Witness Name: Gillian Keegan

Statement No: 01

Exhibits: GK1/001 – GK1/129

Dated: 11 August 2025

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF GILLIAN KEEGAN

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I, GILLIAN KEEGAN, WILL SAY AS FOLLOWS:

1. I make this statement in response to a request for evidence from the UK Covid-19 Inquiry ("**the Inquiry**") dated 9 May 2025 made under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006 (ref: M08-KEEGAN-001) ("**the Request**") asking for a witness statement for Module 8 of the Inquiry, which is examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people.

2. The Inquiry has asked me about the role I played in core political and administrative decision making with regard to the COVID-19 response while serving as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills) ("**Minister**") at the Department for Education ("**DfE**") from 14 February 2020 to 16 September 2021.

3. I understand that corporate statements covering DfE's structure, responsibilities, decision making and actions regarding further education and apprenticeships throughout the pandemic have been provided to the Inquiry for Module 8. This statement should be read in conjunction with those statements and is intended to focus on my personal role rather than repeating material set out elsewhere.

4. This statement is accurate and complete to the best of my knowledge and belief at the time of signing. Given the volume of material relating to my period in office and the pandemic more generally, I have not been able to review all documents. Given the length of time since my tenure as Minister and the very heavy workload my role involved, I cannot clearly recollect much of the material covered in this statement and have had to draw from contemporaneous sources.

A. ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE MINISTER FOR APPRENTICESHIPS AND SKILLS

5. As Minister, my portfolio spanned:

   (a) Strategy for post-16 education (jointly with the Minister of State for Universities).

   (b) Further education ("**FE**") system (oversight of post-16 providers, FE workforce and Institutes of Technology).

   (c) Technical education and skills including T levels and qualifications review.

   (d) Apprenticeships and traineeships (overseeing the national apprenticeship programme including traineeships; improving the quality and accessibility of apprenticeships across England; engaging with employers and training providers to ensure apprenticeships met the needs of the economy; promoting apprenticeships as a viable and valuable alternative to traditional academic routes; and driving reforms to make apprenticeships more flexible and responsive to industry needs);

   (e) Adult education (including basic skills and the National Retraining Scheme).

   (f) Careers advice and guidance; and

   (g) Reducing the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training ("**NEETs**").

6. As explained in DfE's corporate evidence for this module, FE refers to any study after secondary education that is not part of an undergraduate or graduate degree. The FE system in England offers a range of educational opportunities for individuals aged 16 and above, including apprenticeships, classroom-based instruction, and community education programmes. The FE sector comprises 157 general FE colleges, 44 sixth form colleges and 13 designated institutions. Additionally, there are around 1,300 Independent Training Providers ("**ITPs**"), 120 special post-16 institutions, and 134 local authority providers offering adult education. A brief explanation of each of these categories of provider is as follows:

   (a) Designated institutions are institutions that have been formally designated under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 and are part of the statutory

FE sector, including FE colleges and sixth-form colleges. These institutions typically offer a range of vocational and academic courses, including A levels, T levels, technical qualifications, and other qualifications aimed at post-16 education.

(b) ITPs are entities that deliver vocational education and training to young people and adults, often collaborating closely with employers. ITPs offer vocational education and training, including work-based learning, and frequently provide apprenticeship training on behalf of employers.

(c) Special post-16 institutions are specialist learning providers that provide post-16 education and support to young people with some of the most severe learning difficulties or disabilities, or low incidence needs.

(d) Local authority providers encompass various entities such as boroughs and local councils. They offer adult education, work-based learning and other post-16 education opportunities and can be delivered through adult and community learning facilities.

7. In 2016, DfE extended its role in establishing standards for technical courses by creating the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education ("**IfATE**"). This organisation functioned as an executive non-departmental public body and collaborated with employers to develop, approve, review and maintain high-quality apprenticeship and technical education standards. I understand that it closed on 1 June 2025, and its functions were transferred to Skills England.

8. My ministerial responsibilities in relation to FE students and apprentices did not change during my tenure, but the nature of these responsibilities was of course shaped by the challenges presented by the pandemic. The main focusses were trying to get people online as fast as possible (ensuring access to the necessary equipment for all FE students), rethinking the way in which students could be assessed, and implementing COVID-19 testing within institutions.

9. I am asked whether the way in which I discharged my responsibilities changed in terms of where I was based, my daily schedule of meetings, and how I structured the provision of advice to me. I assumed the role of Minister approximately three weeks before the first lockdown was announced. I was largely based in the DfE office throughout my tenure. I had meetings with the Secretary of State for Education ("**SSE**") and other DfE ministers and leadership team (Permanent Secretary and DfE directors-

general) on a weekly basis. I also met with different teams relevant to my responsibilities as and when required.

10. As the pandemic progressed and the country entered lockdown, I held specific and frequent meetings with officials working on the COVID-19 response including the FE COVID-19 Response deputy director as well as those senior officials working on alternative arrangements for vocational technical qualifications ("**VTQs**"). Following the release of VTQ results, I was asked by the Prime Minister to chair daily VTQ meetings to monitor progress for the main Awarding Organisations ("**AOs**") who needed to reissue results. I provide further detail on these meetings, which took place between 20 August 2020 and 1 September 2020, in section E below. From December 2020, I chaired a VTQ Reference Group whose purpose was to keep DfE ministers updated on ongoing and emerging issues around VTQ delivery and assessments in light of the pandemic and subsequent restrictions in education settings (the group's terms of reference are exhibited at: Exhibit GK1/001 - INQ000548367). This reference group met monthly (the agenda for the group's first meeting on 15 December 2020 is exhibited at: Exhibit GK1/002 - INQ000548368), and then more regularly from the start of August 2021. These meetings were attended by a representative sub-group of the AOs, Ofqual, and other organisations (as detailed in the terms of reference).

11. The way in which I received my advice (via submissions) remained the same throughout my tenure. I made it clear when I started in the role that I liked to be given clear, plain-speaking advice supported by facts and data, and I liked to know exactly how and when decisions were going to be implemented.

12. All decisions made within DfE were ratified by SSE during my time as Minister. As explained in DfE's corporate evidence for this module, SSE did not have complete autonomy to make core decisions. The central structures of decision-making changed during the course of the pandemic (and the parameters and timeframes for decisions were often set centrally). I was aware of all the key COVID-19 decisions taking place affecting DfE and its responsibilities. I inputted into key decisions affecting the FE and skills sector, such as the alternative arrangements for VTQs during 2020 and 2021 and arrangements for enabling learners to continue attending in-person at colleges during each lockdown where this was necessary to progress their learning, as detailed later in this statement.

13. I worked with a wide range of officials across the FE and Apprenticeships teams in DfE who supported me in my role. The key senior officials I worked with included:

(a) Paul Kett, Director General for Higher and Further Education.

(b) Julia Kinniburgh, Director General of DfE's COVID-19 Response and Recovery Group from December 2020.

(c) Roger Cotes who was DfE's Deputy Director for FE Improvement and Oversight until January 2021, then Interim Director for Careers and FE Systems thereafter.

(d) Sue Lovelock, Director of Professional and Technical Education.

(e) Angela Fairchild and Lucy Andrew, Deputy Directors for Post-16 Qualifications Review.

(f) Peter Mucklow, Director for Apprenticeships at the Education and Skills Funding Agency ("**ESFA**").

(g) Eileen Milner, Chief Executive Officer of the ESFA.

(h) Sir Richard Atkins CBE, FE Commissioner until March 2021 (Frances Wadsworth CBE then served as interim FE Commissioner before Shelagh Legrave CBE was appointed as FE Commissioner after I left the role of Minister).

(i) Michelle Dyson, Director of Qualifications, Curriculum and Extra Curricular until September 2020, Graham Archer who held this post until February 2021, and David Brown who was Director of the Exams 2021 Programme from September 2020 to February 2021.

