Thank you for the opportunity to discuss a range of important issues with the Education Committee on 26 June, and for the Committee’s input on these matters. I am writing to provide additional information and some clarifications.

Foster Carers eligibility to the 30 hours childcare entitlement

You asked about the eligibility of foster carers for the 30 hours childcare entitlement for working parents of three and four years olds, and reported that your constituents were unable to access this. I can confirm that foster parents are able to access the 30 hours entitlement where they are in paid work outside of their role as a foster parent and if it is in the best interest of the child. My officials have been in touch with Essex local authority and we understand that foster parents in the area have been able to access 30 hours for their foster children. You may wish to make contact with the local authority if you are aware of any ongoing issues.

We recognise the valuable role that many foster parents play in the lives of vulnerable children. Foster parents are not employees; they provide a family for vulnerable children and young people they care for, and help to ensure the needs of the child are met. We are not expecting or requiring foster parents to work outside fostering unless they choose to do so, but for those who do we offer the same support as other working families.

We consulted extensively with local authorities, independent fostering agencies, foster parents and others in the sector to ensure the process for accessing 30 hours gets the balance right between support for foster parents and protecting the welfare of the child. As a result the process works in the following ways:

- Unlike the 30 hours application for parents there is no requirement on the type of work or number of hours that a foster parent must work in order to access the 30 hours and there is no minimum earnings limit (although they must be engaging in paid work). If a foster parent is in receipt of carer’s allowance or other qualifying benefits this will count as qualifying paid work and they can access 30 hours if their partner also meets the eligibility criteria.

- Before children in foster care access 30 hours, a check is made that this is in the best interest of the child and is consistent with their care plan. This is why applications by foster parents for the 30 hours entitlement are managed by the LA rather than via the Childcare Services online portal.

- If a foster parent is not eligible, local authorities should assess the child’s needs for early years provision as part of their care plan.

Keeping Children Safe in Education Guidance

Emma Hardy MP raised some important points regarding peer on peer sexual abuse and harassment in schools. Officials in my Department are already in the process of setting up a meeting with Emma Hardy MP and Jess Phillips MP to discuss how we can build on their work to better promote Part 5 of the Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance – the section that supports schools to understand what child on child sexual violence and sexual harassment looks like, how to prevent it and how to respond to reports of it. We are also keen to discuss wider issues with them including the role of data and Ofsted and how we could provide further support to teachers, pupils and parents.

Publication of the Condition Data Collection

James Frith MP asked about capital funding, and whether the Condition Data Collection (CDC) will be publically available. As the Committee is aware, we have begun a new school CDC, which is expected to complete in autumn 2019. The CDC will provide a high-level assessment of the condition of state funded schools in England, and help inform future capital funding policy, including where funding is best targeted.

Each school visited as part of the CDC Programme receives a school condition report and local authorities, academy trusts and church dioceses receive a summary report on their schools. We plan to publish a report on the findings from the programme at national level, expected to be in spring 2020.

Clarifications

On the question of high needs funding, in an exchange with James, I remarked that we have put in place £100 million of capital funding for support. To clarify, this is not the sum total of our investment; we announced a further £100 million top-up to the Special Provision Capital Fund for local authorities in 2019-20, to take our total investment to £365 million across 2018-21. As I said to the Committee, I would be happy to meet with James in an MP surgery session to pick up in more detail our discussion around high needs funding and local authority compliance with their legal duties as regards the production of Education, Health and Care Plans.

Regarding my response to Thelma Walker MP, I said that the number of children’s centres is at the same level as it reached when Tony Blair was Prime Minister.
Minister. In fact, the number of children’s centres today is actually more than when Tony Blair was Prime Minister. At the last count, there were 2,300 children’s centres.

Finally, it has come to my attention that at my previous appearance before the Education Select Committee on 16 January I provided the Committee with figures for the number of local area SEND inspection reports published by Ofsted and the CQC (42) and the number of written statements of action that had been required (34). Unfortunately these figures were not correct and I apologise for this error. At 16 January, the actual figures were 75 reports published and 35 local areas required to produce a written statement of action. New Ofsted/CQC local area inspection reports are published regularly, and at 17 June, 92 reports had been published with 46 written statements of action required.

I hope that the information provided is of use to you.

Damian Hinds
Secretary of State for Education