Dear Mary

Thank you for your letter dated 21 March on the Government’s progress on the Sustainable Development Goals. Our Committee has as its objectives the promotion of an educational ladder of opportunity, leading to social justice and increased productivity.

We have detailed three areas within ‘Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ upon which the Committee has recently conducted work.

While the Government identifies that the disadvantaged pupils attainment gap has narrowed by 3.1% since 2015 and 9.5% since 2011, the Committee has received evidence suggesting that disadvantaged pupils, such as pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and black and minority ethnic pupils are at increased risk of permanent exclusion and off-rolling and are unable to access appropriate education.

The Education Committee’s inquiries into alternative provision and special educational needs and disabilities have given us cause for concern about the rising number of exclusions in England and the practice of ‘off-rolling’ – when a pupil leaves the school roll for a reason other than a legal exclusions, such as to improve a school’s results, or to relieve financial pressures on schools. The Committee has also heard that some schools are refusing to accept pupils with special educational needs, saying that their needs would be better met elsewhere. The Committee has also heard from parents who have been forced to remove their children with SEND to home-school them as their needs are not met at school.

Some of the reasons that the Committee has heard for off-rolling include an incentive through school performance measures such as Progress 8 to remove pupils from a school roll. The Committee has also heard evidence that an increase in zero-tolerance behaviour policies are also impacting on increasing exclusions. While the Government is taking steps to improve alternative provision, the Committee remains concerned that progress is slow and disadvantaged pupils continue to be excluded from safe and quality education.

The Government is right to say that a record rate of disadvantaged 18-year-olds are entering higher education, however there has been a dramatic decline in both part-time and mature learners. This has had a significant impact on the entry rates of those from lower socio-economic groups into higher education. A recent report by the Sutton Trust,
‘The Lost Part-Timers’, found that the numbers of part-time undergraduate students dropped by 51% between 2010 and 2015. We considered the quality and value for money of post-18 options in our reports on the quality of apprenticeships and skills training and value for money in higher education. I hope that the Committee will have an opportunity to do some work on lifelong learning in the not-too-distant future.

The Committee’s recent report on tackling disadvantage in the early years found that the Government’s 30 hours funded childcare policy is entrenching inequality rather than closing the gap between disadvantaged children, and those from better off backgrounds. The Committee recommended that the Government review their policy, reduce the earnings cap for the 30 hours childcare and use the extra funding to provide early education for disadvantaged children.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP
Chair of the Education Committee