COVID O and other meetings

14. COVID O meetings and other COVID-19 specific cabinet meetings were typically only attended by SSE and other Secretaries of State that had a relevant interest in the decision at hand and were invited by the chair of the meeting to attend. I attended one COVID O meeting on behalf of SSE on 15 July 2021, at the request of SSE for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs ("**DEFRA**") (Exhibits GK1/003 - INQ000548378 and GK1/004 - INQ000092043). In some cases, I am aware that the Minister of State for School Standards ("**MoSSS**"), Nick Gibb, also attended these meetings where SSE was unable to attend (he was nominated as the emergency

planning minister early on in the pandemic and was also the most experienced minister in DfE).

15. There were regular ministerial meetings throughout my tenure with a standing agenda (see Exhibit GK1/005 - INQ000548381). These meetings typically included an update from SSE and the Permanent Secretary on any particularly pressing issues. I also attended regular bilateral meetings with SSE on FE matters. From September 2020 these bilateral meetings took place every two weeks (Exhibit GK1/006 - INQ000548359).

B. CONTACT WITH FE COLLEGES, REGULATORS, UNIONS AND OTHER REPRESENTATIVE ORGANISATIONS

16. Within the FE sector, the roles and responsibilities of (i) local authorities, (ii) FE providers, (iii) employers providing apprenticeships, and (iv) DfE were extremely clear when I first assumed the role of Minister and remained the same throughout the pandemic. Local authorities, FE providers and employers providing apprenticeships all had a clear understanding of their respective roles within the system, and the role of DfE remained clear and well-understood (its roles and responsibilities are explained in detail in DfE's corporate evidence for this module).

17. Throughout the pandemic, we had clear and effective lines of communications with FE providers and employers providing apprenticeships.

18. From 2 March 2020, we increased communications to the FE sector, so they were receiving daily updates. This included the latest guidance and developments sent by email, with supporting social media and stakeholder amplification for major announcements.

19. On 2 March 2020, the Coronavirus national helpline (Exhibit GK1/007 - INQ000542914) was launched to offer guidance for anyone with education related questions. The helpline was open Monday to Friday, 8:00am to 6:00pm. For FE, enquiries were initially received mostly from parents, however, by 10 March 2020 they were mainly from providers (Exhibit GK1/008 - INQ000607814).

20. On 19 March 2020 I was provided with advice on the strategy for communication to the FE sector (Exhibits GK1/009 - INQ000607766 and GK1/010 - INQ000607767). This paper outlined the three key phases, split as follows:

    (a) Phase 1 – sharing information and providing clarity to show how SSE's announcement on 18 March 2020 regarding cessation of classroom delivery for most learners due to COVID-19 would impact institutions and learners to help minimise confusion and stop the spread of false information.

    (b) Phase 2 – supporting colleges and particularly those that were facing issues such as high levels of staff absence.

    (c) Phase 3 – looking ahead to the queries that may be raised about exam results, qualifications, and the next steps for learners.

21. To help ensure the FE sector felt informed and supported throughout, the focus was to engage representative bodies and unions, and to provide information to FE staff and leaders directly through relevant DfE channels. I agreed the paper (Exhibit GK1/011 - INQ000607769) and stressed the importance of communicating reassuring messages to stakeholders and mitigating any spread of misinformation.

22. On 19 March 2020, *Guidance for schools, childcare providers, colleges and local authorities in England on maintaining education provision* (Exhibit GK1/012 - INQ000542448) was published. The guidance outlined the priority of keeping children and the wider community safe and set out which pupils could attend education settings. The guidance requested that, in order to limit the spread of the virus, education settings should only provide face-to-face education for a limited number of students. This included those who were considered vulnerable, and students whose parents were critical to the COVID-19 response and could not be safely cared for at home. The guidance explained that vulnerable children "*include children who are supported by social care, those with safeguarding and welfare needs, including child in need plans, on child protection plans, 'looked after' children, young carers, disabled children and those with Education, Health and Care Plans".*

23. On 21 March 2020, *Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance on isolation for residential educational settings* (Exhibit GK1/013 - INQ000519894) was published, which set out the actions leaders should take to manage COVID-19 within FE. It also covered expectations for students with education, health and care plans ("**EHCPs**") in mainstream FE settings and special post-16 institutions.

24. Due to the pace at which COVID-19 accelerated at the start of the pandemic, many additional forms of communication were created to ensure FE providers, parents, carers, and learners felt supported, particularly during outbreaks of COVID-19, and were aware of guidelines at the time. This included any guidance around non pharmaceutical interventions ("**NPIs**"). Communication to FE providers was mainly through newsletters, guidance and the COVID-19 helpline that was set up on 2 March 2020. We also communicated to FE providers through regional teams. Further information can be found in Annex A to the first corporate statement of Roger Cotes on behalf of DfE dated 31 July 2025 (Exhibit GK1/014 – INQ000588003), which sets out a chronology of communication with the FE sector, including key guidance issued during this period.

25. DfE held regular meetings to engage with the FE sector, including the Principals' Reference Group ("**PRG**") (a group of seven serving FE principals from across the sector with strong track records in improving their colleges, along with DfE officials) and the Permanent Secretary Stakeholder Group ("**PSSG**") (Exhibits GK1/015 - INQ000548318 and GK1/016 - INQ000548317). The PSSG convened weekly to ensure everyone was up to date with the current situation, address challenges, and provide a platform for questions. These meetings were instrumental in linking DfE with various sectors (Exhibit GK1/017 - INQ000607796). Membership of the PSSG was made up of representatives from:

(a) Association of Colleges ("**AoC**")

(b) Association of Directors of Children's Services

(c) Association of School and College Leaders

(d) The Children's Commissioner

(e) Confederation of School Trusts

(f) Council for Disabled Children

(g) Early Years Alliance

(h) GMB

(i) Local Government Association

(j) NASUWT, the Teachers' Union

(k) National Association of Head Teachers

(l) National Education Union

(m) Ofsted

(n) Out of Schools Alliance

(o) Sixth Form Colleges Association ("**SFCA**")

(p) Solace

(q) Unison

(r) Unite

(s) Universities UK

(t) Voice Community

26. Communication with apprenticeship providers was more challenging as this group is more disparate and fragmented. I met with Mark Dawe of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers ("**AELP**") on various occasions, including an introductory meeting on 9 March 2020 (Exhibits GK1/018 - INQ000548313 and GK1/019 - INQ000548314), to discuss the concerns of the sector. We also held roundtables with the various ITPs that AELP representatives (for instance, on 6 April 2020: Exhibits GK1/020 - INQ000548325 and GK1/021 - INQ000548326). This was a useful forum for gathering information about the challenges that ITPs and the businesses for whom they were providing services were facing as a result of the pandemic. I also had regular meetings with the Royal College of Nursing ("**RCN**") to discuss getting medical apprenticeships awarded as soon as possible in order to get more nursing staff onto the NHS front line (for instance, on 8 December 2020: Exhibits GK1/022 - INQ000548365 and GK1/023 - INQ000548366). We also ran a dedicated website for apprenticeships which acted as a platform for communicating directly with both apprentices and apprenticeship providers (Exhibit GK1/024 - INQ000548383). This website could be used for making applications for apprenticeships and accessing resources and advice.

27. I am also asked to describe the nature of the relationships I had with the principal teaching unions, associations of professionals, relevant regulators and qualification-awarding bodies.

28. Teaching unions: As stated above, Unison and Unite were members of the PSSG, which convened on a weekly basis. I also had a number of stakeholder meetings with the University and College Union ("**UCU**"). We met to discuss their concerns about issues such as testing and FE college pay (for instance, see the summaries of my meetings with Jo Grady and Andrew Harden on 12 May 2020: Exhibit GK1/025 - INQ000548370, and on 31 December 2020: Exhibit GK1/026 - INQ000548369). We had a cordial relationship, and I was always keen to ensure I was kept informed of their concerns.

29. Associations of professionals: Many of these associations were members of the PSSG, as listed above, namely the AoC and the SFCA. These organisations, as well as

HOLEX (the membership body for adult community education in England), also attended the regular FE stakeholder briefing meetings that I chaired (see for instance the notes from one such meeting on 9 April 2020: Exhibit GK1/029 - INQ000548361).

