

3 January 2022

Dear Safeguarding Partners

Keeping children and young people safe this winter

Wishing you a very happy new year.

I want to thank you for the work that you and your teams do to protect children in your area. The past two years have been unprecedented and safeguarding partners with their relevant agencies have worked hard through the most challenging circumstances to try to keep our most vulnerable children safe.

The Government is looking closely at the daily data relating to the Omicron variant, but is not currently introducing any new national restrictions. We do know that the growing number of COVID-19 cases is placing pressure on workforce availability in public services and will continue to do so into January. Given the high number of COVID-19 cases, there is potential for more children to be off school due to infection, or limited staff availability resulting in attendance restrictions applying to some children, or temporary school closures.

To respond to these challenges, and in line with your statutory duties as set out in Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018), I am asking that all safeguarding partners review existing COVID-19 plans and assure yourselves that they reflect the nature and level of risk and harm being faced by children in your area, including in the event of increasing absences from education settings. I would also like you to have clear plans to respond to the vulnerabilities facing children who have disengaged from education or who don't return after the school holidays.

To achieve this, you will need to work with schools and other relevant agencies, including health visitors, school nurses, GPs, midwives, probation and youth offending teams, to make sure your intelligence and assessments of risk are up to date, that information is shared, and that support is targeted to the right children and families. Through working with schools and others you should be sharing information on which children and families, including disabled children, may require additional support.

When reviewing your COVID-19 plans and arrangements, you should be confident that:

- There is a process for developing and collectively agreeing a list of children and young people at risk of harm, or in need of support in your area.

- Partners are regularly establishing whether these children are attending nurseries, schools, and colleges and assure yourselves that these children have reengaged in education following the Christmas holiday.
- There is a process for ensuring that partners and agencies have 'eyes on' these children, particularly when absent from school – this could include conducting visits to check on their wellbeing and safety.
- Information sharing processes are adequate and effective between partners and agencies.
- Partners are working with Virtual School Heads to support the attendance of looked after children and the extended group of children with a social worker that they support.
- Partner agencies and a breadth of professionals, including health visitors, GPs and midwives are utilised to identify children, make appropriate referrals, and provide suitable support.
- Partners are using their own communication channels and relationships with local communities to signpost to support and routes to report concerns.
- In addition, we would ask safeguarding partners to have processes that are adequate for identifying pregnant women, babies, and young people who may be at risk of harm should any additional COVID-19 restrictions come into force.

You are best placed, as a partnership, to identify which children are vulnerable and then work with agencies to ensure children are safe and well. We want to support you in this and you may find the [toolkit for supporting schools and local authorities to improve attendance](#), which is available on gov.uk, a useful resource. As you know, we also publish data on [attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic](#) by local area, which include breakdowns by those children with a social worker, children with an Education, Health and Care Plan, and children in receipt of free school meals. Local Authorities and schools will also have access to up-to-date information on attendance. The Government has published guidance on [children of critical workers and vulnerable children who can access schools or educational settings](#) in the event of attendance restrictions on gov.uk. The definition of vulnerable children is kept under review and partners should regularly review this guidance to check for any updates.

The Department will also be moving to a fortnightly collection of the Vulnerable Children and Young People Survey from 4 January. Regional Improvement Support Leads will work with local authorities and safeguarding partners to gather intelligence on workforce absences, changes to referral numbers, and the number of children becoming looked after. This will provide the Department with the information necessary to provide suitable support to local areas facing acute challenges.

We would very much welcome your feedback on undertaking the asks I have set out in this letter. Please do come back to my team vulnerablechildren.covid@education.gov.uk with views or questions or raise any points through the multi-agency child safeguarding reform facilitators: Helen.Adams1@dhsc.gov.uk and Lorraine.PARKER@norfolk.police.uk

I have copied this letter to my counterparts in the Home Office (Jae Samant, Director General for Public Safety) and the Department for Health and Social Care (Jonathan Maron, Director General, Office for Health Improvement and Disparities).

Thank you for your hard work in these challenging circumstances.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Imon' or 'Morris', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Indra Morris

**Director General Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group
and Senior Responsible Officer for Vulnerable Children COVID -19**