



**Because growing
up can be hard**

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
20 Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BT

11 January 2021

Dear Secretary of State,

Learning from lockdown: Getting it right this time for children and families

“My friend has lots of brothers and sisters and he can't get on his computer as much as me. I like learning new stuff. So does he but he can't do it as much as me. After lockdown he can come to visit and we can do our maths together. I will help him.” (Boy aged 11)

During May 2020, Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and Children North East (CNE) carried out extensive [research](#) with children and families living in low-income households across the UK. We asked them about their experiences of home learning during lockdown so we could understand what was working well, as well as what additional support was needed. This research built on the existing work being done by both organisations to identify and remove the financial barriers and poverty-related stigma that prevents children in poverty from fully participating in school life. Together, through the [Poverty Proofing the School Day](#) programme and the [Cost of the School Day](#) project, we have spoken to thousands of pupils and families, as well as school staff, to understand where difficulties might lie for those living on a low income – and which solutions work best for families.

On 5 January 2021, the coronavirus pandemic forced schools across England to close their doors to the majority of pupils once more. However, importantly, this time round we are better equipped with an understanding of what pupils and families need while they are at home – and what type of support they value. We have learnt vital lessons from the first lockdown through speaking to families about their experiences, and we urge the government to use the principles laid out in this letter to guide its decisions, while most pupils are trying to access their education from home. As a matter of urgency, we are calling on the government to:

1. **Prioritise cash payments to families as a replacement for free school meals.**
2. **Take urgent action to ensure all children have the learning tools they need to take part in the curriculum.**
3. **Provide families with greater financial support to cover the increased costs they are facing as a result of the pandemic, including costs related to home learning.**

A child and family-centred framework for lockdown 2021

Support for children and families living on a low income must:

- Give families and children dignity by removing the stigma and shame that often comes with living on a low or insecure income.

- Allow families choice, control and flexibility, as they know what works best to address the multiple needs of their families and children.
- Involve families and children in decisions so they receive the right support, rather than making assumptions about their needs and circumstances.
- Prioritise removing barriers to learning that often prevent poorer pupils having the same experiences and access to education as their better-off peers.
- Support all families with children that are struggling to stay afloat, not just those eligible for free school meals. Two in five schoolchildren in England live below the poverty line but are not currently eligible for a free school meal each day.¹
- Help families and communities to keep safe from the virus by reducing the number of journeys families have to take and the use of public transport where possible. No family should have to choose between their health and the other needs of their children.

Taking into account these child- and family-centred principles and our research with thousands of children, young people, parents and carers during the pandemic, we know there are actions the government can take to ensure some children and families are less disadvantaged during this lockdown period. Schools have once again gone to extraordinary lengths to ensure children don't miss out, but the government must now play its part. CPAG and CNE urge the government to:

1. **Prioritise cash payments to families as a replacement for free school meals.** Taking a 'cash-first' approach has the greatest benefits for families living in low-income households as it allows choice, accessibility, discretion and safety – which are all highly valued by families. Our research showed that 81 per cent of families receiving direct payments to their bank accounts said these were working extremely or very well for them, while satisfaction levels were much lower for other solutions such as vouchers, food deliveries and 'grab bags'.²

“Cash payments takes the embarrassing factor out of it, we don't need to queue for food bags or receive vouchers, we don't feel ashamed for needing help this way.” (Lone parent of two children)

“This [direct payments] is much better than the weeks prior where we had to go to the school to collect a bag of lunch. When you're not even meant to be going out.” (Mum of two children)

2. **Take urgent action to ensure all children have the learning tools they need to take part in the curriculum.** Whether at home or at school, pupils should have the right resources to participate in the work set by their teachers. During the first lockdown 40 per cent of low-income families were missing at least one essential resource, with ICT equipment such as devices, internet and printers being the most common items that families lacked. Where resources had been provided to pupils, they were much more likely to report that they had done a lot of work at home.³

Although schools are now open to pupils who can't access learning at home, this is not a long-term solution to the problem – and it puts families and communities at a greater risk of catching the virus. Together we must speak to families, understand what they need and plug the gaps without delay.

“I feel that my daughter is missing out on her education, because I'm not financially able to get her a computer. She shouldn't have to fall so far behind due to our financial situation.” (Mum of two children)

¹ [Free school meals briefing](#), CPAG (Updated December 2020)

² [The Cost of Learning in Lockdown](#), CPAG (June 2020)

³ [The Cost of Learning in Lockdown](#), CPAG (June 2020)

“We don’t have a laptop or computer. All the work assigned is meant to be done online, which isn’t an option for us. Unfortunately, my daughter can’t access the same online lessons as the other children.” (Lone parent of two children)

“We use my phone to do everything [as] we do not have a computer/laptop and a lot of things are not compatible. A lot of things we have to write out as we do not have a printer and using a phone isn't ideal.” (Mum of children aged 10)

3. **Provide families with greater financial support to cover the increased costs they are facing as a result of the pandemic, including costs related to home learning.** We know that family income is the strongest statistical predictor of how well a child will achieve at school⁴ and, as things stand, the disparity between poorer pupils and their better-off peers is set to get much worse. Our research also showed that families who had the greatest money worries during the first lockdown were the most likely group to have to purchase items to support their children’s home learning.⁵

The Department for Education must work with other government departments to provide more financial support directly to families with children that are struggling. At a bare minimum, the £20 per week uplift to universal credit must be retained, but families with children need greater support. Increasing child benefit by £10 per week per child⁶ and expanding free school meals eligibility⁷ are both policies that will work to improve educational outcomes for pupils in low-income households and reduce the attainment gap.


“We’re struggling as husband is a key worker and I have been made furloughed on only 80 per cent. This took a massive hit on us as kids are eating more with being at home. Struggling to pay all credit card bills etc. with zero support as not entitled to it.” (Mum of two children)

School staff are tirelessly doing their bit to make sure their school communities don’t suffer, but now it’s time for the government to step up. **This time we need to do better for children and families – we simply can’t afford to let them down again.**

Kind regards,



Alison Garnham
Chief Executive at Child Poverty Action Group



Leigh Elliot
Chief Executive at Children North East

⁴ K Cooper and K Stewart, [Does Money Affect Children’s Outcomes? An update](#), CASEpaper 203, Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics, July 2017

⁵ [The Cost of Learning in Lockdown](#), CPAG (June 2020)

⁶ [Low-income parents relying on child benefit for household basics](#), CPAG (August 2020)

⁷ [Free school meals briefing](#), CPAG (Updated December 2020)