30. Regulators: I met regularly with Ofsted and Ofqual. Representatives from both these organisations also attended the FE stakeholder briefing meetings that I refer to in the preceding paragraph. I also held ministerial roundtables with Ofqual and the AOs on an ad hoc basis (Exhibits GK1/030 - INQ000548348; GK1/031 - INQ000548362, GK1/032 - INQ000548363 and GK1/033 - INQ000548377) and Ofqual attended the VTQ Reference Group meetings that I refer to above. I met with Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman, approximately every quarter (for instance, see the readout from our meeting on 9 February 2021: Exhibit GK1/034 - INQ000548376) and I also spoke with her on the telephone when necessary. I also met regularly with IfATE, which is not a regulator itself but works closely with Ofqual to ensure quality in apprenticeships and technical qualifications. I met with them on 29 April 2020 (Exhibits GK1/035 - INQ000548335 and GK1/036 - INQ000548338) and on 23 July 2020 (Exhibit GK1/037 - INQ000548350), and from November 2020 we met every two months (Exhibits GK1/038 - INQ000548360 and GK1/029 - INQ000548361).

31. Qualification awarding bodies: I regularly met with all of the AOs and the Federation of Awarding Bodies ("**FAB**") (for instance, see: Exhibit GK1/030 - INQ000548348). Representatives from the AOs were also present at the VTQ Reference Group meetings referred to above, and many of them attended the VTQ meetings that I chaired at the end of August 2020 at No.10's request, which I explain in section E below.

32. There was no reticence on my part about being seen to make demands on the teaching profession during the pandemic. My colleagues and I, working in tandem with the teaching profession, were fully focussed on the young people we were jointly serving.

33. I am asked whether I consider that we had the right balance in terms of the contact we had and the input we received from unions and other representative bodies, and that which we received from those organisations which represent the interests of apprentices and FE students. The balance of DfE's dealings with stakeholders in this sector leans more heavily in the direction of providers than end-users. There are mechanisms for DfE to speak with college leaders via the stakeholder bodies outlined above, and the workforce via union leaders, but there was no clear mechanism for liaising with the learners themselves. I did hold roundtables with learners (for instance,

during virtual visits to colleges such as a visit to Weston College on 21 May 2020: Exhibits GK1/039 - INQ000548344, GK1/040 - INQ000548329, GK1/041 - INQ000548364, GK1/042 – INQ000548339 and GK1/043 - INQ000548342), but there was no regular pattern of liaison with them. As for apprentices, I held a virtual roundtable on 7 April 2020 to discuss topics such as online learning and mental health (Exhibit GK1/044 - INQ000548328). Following this, I had further virtual meetings with apprentices, including a call with the Young Apprenticeship Ambassador Network on 13 May 2020 (Exhibit GK1/043 - INQ000548342) and a call with Capgemini apprentices on 8 December 2020 (Exhibit GK1/041 - INQ000548364). In any role I have held, I have always wanted to have a clear focus on the people receiving the service. The higher education ("**HE**") system has a very strong student satisfaction feedback system. I believe there is room for improvement in this regard in the FE sector.

34. As for the principal sources of information for monitoring and assessing the impact of the pandemic countermeasures on the mental health and wellbeing of FE students and apprentices, we received feedback on this anecdotally as opposed to having a structured system in place. I visited FE colleges (both in person and virtually) and held roundtables with college leaders and other organisations delivering apprenticeships, as explained above. I spoke with learners and apprentices directly whenever an opportunity to do so arose (for instance, during my college visits).

35. I am also asked to explain the principal sources of information for monitoring and assessing the impact of the pandemic countermeasures on the academic attainment and outcomes of apprentices and FE students (including rates of 'drop-out' and students leaving courses before completion). In relation to learners who participate in or complete their FE courses, DfE consistently tracks participation rates, measures academic attainment, and assesses employability prospects post-course and/or graduation, and we continued to do this throughout the pandemic. In addition to these regular monitoring activities, we also conducted and funded research studies to gain deeper insights into the impact of the pandemic on these areas. The monitoring and assessment of these factors conducted for learners aged 19 and above in the FE sector has been explained in detail in Chapter 5 of Roger Cotes' first corporate statement of behalf of DfE dated 31 July 2025 (Exhibit GK1/014 – INQ000588003). In summary, the principal sources of information during my time were as follows:

    (a) Data on learner volumes and achievement rates was sourced from the further education and skills and apprenticeships statistical publications (Exhibits

GK1/045 – INQ000607826 and GK1/046 – INQ000607827). This data collection was established before the COVID-19 pandemic, and I understand that it still remains in place. These statistical releases present information on adult (19+) FE learners and all-age apprenticeships using the Individualised Learner Record ("**ILR**") which collects data about learners from training providers in the FE and skills sector in England. This data continued to be collected during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(b) Data on employment rates for individuals after completion of their course is sourced from the FE outcomes publication (Exhibit GK1/047 - INQ000607828). This data collection was established before the COVID-19 pandemic, and I understand that it still remains in place. This publication uses matched administrative data from the Longitudinal Education Outcomes dataset, linking together learning, benefits, employment, and earnings data to produce statistics which show the employability outcomes of learners after they have completed their course.

36. I also had fortnightly catch-up meetings with the apprenticeships team during which they talked me through the latest apprenticeship performance data (see for instance: Exhibits GK1/048 - INQ000548345 and GK1/049 - INQ000548351).

37. The monitoring and assessment of these factors conducted for learners aged 16 to 18 has been explained in detail in Chapter 4 of Susan Acland-Hood's corporate statement on behalf of DfE dated 16 July 2025 (Exhibit GK1/107 – INQ000587992) which covers 16 to 18 year olds undertaking academic qualifications and VTQs below level 4 in schools and colleges, primarily at level 2 (e.g. GCSE resits as well as other equivalent level technical qualifications) and level 3 (e.g. A levels, T levels and other VTQs), and also level 2 and 3 attainment at age 19. In summary, the principal sources of information during my time were as follows:

(a) DfE published statistics on young people aged 16 to 18 participating in education and training, and those NEET, and continued to do so throughout the pandemic (Exhibit GK1/050 - INQ000514472).

(b) DfE publishes statistics on attainment in A level and VTQ (Exhibit GK1/051 - INQ000588466), as well as statistics on level 2 and level 3 attainment at age 19 (Exhibit GK1/052 - INQ000588430), and on the destinations of students

who left 16 to 18 study during and after the pandemic (Exhibit GK1/053 - INQ000588486).

C. PANDEMIC PLANNING AND THE EARLY STAGES OF THE PANDEMIC

38. I was aware of the departmental plans for responding to the pandemic as they developed, but I was not directly involved in their production or evolution. I was kept informed of planning developments via the DfE 'Coronavirus: Rolling Brief' emails which were circulated daily (see the following example from 25 February 2020 which summarised the work underway regarding Reasonable Worst Case Scenario Planning: Exhibit GK1/054 - INQ000548312). During the pandemic planning period, I was a new minister in DfE, and my primary focus was on the considerable skills agenda I had to deliver, including the development of a Skills for Jobs White Paper focussing on reforms to post-16 technical education and training which ended up being published in January 2021 (Exhibit GK1/055 – INQ000548372). The process by which DfE's pandemic plans were updated and developed has been set out in detail in both Chapter 3 of Roger Cotes' first corporate statement on behalf of DfE (Exhibit GK1/014 – INQ000588003) and chapter 2 of Julia Kinniburgh's first corporate statement on behalf of DfE dated 28 July 2025 (Exhibit GK1/056 – INQ000651498). This process was overseen by SSE and MoSSS.

39. I have been asked whether I consider that apprentices and FE students differed significantly as a cohort from school pupils and university students, in terms of the potentially disruptive impact of countermeasures on their education.

