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Will Quince MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families

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Geraint Davies MP

By email: geraint.davies.mp@parliament.uk

23 November 2021

Dear Chairs, Co-Chairs, and Vice-Chairs,

Thank you for your letter of 26 October, addressed to the Prime Minister, regarding access to speech and language therapy. Your letter has been passed to this department and I am replying as the minister responsible for this policy area. I apologise for the delay in responding.

Supporting children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and their families is a priority for this government. Their educational, physical and mental wellbeing remains central to our cross-government response to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. We want pupils and students with SEND to continue to receive high-quality teaching and specialist professional support because we know that they may have been disproportionately impacted. That is why education settings remained open for children and young people with an education, health and care (EHC) plan throughout the periods of national lockdown during the last academic year.

We know that access to speech and language therapy for children and young people with communication and swallowing needs is crucial, and during the lockdown members of the Royal Colleges have worked closely with ministers and departmental officials to help to support this. We are very grateful to them for working with us on this vital issue.

As you know, our focus is on education recovery to ensure that no child is left behind. In the £4.9-billion education recovery funding announced so far, we have consistently prioritised children and young people with SEND by giving additional weighting for specialist settings as we know that they need targeted support. Elements of the education recovery funding can be used to support disadvantaged children and young people's wider needs if required, including the provision of therapies. Alongside this, we are providing further training and support for early years practitioners and schoolteachers across the country. The expansion of the National Tutoring Programme will allow more pupils to benefit from the power of regular tutoring, and the new school-led tutoring element gives schools the flexibility to choose their own tutors, enabling them to select the most suitable provision for pupils with SEND.

We recognise that there is a backlog of assessments and for some children and young people there may be a further need for re-assessment following the COVID-19 pandemic. I would like to assure you that this is a priority for us, and I will be keeping in close contact with my ministerial colleagues at the Department of Health and Social Care to look at workforce capacity of therapists and professionals conducting assessments and therapeutic interventions. Specialists, therapists and other health professionals who support children and young people with SEND should provide interventions as usual and our guidance is clear that where children and young people with an EHC plan are in receipt of health provision, the local authority (LA) and health commissioning body must secure or arrange the provision specified in the plan. In order to support this, we have issued joint guidance for educational settings and health providers working with a cross-sector group including the Royal Colleges and professional organisations. A copy of the guidance is available at: tinyurl.com/2hryhPm.

We know how important it is for children and young people to access the speech and language therapy that they need, and that the right funding is fundamental to that. We announced this summer that high needs funding will increase by £780 million, or 9.6%, in 2022-23 compared to 2021-22. This follows the increase of more than £1.5 billion over the previous two years. On top of this, the recent autumn Spending Review delivers an additional £4.7 billion for the core schools' budget by 2024-25 compared to previous plans. That includes an additional £1.6 billion for schools and high needs in 2022-23, on top of the funding previously announced. We are now working on how this additional funding should be allocated most effectively. We continue to encourage schools and colleges to work collaboratively with their LA, Clinical Commissioning Group and health providers to ensure that children and young people with SEND have access to appropriate therapies and support.

Thank you for writing about this important matter. I hope this reply is useful.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Will Quince', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Will Quince MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families