

15 June 2020

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP  
Secretary of State for Education  
Rt Hon Alok Sharma MP  
Secretary of State for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy  
By Email

Dear Secretaries of State,

This Government has taken great strides in finding ways through some of the most difficult problems any post-war Government has faced. Now that spirit is needed to unlock a key problem in our move towards the Recovery phase of this country's response.

Throughout this crisis, the British Chambers of Commerce has consistently highlighted the interdependencies between business, schools and transport. When our President wrote to the Prime Minister on 1 May, we said that economic impact must be a consideration when deciding how to phase the reopening of schools.

No matter how safe businesses make their workplaces, employees and customers cannot return unless they have safe transport, and someone to look after their children.

We write today about the last of these issues: schools. The prospect of schools not re-opening for all pupils until September, and the lack of clarity about whether it will be possible even then, presents two critical issues for business.

First, the challenge for working parents and their employers is acute. Many working parents cannot send their children back to school; there is scarce wrap-around care for those that do; older grandparents who are more vulnerable can no longer meet this need; and, even if they could, friends and relatives are not permitted to visit children's homes to provide childcare under current guidelines, unless they meet the criteria to form a 'support bubble'. There is no clarity about the provision of summer activities that many rely on in order to be able to work during the long summer holidays and questions persist about what will happen in September. While some can and will struggle on working from home with children around, for many that is simply not an option especially for the longer term.

While the economy is restarting and moving towards recovery employers are facing many tough choices. The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme has gone a long way to retain jobs in the immediate crisis, but with that starting to taper, revenues taking time to recover, and many businesses still unable to open or operating at a restricted capacity, not every job will be able to be saved.

One concern is that without schools fully open, employers will be forced to choose between supporting working parents – mainly women - and the financial sustainability of their business. Just as in 2008, this economic shock will disproportionately impact women and the least advantaged in our society, unless the government takes proactive steps to prevent this from happening.

Where children are unable to return – or in the event of further temporary shutdowns - and no suitable alternative childcare can be provided, we urge you to provide support to employers to retain the skills and talent of working parents. Without a clear pathway ahead for the coming months, we risk imperilling the support to working families from Government to date.

Second, the longer children are out of school, the harder it will be for us to thrive as an economy in the future, as the impact on learning and future skills will continue to grow. This could deliver strong regional differences, undermining our shared mission of levelling up the UK economy. We have welcomed our engagement with the Secretary of State for Education and his colleagues from across government who are providing a sharp focus on the skills challenge ahead.

However, the most urgent first step is to set out a clear plan for the return of all pupils to school as soon as possible, alongside providing clarity on provision of summer and wrap-around childcare so that employers and employees can constructively plan together for the future

We believe that this problem needs a laser focus in the coming days to unblock a growing crisis for working parents and the companies they work for. The prize for success here is clear: greater prosperity in the short term, and better educational outcomes and levelling up in the longer term.

We and our colleagues in the Chamber Network throughout the country stand ready to work on this challenge.

Yours Sincerely

Claire Walker & Hannah Essex  
Co-Executive Directors

CC: Rt Hon Liz Truss MP, Secretary of State for International Trade and Minister for Women & Equalities