

MEETING WITH MINISTER VICTORIA ATKINS - MINISTER FOR SAFEGUARDING

Attendees: TBC

Purpose of meeting: To discuss how DfE and Home Office can align their approaches and work effectively to protect vulnerable children and mitigate the additional risks arising from COVID-19.

Annotated agenda: i) to emphasise the importance of working closely with HO and seek reassurances police will continue to prioritise safeguarding including in relation to domestic abuse and extra familial harms; ii) to seek HO support to accelerate DBS checks for staff for children's social care staff in children's homes, secure children's homes and other settings

1) School attendance of vulnerable children

Points to make

- Schools remain open for vulnerable children because we recognise the importance of schools in helping to keep children safe. **DfE has issued guidance setting out our expectation that vulnerable children attend school and are working with schools and LAs to increase take up of school attendance by these children.**
- DfE **will/has issued interim safeguarding guidance to support schools and college continue to provide a safe environment for children**, keep them safe and continue to have regard to the statutory safeguarding guidance, *Keeping Children Safe in Education*.
- The guidance includes specific arrangements to protect vulnerable children, including how schools should work with their social workers and measures to follow where a vulnerable child does not attend school.

2) Attendance in Alternative Provision (AP) settings

Point to make

- We recognise the **importance of AP being included in local planning for vulnerable pupils** because they have greater concentrations of children meeting the definition of vulnerable and a highly skilled workforce who can support children.
- It is important to note that the threats/harms we are thinking about will affect a larger group of vulnerable children not just those in AP. **There are greater numbers of vulnerable children meeting our definition in mainstream schools, it is just the proportions that are higher in AP.**
- As with other schools, **we're expecting AP settings to work with local authorities to risk assess vulnerable children and decide on the best way to provide support**, including keeping the AP setting open where it is safe and feasible to do so. This is no different to what we are asking for mainstream schools. We are not asking AP schools to remain open regardless, nor to provide support in school for all their children.

3) Multi-agency safeguarding partners

Points to make

- **Multi-agency working is critical at this time, and safeguarding partners, including health and the police have been asked to continue to make safeguarding the priority.** We are working to develop a coordinated approach to communications on safeguarding.
- There is already very strong joint working at official level across key government departments, and a commitment from all to continue joined up working.
- We are monitoring all Serious Incident Notifications (SIN) and children at immediate risk

of harm cases as they come in and any that relate to Covid19 or have a link or characteristic that would suggest children being contextually more at risk from being at home. We are still expecting to receive SINS in 5 working days, but whilst Rapid Reviews will still happen, timescales may be extended.

- **Questions to ask:** What reassurance can the HO give that police will continue to prioritise multi-agency safeguarding around the vulnerable threats, and that resources will not be taken off safeguarding, where possible?

4) Impacts of the increasing demand for children's social care

Points to make

Risks at home – including domestic abuse

- The isolation of families and increasing financial stresses brought on by social distancing and self-isolation could exacerbate risks to children. We are concerned about a rise in **domestic abuse**, as well as adult mental health and substance abuse.
- In response to the risk of rising demand, we are allowing the **emergency registration of social workers who have left the profession to expedite their registration allowing them to come back into practice to respond to gaps in the workforce caused by COVID-19**. Additionally, we are working with employers to consider the best ways of quickly increasing the number of social workers available.

Risks from outside of the home – including online safety and extra-familial harms

Online safety

- The DfE safeguarding in schools team are already in touch with HO regarding online safety and the potential increased threat online for those children not attending schools.
- DfE **welcome the expertise of HO and National Crime Agency colleagues** in this space and appreciate knowledge being shared to help us support safeguarding action.

Extra-familial harms

- We recognise the increased risk of extra-familial harms, such as gangs, county lines, and exploitation, to children and young people who may not have the same access to protection and support in these circumstances. **Our Regional Schools Commissioners are proactively gathering intelligence from LAs** so we will find out quickly if safeguarding issues are emerging.
- We are open to considering how we might refocus our existing *Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme* to better support safeguarding partners in local areas response and help them to keep vulnerable children safe.
- **Question to ask:** It would be helpful to understand from the HO what we could anticipate as the crime landscape changes, and the scale of the challenge that COVID-19 might create? How are police forces planning to respond and how can we encourage local join up to safeguard young people?

Increased demand for children to enter care

- We are ensuring LAs have enough capacity to safely accommodate and care for newly arriving **Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children**. We are engaging closely with the LGA, ADCS and individual local authorities to understand what further support is needed from us in addition to the £1.6b funding that has been made available.
- We're mindful that an **increased demand for placements in children's homes and secure children's homes will exacerbate existing capacity pressures**. We could see increased risks to children due to a lack of available placements to meet children's

- needs and keep them safe.
- Staff in these settings are required to have an enhanced DBS check. **DfE would welcome HO colleagues support to establish the numbers of outstanding checks, current timeframes for clearance and to consider options to accelerate the DBS clearance process to swiftly increase staffing capacity.**
 - **Question to ask:** Can you explore accelerating DBS checks for children's social care staff in children's homes, secure children's homes and other settings that care for children in care and care leavers?