40. A key difference between FE students and school pupils is that FE settings operate much more flexible models of provision than schools. Whilst most school pupils have to be in their settings at the same prescribed times, FE students have varying timetables and FE providers typically have much larger sites. It was therefore easier for FE colleges to implement social distancing as they could have different cohorts of students in at different times of day, or in separate parts of the campus.

41. Another key difference between FE students and school pupils is their age. I imagine that the impact of pandemic countermeasures on the education of FE students was generally speaking less severe than on school pupils because they are older and therefore more capable of self-learning. Many FE colleges already delivered remote learning in certain situations (to accommodate learners needing more flexibility, such

as those with caring responsibilities, and also as a standard part of some courses), meaning that FE colleges and certain FE students were more familiar with the concept of remote learning than school pupils and many colleges already had the necessary facilities in place.

42. A key difference between FE students and university students is that the majority of FE students live at home, whilst the majority of university students live away from home (for instance, in halls of residence where there were different public health considerations) and often at a significant distance from home (meaning the government had to consider how they would travel safely back home at the end of each term).

43. FE colleges generally have a higher level of special educational needs and disability ("**SEND**") students (both those receiving SEN Support and those with EHCPs) than schools. FE colleges are better able to meet SEND students' needs due to the way in which they operate: namely, more flexibility in attendance, no uniform, and typically smaller classes. Some FE colleges have specialist units for SEND students. Young people with complex needs may well be in general FE colleges as well as specialist post-16 institutions. Universities typically do not have as many SEND learners as the FE sector.

44. As far as I am aware, the FE sector typically has a higher proportion of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds than schools or universities. I do not know about the relative proportions of care leavers (there is no published FE learner data on care leavers to my knowledge).

45. FE providers had a lot more students undertaking practical, technical and vocational training than schools or universities, meaning there were many aspects of their training that could not be easily facilitated in a remote way. The same difficulty applied to apprentices.

46. My understanding is that there is a higher proportion of students at risk of becoming NEET in the FE sector than in schools or universities. It is not the case that being an FE student in itself puts one at higher risk of becoming NEET. Rather, this is linked to the fact that the FE sector has more disadvantaged students, who are inherently more likely to end up NEET. I am aware that this was already a major concern before the pandemic. For individuals particularly at risk of becoming NEET, the loss of a structured system of learning during the pandemic was particularly detrimental.

47. I am asked whether I consider that subsequent departmental decisions and guidance regarding the closing and opening of FE settings and the provision of FE and apprenticeships took adequate account of the particular needs and requirements of apprentices and FE students. When it came to making decisions about the closing and opening of settings, consistency of treatment across the whole education system was a major concern (i.e. not applying different rules to different parts of the system). My view is that, in practice, more could have been done to keep FE settings open, particularly given some of the unique features of the FE cohort listed above (namely, the flexibility in timetabling and the fact that the majority of students live at home), but I also appreciated the force of the argument that all areas of the system should be treated in the same way.

48. Like schools, FE settings always remained open for those who were considered vulnerable. What we could not guarantee, though, was whether the students falling into these categories would come in or not (for a variety of reasons, including fear or anxiety, not wanting to appear different, or transport issues) and take advantage of being able to remain in a structured environment.

D. SCHOOL AND COLLEGE CLOSURES AND THE MOVE TO REMOTE TEACHING FROM MARCH 2020

49. A chronological account of the decision-making process regarding the closure of schools and other education settings to most students in March 2020, and the development of associated guidance as to which students could attend for face-to-face tuition (in short, children of key workers and those who were considered vulnerable), has been provided in paragraphs 3.21 to 3.30 of Julia Kinniburgh's first corporate statement on behalf of DfE dated 28 July 2025 (Exhibit GK1/056 – INQ000651498) and paragraphs 3.17 to 3.41 of Roger Cotes' first corporate statement on behalf of DfE dated 31 July 2025 (Exhibit GK1/014 – INQ000588003).

50. I was not personally involved in the closure decision, or in the development of these initial pieces of guidance. The key pieces of initial guidance were *Guidance for schools, childcare providers, colleges and local authorities in England on maintaining education provision* (Exhibit GK1/012 - INQ000542448), published on 19 March 2020, and *Maintaining education and skills training provision: further education providers* (Exhibit GK1/057 - INQ000542963), published on 23 March 2020.

51. I was, however given the opportunity to comment on the 23 March 2020 draft guidance prior to its publication. My private office confirmed that I was broadly happy with it but passed on a few comments from me, for instance, querying why we had not acknowledged issues around free school meals in the 'Funding' section, and asking whether we would be capturing data to ascertain the percentage of learners accessing online learning (Exhibit GK1/058 - INQ000548319). I received a response to these queries later that day (Exhibit GK1/059 - INQ000548320). This response confirmed that the free school meals issue had not been resolved but there was a meeting due to take place later that day with the Treasury ("**HMT**") so, if approval was obtained in time, then this could be added into the guidance before publication. In the end, the issue was not resolved in time to be addressed in this guidance, but on 30 April 2020 the ESFA revised the guidance on *Free meals in further education funded institutions* to include FE funded institutions and ensure free meals were provided to eligible learners aged 16 to 19, regardless of whether they were attending in person or studying remotely due to COVID-19 (Exhibit GK1/060 – INQ000607811). As for my query about data collection on online learning access, it was clarified that the FE directorate were asking their territory contacts to capture some wider headline information, including about types of learning being offered, but were not being asked for volumes or

percentages. Data collection on online learning developed as the pandemic progressed, as explained below.

52. I am asked to explain what information was provided to me prior to mid-March 2020 as to the ability of FE establishments to provide remote education on a mass scale. Before 2020, DfE did not collect information on remote education practices across education settings. I was aware that some educational settings did offer remote education to support pupils during absences, and many FE providers in particular delivered some remote learning (for example, to support students needing flexible schedules) but, generally speaking, teachers had limited experience with remote education. There was no communication with the FE sector about moving to remote education prior to the Prime Minister's announcement of the national lockdown on 18 March 2020; our focus was on keeping as many children as possible in face-to-face education, meaning the focus on remote education was more limited. However, due to the number of students and staff within institutions that were self-isolating, a lot of providers had already taken steps to allow or encourage students to learn remotely where they could.

53. I am asked whether some FE courses were prioritised for face-to-face teaching to continue and, if so, what criteria applied. During this initial period of the pandemic, FE providers were advised, as were all other education settings, to only remain open to learners who were considered vulnerable or were children of key workers. Furthermore, learners who were in exam cohorts were also prioritised to return earlier than other cohorts, such as during summer 2020. During the third lockdown (January 2021 to March 2021), FE colleges were advised that they could use in-person assessment methods for Licence to Practice VTQs, where in-person practical assessments were necessary to demonstrate competence, such as in courses like electrical installation, health and social care, construction, and engineering.

54. On 20 March 2020, I asked to receive a rolling brief on the FE COVID-19 response which collated all pertinent information in one place (GK1/061 - INQ000548315). This request was promptly actioned, and I began to receive daily email updates on FE COVID-19 issues that same day (GK1/062 - INQ000548316). These updates covered any new guidance issued to providers, the latest stakeholder engagement, examples of good practice regarding remote education provision, policy updates, and survey data on providers (see the following examples of daily updates sent to me on Friday 24 and Monday 27 April 2020: Exhibits GK1/063 - INQ000548332 and GK1/064 - INQ000548333).

55. We were very conscious that some FE students from disadvantaged households may not be able to access their required online learning due to a lack of suitable devices such as laptops and/or internet access. On 24 April 2020, the ESFA revised their guidance to institutions that administered the 16 to 19 Bursary Fund to address this challenge, clarifying that the fund could be used to provide essential equipment and support participation in education (Exhibit GK1/065 - INQ000607856). This was a fund already in existence, used to provide financial support for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds with the costs of education such as travel, books and equipment.

