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The Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP
Secretary of State for Education

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Catherine Roche
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By email: Policy@Place2Be.org.uk

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Dear Catherine,

Thank you for your correspondence of 30 August, regarding school absences, the resulting issue of mental health difficulties and the subsequent loss of social connection and community. I would be grateful if you would share my response with your co-signatories.

Thank you also for sharing your findings on school absences and your report 'School for All: Solutions for School Attendance', and for the work you are doing to better understand the barriers to attendance that some children and young people face. I have shared your correspondence with my officials and I am pleased that several of your recommendations are already being implemented by my department.

I want to assure you that this government is committed to improving mental health support for all children and young people. This is critical to breaking down barriers to opportunity and learning. The right support should be available to every young person who needs it, which is why we will provide access to specialist mental health professionals in every school.

Family Hubs play an important role helping families access vital services to improve the health, education and wellbeing of children, young people and their families. Our mission is to break down barriers to opportunity, to give every child, and every family the best start in life.

The Chancellor's Autumn Budget announced that we are increasing spending on early years and family services to £8 billion in 2025-26.

This includes £69 million to continue delivery of the existing network of family hubs. It confirms that the department will make further grant funding awards to those local authorities presently receiving funding.

We will intervene earlier to stop young people being drawn into crime, creating a new Young Futures programme with a network of hubs reaching every community. These hubs will have youth workers, mental health support workers. We will also recruit an additional 8,500 new mental health staff to treat children and adults.

We celebrate the incredible work of those in our sectors to support children and young people to develop socially and emotionally as they grow up, navigating life's challenges. We will continue to explore ways to build upon this work, including ways to strengthen schools' and colleges' wider approaches to mental health and wellbeing.

We agree that schools should take a whole school approach to attendance and build strong relationships with families. We have set clear expectations that schools, trusts and local authorities (LAs) should work with families to address the barriers to school attendance in a sensitive way, providing a 'support first' approach. The Working Together to Improve School Attendance guidance requires schools, trusts and LAs to work together to tackle absence. This guidance became statutory in August 2024. For those facing complex barriers to attendance, schools are asked to have sensitive conversations with children and families and work with them to put support in place for their individual needs. Further information is available on GOV.UK at: tinyurl.com/6W2RHPZ8.

In addition to this guidance, to give schools the tools to work with families and children, the department has published a toolkit to support schools' communication with parents, which is available on GOV.UK at: tinyurl.com/4T35WY5V.

Moreover, to support schools, trusts and LAs to use data to identify attendance issues and target interventions early, we have made the sharing of daily attendance data with the department mandatory for all schools from September 2024. Schools, trusts and LAs can then access a data tool to identify and intervene where pupils are at risk of persistent absence.

With regard to a specific code in the school register for a mental health related absence, while the intent behind the suggestion is clear, we have concerns that creating an additional code to record this is unhelpful in practice and could place a burden on schools. Teachers will often understand the issues a child is facing, but it would be inappropriate to expect them to make a judgement on the nature of a child's illness at the point of taking the register.

Moreover, recent changes to the school register codes have introduced other codes beneficial to children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) or who are facing mental health challenges. For example, the new code, Q, allows schools to record where a pupil is absent because the LA has a duty to provide home-to-school transport and it has not done so. A new specific code, C2, for a pupil on a part-time timetable will allow better tracking of the use of the timetable. A temporary, time-limited part-time timetable can be used where a pupil's parents and the school agree that the pupil should temporarily be educated on a part-time basis for exceptional reasons and have agreed the times and dates when the pupil will be expected to attend school as part of that timetable.

For too long the education and care system has not met the needs of all children, particularly those with SEND, with parents struggling to get their children the support they need and deserve. This government's ambition is that all children and young people with SEND or in alternative provision receive the right support to succeed in their education and as they move into adult life. We are committed to improving inclusivity and expertise in mainstream schools, as well as ensuring special schools cater to those with the most complex needs, restoring parents' trust that their child will get the support they need.

We will strengthen accountability on mainstream settings to be inclusive including through Ofsted, support the mainstream workforce to increase their SEND expertise, and encourage schools to set up Resourced Provision or Special Educational Needs units to increase capacity in mainstream schools.

We have published independently commissioned insight that suggests if the system was extensively improved, using early intervention and better resourcing mainstream schools, it could lead to tens of thousands more children and young people having their needs met without an education, health and care plan - and having their needs met in a mainstream setting, rather than a specialist placement.

This work forms part of the government's Opportunity Mission, which will break the unfair link between background and opportunity – starting with giving every child, including those with SEND, the best start in life.

The government cannot do it alone – we will work with the sector as essential and valued partners to deliver our shared mission and restore parents' trust.

Thank you again for taking the time to write and I am grateful for your kind invitation to meet. My office is aware of your request, and if I am able to meet, they will be in touch to arrange a suitable time.

Best wishes,

B. Phillipson

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