behind while face-to-face teaching is on hold, which is why we have partnered with the Department for Education to give pupils from disadvantaged families the mobile data they need to stay connected.

Nick Jeffery, CEO, Vodafone UK, said:

We are absolutely committed to doing what we can to keep the UK connected during the pandemic, including helping children to continue their education in lockdown. We launched our schools.connected programme last year, providing 350,000 free data SIMs for teachers to offer to pupils that need them most. We are also delighted to be joining the Get Help with Technology programme.

Notes to editors

- Further details on the national voucher scheme will be provided shortly. Schools should work with their catering providers so that meals continue to be available to any eligible pupils still attending school – including all infants and those receiving benefits-related free school meals – as well as for meals or food parcels for eligible pupils staying at home where necessary.
- Every secondary school is now able to place their order for devices, and the vast majority will have received their full allocation by the end of this week. We will be systematically delivering devices to primary schools over the next two weeks, with the most disadvantaged areas being prioritised.
- We are also extending support to disadvantaged 16-to-19-year-olds, during the spring term, including those in further education. Schools with sixth forms, colleges and other FE institutions will be invited to order laptops and tablets to further support disadvantaged learners to access remote education.
- As announced in December, Ofsted's routine graded inspections will remain suspended for the spring term but during this period Ofsted will conduct a programme of monitoring inspections in inadequate schools and some that require improvement. These will have a strong focus on the quality of remote education being provided. In addition, Ofsted can inspect a school of any grade if it has serious concerns about the quality of remote education being offered to pupils.