56. It is correct that, on 13 August 2020, advice was provided to me (and SSE) flagging the pressures on the 16 to 19 Bursary Fund following forecasting of the number of students that were likely to require financial support in the academic year 20/21 (Exhibits GK1/066 – INQ000548357 and GK1/067 - INQ000548358). The advice explained that:

    (a) The anticipated pandemic-led economic downturn was predicted to lead to increasing unemployment, and reduced household incomes as a result would increase the need for students to get help from the 16 to 19 Bursary Fund, as would reductions in job and apprenticeship opportunities (and the resultant expected increase in FE student numbers).

    (b) In addition to increased economic hardship, providers were expecting: (a) increased transport costs due to limited capacity on public transport, and (b) increased device and connectivity costs to allow learners who could not otherwise afford it to participate in education remotely.

    (c) On devices and connectivity, according to a recent AoC survey, 56% of colleges said that their bursary funding for 19/20 had not been sufficient to provide laptops and connectivity support to all disadvantaged learners that need them.

    (d) Without additional funding (around £30 million to £50 million), providers would be unable to meet the needs of disadvantaged students at the same level of support as in previous years.

57. It was therefore recommended that we approach HMT to seek an agreed solution from the following options:

(a) Seeking to provide a general top-up to provider allocations for the academic year 20/21 (a strong challenge was expected on this from HMT, who had indicated that it had a very high bar for any new funding requests outside of the Spending Review process, which would be too late to meet this need);

(b) Seeking to provide additional *targeted* funding, managing this on a reactive basis with business cases from providers that needed it (it was noted that HMT would probably prefer this approach, although the high bar would still apply); or

(c) Identifying additional funds from wider departmental budgets which could be used to provide a top-up for providers to support disadvantaged students on a business case basis as in option (b) (but DfE was already facing severe pressures across its 20/21 budget).

58. My private office provided my comments on this advice on 25 August 2020 (Exhibit GK1/068 – INQ000548355). I shared the view of DfE's Central Strategic Finance team and Special Advisers that it was not the right time to be approaching HMT with a request for more funding as they would be unlikely to consider the request favourably. However, I remained very concerned about ensuring that disadvantaged students' learning requirements were being met. I asked how many colleges had submitted business cases for additional funding in that academic year. The response provided was that not many had done so (58 cases had been submitted) but this did not reflect the predicted increases in FE student participation and levels of disadvantage amongst the academic year 20/21 student cohort (Exhibit GK1/129 – INQ000548356).

59. In August 2020, DfE (through the ESFA) implemented changes to the ESFA Adult Education Budget ("**AEB**") funding rules for the 2020/21 academic year (Exhibits GK1/069 – INQ000607845 and GK1/070 – INQ000607835). This amendment permitted providers to utilise learner support funds to procure devices for learners aged 19 and above, facilitating their access to IT equipment and connectivity. DfE did not monitor the number of FE students accessing remote education, although we did receive survey data from other organisations (an example is provided in the next paragraph). As for the quantity of remote education being provided by FE colleges, I received regular updates on recent survey data via the FE COVID-19 daily email updates sent to me (for instance, see Exhibit GK1/071 - INQ000548327, the daily email update from 3 April 2020 which informed me that 94% of colleges and 83% of non-college providers were delivering learning online at that point in time).

60. In the FE COVID-19 daily update email sent to me on 1 May 2020, I was informed that the AoC and HOLEX had provided results from their respective remote learning surveys, which provided us with a greater insight into the extent and nature of remote education during lockdown (Exhibit GK1/072 - INQ000548337). I was then sent a slide pack on 5 May 2020 which set out the results of this survey work in detail (Exhibits GK1/073 - INQ000548340 and GK1/074 - INQ000548341). The summary of these results explained that the vast majority of colleges and adult and community education providers had taken decisive action to switch to online provision, but there was significant variation in learner engagement and experience. In relation to 16-19 year olds, only 3 in 10 colleges confirmed that all their learners were continuing their study, two thirds of colleges confirmed the majority of their learners were continuing their study, and 2% of colleges stated that only some of their learners were continuing their study. The results showed lower levels of ongoing learning by adult learners (post-19) in comparison to the 16 to 19 cohort (due to factors including more adult learners having caring responsibilities), although engagement remained high.

61. From early January 2021, data on remote education was captured via the Education Settings data collection ("**EdSet**") form. This was a system that had been launched in March 2020 to monitor children and young people's attendance during the pandemic. FE providers were also asked to publish details of their remote education offer on their website by 18 January 2021 (Exhibit GK1/075 – INQ000575807). This data was then shared across DfE via weekly situation reports ("**sitreps**") (for instance, see the sitrep dated 25 February 2021 which confirmed that 100% of FE colleges were meeting their remote learning requirement at that point in time: Exhibit GK1/076 - INQ000541100).

62. DfE itself did not monitor the quality of remote education provision as it was not our role to do so; this was Ofsted's responsibility, as explained throughout Chapter 4 of Julia Kinniburgh's second corporate statement dated 17 July 2025 on behalf of DfE (Exhibit GK1/077 – INQ000587978). Ofsted is an independent regulatory and non-ministerial department established by statute, independent of DfE, responsible for inspecting and regulating organisations and individuals providing education, training, and care (including FE education).

63. All routine Ofsted inspections were suspended on 17 March 2020, but Ofsted continued its regulatory work. In July 2020, it published *Ofsted: schools and further education & skills (FES)*, its findings on remote education in the FE and skills sector during COVID-19. The findings were based on a review of a 'small sample of 20

volunteer colleges and other providers', carried out in June 2020 (Exhibit GK1/078 – INQ000575800).

64. This report revealed mixed experiences. Learners' experiences during this period varied significantly across providers and subject areas. For instance, the amount of face-to-face contact through video conferencing differed greatly even within the same provider. Some learners appreciated the convenience of online education while others missed face-to-face interactions and immediate feedback. Engagement levels differed; particularly for those at levels 1 and 2 (equivalent to GCSE grades 1 to 9), than those at level 3 (equivalent to A levels and T levels), who struggled more with the technology necessary for online learning, leading to disengagement with some online teaching methods. Both learners and teachers preferred live online lessons for better interaction, though managing smaller groups increased staff workload. The success of online education relied on staff training, strategic planning, and compatible software and platforms.

65. In mid-September 2020, Ofsted inspectors conducted pilot visits across FE and skills providers before carrying out interim visits to various education (and social care institutions) until December 2020 (Exhibit GK1/079 - INQ000575769). These non-graded visits were to monitor compliance with the Coronavirus Act 2020 Provision of Remote Education (England) Temporary Continuity Direction (which was issued on 1 October 2020 and came into force on 22 October 2020, making it clear that schools had a legal duty to provide remote education for state-funded, school-age children unable to attend school due to COVID-19) and to ensure education settings were prepared to deliver effective remote education, providing assurance rather than formal grades or judgement (Exhibit GK1/080 - INQ000575801).

66. Following these visits, Ofsted released a series of briefings which offered insights into remote education's effectiveness and the strategies used to maintain education standards during the pandemic (September 2020 briefing: Exhibit GK1/081 - INQ000575673). I was kept informed of Ofsted's findings on remote education provision in the FE sector throughout this time.

67. The FE Commissioner also had a key role in monitoring the provision of remote education. This individual is appointed by SSE to work with the sector to assist colleges in delivering exemplary education and training for learners. One of their key responsibilities is quality improvement, namely working with FE colleges and local authorities to enhance the quality of education and outcomes for learners. Updates

from the FE Commissioner's team regarding online learning were included in the FE COVID-19 daily update emails that I received (for instance, on 27 April 2020 the team informed me that online learning had taken off well, with most colleges offering learning to 100% of students and attendance levels running between 70% and 90%: (Exhibit GK1/082 - INQ000548336).

68. As for monitoring the quality of apprenticeships during the pandemic, this was the responsibility of IFATE. I regularly received data updates regarding apprenticeships via the departmental sitreps, including data on the status of apprenticeships (whether they were stopped, paused or had resumed), vacancies, the number of active apprenticeships, and the percentage change in active apprenticeships since February 2020 (see, for instance, Exhibit GK1/083 - INQ000548352). Information regarding the impact of pandemic measures on apprenticeships was also sometimes provided in the FE COVID-19 daily email updates. For instance, the email update I received on 17 June 2020 summarised the results of a survey conducted by the National Society of Apprentices ("NSOA") on the impact of the pandemic on apprentices during May 2020 (out of 918 participants, 70% were either working from home or physically attending work, only 1% had lost their jobs, 25% had been or were about to be furloughed, and 4% said they were not working and had not been furloughed but expected to return to work when allowed) (Exhibit GK1/084 - INQ000548347).

69. I am asked to set out the conclusions I reached as to the quantity and quality of education that was provided by FE colleges during the pandemic. In my view, the quantity was good; the vast majority of FE providers delivered the required amount of remote education, partially helped by the fact that many of them already had experience in providing education remotely pre-pandemic, as explained above. My impression was that the quality was very variable depending on the ability of individual teachers. On my regular visits to FE colleges during the pandemic, I observed some very engaging examples of education being delivered in a wide range of courses.

E. EXAMINATIONS AND VOCATIONAL AND TECHNICAL QUALIFICATIONS

70. I am asked about concerns I raised in March 2020 about students working towards VTQs, particularly in relation to qualifications to assess occupational competency. On 24 March 2020, I was sent a note for ministers entitled *Covid-19 contingency planning: Vocational and Technical Qualifications* which detailed the urgent work underway with Ofqual to agree how AOs would deliver VTQ assessments and results, as well as setting out the wider issues relating to VTQs which would require decisions to be made over the coming weeks as a result of changes to VTQ assessments (Exhibit GK1/085 – INQ000514570).

71. The note highlighted that the VTQ landscape was particularly complex, and the appropriate measures would take longer to agree than was the case for GCSEs, AS and A levels. This was due to the fact that VTQs serve a range of purposes, are taken by a diverse student population, have a range of delivery and assessment models, and (at the time) were delivered by nearly 160 AOs. It explained that the ESFA was working with Ofqual to agree the necessary action to ensure students studying VTQs due for award in that academic year would not be disadvantaged, and that as many as possible could be provided with a grade. The main approaches being considered were rescheduling to a later date, estimated grades, or adapting how assessments were conducted.

72. On 26 March 2020, my private office passed on my comments on the note (Exhibit GK1/086 – INQ000506999). I agreed with the core principle set out at paragraph 13 of the note, namely: *"that estimating grades should be extended as broadly as possible for qualifications taken in schools and colleges to avoid disadvantaging students in comparison to those taking GCSE and A Levels. However, estimation should not be used where it would undermine the judgement of occupational competence*". However, I was concerned about the comment at paragraph 10 that, when it came to VTQs where estimation would be inappropriate given the very practical nature of the competence needing to be demonstrated (such as OCR Road Haulage and Passenger Trasport, or NCFE CACHE Technical Level 3 Diploma in Early Years Education and Care), "*delaying assessment may be the only option*". I asked officials and Ofqual to urgently consider what more could be done to substitute for end-point assessments for this type of VTQ, including options like using video, live stream and controlled social distancing. I wanted everything possible to be done to avoid a backlog for people completing these qualifications, resulting in them being disadvantaged.

73. On 31 March 2020, SSE sent a formal direction letter under s.129(6) of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009 to Ofqual setting out the policy direction to which he expected them to have regard in putting in place alternative arrangements for awarding grades (Exhibit GK1/087 - INQ000507001). The direction letter explained that the government's key aim was to enable students to progress successfully to the next stage of their lives, and asked Ofqual to:

(a) work with the AOs to develop and implement an alternative system of grades to replace exams in summer 2020, to enable students to progress to further study and employment.

(b) ensure that students were issued with calculated results based on their exam centres' judgements of their ability in the relevant subjects, supplemented by a range of other evidence.

(c) put in place arrangements for standardising results across schools and colleges.

(d) ensure, as far as is possible, that qualification standards were maintained, and that the distribution of grades should follow a similar profile to that in previous years.

(e) develop an appeals process, focused on whether the process used the right data and was correctly applied, rather than seeking to overturn teachers' professional judgement on individual students' ability; and

(f) work with the AOs and others to plan to enable students who did not feel their calculated grade reflected their ability to sit exams as soon as reasonably possible after schools and colleges were open again.

74. On 9 April 2020, SSE wrote a second direction letter (Exhibit GK1/088 - INQ000507002) to the Ofqual Chief Regulator setting out his policy with regard to VTQs. Recognising the complexity of the VTQ landscape, the letter stated: "*students and other learners who are taking vocational and technical qualifications that are used for progression to and through employment, further or higher education should be issued a set of results this summer in order to allow them to progress to the next stage of their lives... This means that all students and other learners taking such qualifications should, wherever possible, receive a result that fairly reflects the work that they have put in and their level of attainment, and where relevant, maintains the same broad*

levels of comparability with previous years, in line with the approach being taken for GCSEs, AS and A levels… All reasonable measures should be taken to ensure a safe, and valid result can be awarded to students and other learners, and that standards are maintained as consistently as possible."

75. On 27 March 2020, I had been sent this draft direction alongside an accompanying note and given the opportunity to comment on it (Exhibits GK1/086 - INQ000506999, GK1/089 - INQ000548322 and GK1/090 - INQ000548321). I queried what was going to be done to incentivise providers to carry out adapted assessments for qualifications where calculation of results would be inappropriate, rather than allowing delays to occur (Exhibit GK1/091 - INQ000548323). I was sent a response to this query on 31 March 2020 (Exhibit GK1/092 - INQ000548324), but my private office commented that the response did not appear to convincingly answer my question. On 2 April 2020, my private office asked that I be kept informed as to whether adaptation of assessments (rather than delays) was taking place or not.

76. As explained in detail in Jenny Oldroyd's first corporate statement on behalf of DfE dated 28 July 2025 (Exhibit GK1/093 – INQ000651499), Ofqual took forward the work on how to award VTQ grades between April and July 2020. The DfE minister who led on this area was MoSSS. In the FE COVID-19 daily email updates, I was kept informed of Ofqual's progress in this area (for instance, see Exhibits GK1/094 - INQ000548330 and GK1/063 - INQ000548332) and I also had frequent meetings with DfE officials working on this. I also met with Ofqual (Roger Taylor, the Chair, and Sally Collier, the Chief Regulator) on 20 May 2020 to discuss this issue (Exhibit GK1/095 - INQ000548346). In broad summary (a more detailed explanation is provided in Chapter 4 of Roger Cotes' first corporate statement on behalf of DfE dated 31 July 2025 (Exhibit GK1/014 – INQ000588003):

    (a) Ofqual launched a consultation on 24 April 2020 seeking views on exceptional arrangements for awarding VTQs and other general qualifications. I was sent the draft Ofqual consultation on 22 April 2020 and cleared it on 23 April 2020 following a meeting with DfE officials to discuss its contents (Exhibit GK1/096 - INQ000548331).

    (b) Ofqual then published a decisions document for awarding results in VTQs and other general qualifications on 22 May 2020. For VTQs, Ofqual confirmed that there was to be no overarching statistical standardisation model, and that the extraordinary regulatory framework (Exhibit GK1/097 - INQ000607854) would

be introduced to allow AOs flexibility to determine the most suitable approach for how their qualifications should be graded.

(c) The awarding of VTQs in 2020 followed guidance from Ofqual, which provided flexibility to AOs to decide the best grading methods for students (Exhibit GK1/097 - INQ000607854). AOs implemented several measures to ensure fair grading for VTQs for FE students, including teachers' assessments of students' performance throughout their courses and often used at the unit level. Additionally, banked unit grades were utilised for qualifications like BTECs, where students' modular unit grades, assessed at regular intervals throughout the course, contributed to the final qualification-level grade. AOs' adapted assessments, which involved modified versions of exams that students had completed, reduced the need for a calculation process.

77. As for the timing of VTQ results, on 11 May 2020 I received a short note setting out a recommendation that we work with AOs to issue VTQ results on the same days as A level and GCSE results (13 and 20 August respectively), where those VTQs were used for progression to FE and HE, which I approved (Exhibits GK1/098 - INQ000548343 and GK1/099 - INQ000548382). As explained in the note, AOs were free to determine when they published their VTQ results and many usually issued them weeks before A level and GCSE results. The larger AOs with the majority of FE and HE progression VTQs were content to meet the 13 and 20 August deadlines (Exhibit GK1/100 - INQ000548349). This was intended to give greater prominence to the release of VTQ results than usual.

78. I am asked to summarise any difficulties for FE students of which I was aware in relation to centre assessment grades ("**CAGs**") for GCSEs, A levels or other qualifications in 2020 and/or 2021, and any steps I took to address these issues. Since the vast majority of GCSEs and A levels were delivered in schools, the Minister for Schools (Nick Gibb) was the lead on issues relating to the assessment of these qualifications; I assume that any difficulties encountered in this respect in schools also applied in FE settings, but I do not recall any specific examples. In my role, I was mainly focussed on VTQs.

79. The main issue that arose in relation to the grading of VTQs was that, following the release of results in August 2020, for the small number of qualifications that had used a statistical standardisation approach similar to the Ofqual model for A levels and GCSEs, Ofqual asked AOs to review their approaches (Exhibit GK1/101 -

INQ000514696). This meant that a small proportion of VTQ results would most likely need to be reissued. On 18 August 2020, DfE sent a statement (Exhibit GK1/102 - INQ000507016) to FE providers explaining this. On 19 August 2020, I was made aware of a number of issues with the grading of BTEC qualifications (Exhibit GK1/027 - INQ000548353).

80. On 19 August 2020, an issue with delays to the issuing of some VTQ results, and BTECs in particular, began to emerge. Following the decision to move to CAGs for A and AS levels (explained in further detail in Jenny Oldroyd's corporate statement on behalf of DfE dated 28 July 2025 (Exhibit GK1/093 – INQ000651499), a number of AOs decided to regrade Level 2 and Level 3 results. DfE officials sent an update to SSE's office on the VTQ/BTEC situation, including information from across the different AOs involved (Exhibit GK1/028 - INQ000514538). No.10 were also informed and then updated daily.

81. As mentioned above, at the request of No.10, on 20 August 2020 I began chairing daily meetings with Ofqual, the AOs that had outstanding results, the AoC, the University and Colleges Admissions Service ("**UCAS**"), the SFCA and No.10 colleagues to ensure that work progressed on getting all VTQ results issued as quickly as possible (Exhibit GK1/103 - INQ000548354). An example of a readout from one of these meetings (28 August 2020) is exhibited here: (Exhibit GK1/104 - INQ000514556). No.10 daily updates on the situation and these meetings continued until 1 September 2020, when all VTQ results had been issued (Exhibit GK1/104- INQ000514556).

F. REOPENING FE COLLEGES AND THE RETURN TO FACE-TO-FACE TEACHING

82. In the wake of the Cabinet's decision to impose a national lockdown on 4 January 2021 in light of rising cases of COVID-19, SSE and I received advice set out in a position paper dated 6 January 2021 (Exhibit GK1/105 - INQ000075674) recommending that we adopt the following approach for FE (see paragraph 3(a)):

"*Further Education to remain open for face-to-face attendance for those defined as vulnerable, children of critical workers, while those on technical courses who need access to specialist equipment can attend on site where necessary, although other aspects of their programmes should be delivered remotely. All other students will learn remotely until at least February half term.*"

83. SSE agreed to this approach (as well as the other approaches set in paragraph 3 which did not relate to FE) (Exhibit GK1/106 - INQ000075673). FE colleges wanted all their learners to be able progress, so they did their utmost to facilitate attendance on site for students who needed access to specialist equipment. As explained above, it was easier for FE colleges to socially distance learners than schools for a number of reasons: their students are older (and therefore more able to comply with distancing rules), their classes are typically small, and their sites are typically large.

84. The position paper gave the following assessment of the negative impacts on the FE sector if access to education were to be limited (at paragraph 24):

> "*There may be negative impacts to students and business (for example Apprenticeships, T Levels, traineeships) if access to education is limited which may disproportionately disadvantage vulnerable or marginalised students. Unlike other parts of the post-16 education system, disadvantaged learners are more likely to participate in FE than more advantaged learners and are more likely to live in the most deprived areas of England than the least deprived areas. Prolonged absence from face-to-face learning for disadvantaged, lower level students, could increase disengagement from learning and risk of becoming NEET, with impacts likely to be larger on students undertaking practical learning, lower level learners or those with learning difficulties.*"

85. I was satisfied that the recommended approach set out in the position paper was appropriate given the public health situation at this time. I agreed with the assessment at paragraph 25 that "*in line with the recommendation of the chief medical officers… it*

[was] right to restrict attendance in order to reduce covid transmission rates nationally". If we had not restricted attendance at FE settings at this time, this could have contributed to the spread of infection not only to FE students but to members of their household or bubbles (who may have been vulnerable), which could have had serious health consequences.

86. We were extremely conscious of the risk, highlighted in paragraph 24 of the position paper, that a "*[p]rolonged absence from face-to-face learning for disadvantaged, lower level students, could increase disengagement from learning and risk of becoming NEET, with impacts likely to be larger on students undertaking practical learning, lower level learners or those with learning difficulties*". As explained in this paragraph, "*[u]nlike other parts of the post-16 education system, disadvantaged learners are more likely to participate in FE than more advantaged learners and are more likely to live in the most deprived areas of England than the least deprived areas"*. Many of these learners have to resit their mathematics and English GCSEs when they start out in the FE system, which imposes an additional burden on them and can be a source of fear and anxiety. It was therefore a difficult decision to restrict attendance at this time, knowing that a prolonged absence may disproportionately disadvantage these students. However, we were satisfied that there were appropriate exceptions built into our approach to mitigate the potential disproportionate impact on the groups mentioned above: FE providers remained open for face-to-face attendance for (1) those defined as vulnerable, and (2) those who required access to specialist equipment or those on practical courses that could not be delivered wholly remotely.

87. As highlighted in paragraph 25 of the position paper, "*We [were] also working to ensure a high standard of remote learning, building on previous work to strengthen remote education expectations by emphasising the benefits of live online teaching, expecting providers to identify a named senior leader with responsibility for quality remote learning, and where providers [could not] provide online access to a student that they be identified as vulnerable and expected to attend on site*". This discretion to deem students as vulnerable if they could not be provided with online access was a particularly significant mitigation.

88. DfE has provided a detailed analysis of NEET rates before, during and since pandemic in Chapter 4 of Susan Acland-Hood's third corporate statement to the Inquiry dated 16 July 2025 (Exhibit GK1/107 – INQ000587992).

89. I am asked to set out my role in the decision-making process in relation to FE colleges' return to face-to-face-teaching for all students in 2021, the date of the full reopening of FE colleges to all students, and what the priorities were in this regard. A detailed account of this decision-making process has been set out in Chapter 5 of Julia Kinniburgh's first corporate statement on behalf of DfE dated 28 July 2025 (Exhibit GK1/056 – INQ000651498) (notably paragraphs 5.58-5.99, 5.109 and 5.121). In the weeks leading up to the decision being announced, we were pushing for the reopening to occur as quickly as possible.

90. As explained in Julia Kinniburgh's corporate statement on behalf of DfE dated 17 July 2025 (Exhibit GK1/077 – INQ000587978), SSE attended the key COVID O meetings and led on discussions with the Prime Minister pertaining to this issue. On 22 February 2021, the Prime Minister announced a four-step roadmap for cautiously easing lockdown restrictions at a COVID-19 press conference (paragraph 5.99) (Exhibit GK1/108 - INQ000075711). Returning to face-to-face education in schools and colleges was the first step in the roadmap as the government considered education a national priority. Step 1 of the roadmap stated that schools and colleges would be open to all pupils from 8 March 2021 (Exhibit GK1/109 – INQ000542961) (Paragraph 3, Figure 9: Step 1). Schools and colleges then returned to full attendance from 8 March 2021, with twice weekly testing for secondary school pupils alongside staff testing across primary and secondary schools and colleges (paragraph 5.127).

91. Whilst SSE led on this decision-making process for DfE, I was kept informed of developments regarding the upcoming policy changes and did not express any objections (Exhibit GK1/110 - INQ000548375). I also attended FE stakeholder meetings at which the plans for the return to face-to-face teaching were discussed and stakeholder feedback was sought, for instance on 3 April 2021 (Exhibits GK1/111 - INQ000548371, GK1/112 - INQ000548373 and GK1/113 - INQ000548374).

92. In summary, the principle departmental strategies that were implemented to address the negative impacts of a long period of remote teaching on FE students, including disadvantaged students and those with SEND, were as follows:

    (a) Assisting FE colleges to make an effective switch to remote education for those that needed to learn remotely. As explained above, FE providers were quick to adapt to remote learning as many providers had already incorporated online methods into their courses before the pandemic. DfE prepared various pieces of remote education guidance and collaborated with industry leaders

to develop remote education resources and support to assist with content and best practice. For example, the EdTech demonstrator programme was launched on 28 April 2020 to provide colleges (and schools) with free peer-to-peer support on the effective use of technology in education. Any publicly funded school or college could apply for up to 30 hours of support from an EdTech Demonstrator. I understand that this programme lasted until the end of June 2022 (Exhibit GK1/114 - INQ000548380). Further detail on specific guidance and resources has been set out in Chapter 4 of Julia Kinniburgh's second corporate statement on behalf of DfE dated 17 July 2025 (Exhibit GK1/077 – INQ000587978).

(b) Ensuring that the 16 to 19 Bursary Fund could be used by providers to get digital devices into the hands of disadvantaged students to enable them to learn remotely, as explained above.

(c) Ensuring that vulnerable FE students (many of whom had SEND) could still access face-to-face learning and allowing providers to exercise their discretion to deem students vulnerable if they could not be provided with online access to learning, as explained above.

(d) Securing funding for the FE sector to help with learning recovery. The major funding developments during my time as Minister were as follows:

    i. On 20 July 2020, DfE announced that £96 million was being allocated to 16 to 19 providers as a ringfenced grant to be spent on small group tuition for students who had low prior attainment (without GCSE English and/or mathematics at the expected standard) for English, mathematics, and other courses where learning was disrupted (Exhibits GK1/115 - INQ000607804 and GK1/116 – INQ000607840). This was known as the 16 to 19 tuition fund.

    ii. On 24 February 2021, DfE announced a new £700 million education recovery package. This included a £102 million extension of the 16 to 19 tuition fund for a further year to support more students in English, mathematics and other vocational and academic subjects (Exhibit GK1/117 - INQ000541082).

iii. On 2 June 2021, DfE announced the Education Recovery Package (Exhibit GK1/118 - INQ000541083) which included the expansion of the 16 to 19 tuition fund, continuing to target key subjects such as mathematics and English.

(e) Providing support to college leavers to find apprenticeships or employment:

i. On 28 April 2020 we launched 'The Skills Toolkit', a new online platform to help boost the nation's skills while people were staying at home (Exhibits GK1/119 - INQ000548334 and GK1/120 - INQ000548384). This provided access to free, high-quality digital and numeracy courses to help people progress in work and boost their job prospects.

ii. DfE's skills recovery was part of the UK government's *A Plan for Jobs* initiative which the HMT published on 8 July 2020 (Exhibit GK1/121 - INQ000088027). This was further referenced in the announcement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer of a new £2 billion job support plan, focused on skills development and youth employment (Exhibit GK1/122 – INQ000607829). DfE committed over £500 million to ensure that young people acquired the necessary skills for quality employment. This included £111 million for traineeships, £32 million for the National Careers Service, and demand-led initiatives such as the apprenticeship employer incentive and high-value courses for school and college leavers. The £32 million investment for the National Careers Service was aimed at offering unemployed individuals close to re-entering the labour market with immediate support such as careers information, advice and guidance (some of which was offered virtually during lockdown).

iii. Skills Bootcamps and Free Courses for Jobs ("**FCFJ**") were announced by the Prime Minister on 29 September 2020 and implemented in April 2021 (Exhibit GK1/123 - INQ000607847). Skills Bootcamps, funded by DfE, are intensive training programmes designed to help adults

acquire skills as part of the Lifetime Skills Guarantee and Plan for Jobs initiatives. The initiative (targeted at adults aged 19 and above) seeks to address skills shortages by providing high-demand skills, support career progression and transitions, boost employment through pathways such as job interviews and employer connections and promote lifelong learning and continuous skill development. The FCFJ initiative was introduced April 2021 in the FE sector to assist individuals in acquiring skills and qualifications (for free) with a view to securing employment. It is available to adults aged 19 and over who do not already have a level 3 qualification (equivalent to an A level) or higher.

(f) Providing funding and support for students' mental health and wellbeing. In particular:

i. DfE provided new online resources to providers to boost mental health support for both staff and students, including videos, webinars and teaching materials produced in partnership with charities (see the announcement made on 7 June 2020: Exhibit GK1/124 - INQ000588377).

ii. On 25 August 2020, in partnership with the Department of Health and Social Care ("**DHSC**"), DfE launched an £8 million Wellbeing for Education Return programme to provide schools and colleges in England with the knowledge and access to resources to support children, young people, teachers and parents as schools and colleges reopened fully in September 2020 (Exhibit GK1/125 - INQ000514686).

iii. On 10 May 2021, DfE announced an investment of more than £17 million (Exhibit GK1/126 - INQ000514687) to build on mental health support already available in education settings. This included £7 million of funding (Exhibit GK1/127 - INQ000588308) for local authorities to deliver a Wellbeing for Education Recovery programme, which built on the success of Wellbeing for Education Return. The £17 million total included £9.5 million for the financial

year 2021-2022 for schools and colleges to train a senior mental health lead from their staff.

iv. On 10 July 2021, a series of wellbeing support videos (Exhibit GK1/128 - INQ000607809), co-created with the government's Youth Mental Health Ambassador, Dr Alex George, PHE, and First News were released, offering guidance to children and young people on how to improve their mental and physical wellbeing.

G. FUNDING ISSUES

93. I am asked whether I consider that the funding offered by the Treasury to enable the pandemic response in the FE sector and to support FE students and apprentices was adequate. A significant amount of funding was provided to the FE sector during the pandemic, as explained in DfE's corporate evidence for this module. There is a longstanding problem, though, that FE colleges are not treated the same as schools when it comes to funding. This is most clearly reflected in discrepancies in teacher pay between the two sectors. My impression was that the FE sector received less funding for COVID-19 recovery than the school sector overall.

94. While DfE supported schools with the rollout of digital learning through the 'Get Help with Technology' programme, the FE sector received funding for this purpose through the 16 to19 Bursary Fund. I did wonder why the same approach was not adopted for both FE providers and schools, to ensure parity. My impression was that the funding provided through the 16 to 19 Bursary Fund was not as generous as that provided to schools through the 'Get Help with Technology' programme, but it is fair to say that the FE sector was further ahead than schools in terms of digital learning when the pandemic started. Further, the 'universal catch-up premium' announced on 19 June 2020 to support children and young people to make up for lost time in education was only available for state-funded primary and secondary schools over the 20/21 academic year, even though FE providers also cater for the 16 to 19 learner cohort.

H. LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

95. Clearly the impact on FE students due to education settings being closed was significant and may have resulted in more young people becoming NEET and experiencing various mental health issues. I recommend that such considerations are given significant weight as part of any decisions to close educational settings in a future pandemic.

96. I also consider that the FE sector should build on the online learning offer developed throughout the pandemic and ensure that it is always optimised and accessible. Best practice and high-quality resources should also be shared collaboratively amongst providers. This should help to ensure higher engagement and quality of education in future online offers.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed: Personal Data

Dated: 11 August 2025