

Date: 13 December 2021

Your Ref:

Our ref: 211213B/Zahawi N/PR/LB

Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP  
Secretary of State  
Department for Education  
Sanctuary Buildings  
Great Smith Street  
London  
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# NASUWT

## The Teachers' Union

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General Secretary  
**Dr Patrick Roach**

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Dear Nadhim,

### **Staffing shortages**

The current picture in respect of increased staff absence levels is acute. Without doubt the impact of high levels of Coronavirus transmission has been a contributory factor, but so too has been the significant workload pressures that teachers continue to experience and which show no signs of abating.

The NASUWT is receiving daily reports of serious staffing shortages and of attempts by schools to manage these inappropriately by requiring teachers to provide absence cover. No doubt, this has been driven by the lack of availability of supply teachers, a serious issue which the Union has repeatedly brought to the attention of the Department.

However, the effect of this is that teachers are being asked to undertake substantial additional work in order to cover for staff shortages. Teachers report being overwhelmed and exhausted.

We understand that schools are reporting significant proportions of teaching staff absent at any one time, with figures reported to the Union ranging between one-third to one-half of teachers at individual schools unavailable to work.

Whilst workload is a key concern for our members, so too is the impact on safe working practices. The impact of stress on teachers' physical and mental health are well documented. At the same time, the ability for teachers and headteachers to manage effectively a Covid-safe environment is being seriously compromised.

We would welcome confirmation from the Department of the data returns you hold on the levels of teacher and support staff absences – both Covid and non-Covid related absences - and the steps being taken to ensure that schools can continue to maintain the quality of education provision whilst continuing to operate safely at all times.

We believe that your Coronavirus guidance for schools and other educational settings must make clear the full range of actions available to schools and colleges when dealing with compromised staffing levels, including the option to send pupils home where the safety of provision cannot be maintained.

All school and college employers must, once again, be reminded by the Department of the need to update their risk assessments in consultation with staff and trade unions and of their legal obligations to take all reasonably practicable steps to demonstrate that they have in place appropriate measures to safeguard the health and safety of staff and pupils.

It is essential that appropriate measures are in place to protect safety of staff now and when schools and colleges reopen again in the new year.

### **Test and trace**

We are concerned to understand what arrangements are in place to support effective tracing of close contacts of pupils who have tested positive for Covid-19.

We welcome the assurances given by the Department that there will be no expectation on school leaders to discharge work to support track and trace systems during the school closure period. However, it is unclear how the system for identifying close contacts will operate at the end of term and during the holiday period. Without further progress on increasing levels of participation in testing and reporting, there is a real risk for schools when they reopen in January of a further surge in cases of Covid transmission.

We would ask the Department to confirm to schools how the arrangements for tracking close contacts are expected to operate in order to ensure that the return in January can take place effectively and without further risk of widespread disruption.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Patrick Roach', written in a cursive style.

Dr Patrick Roach  
**General Secretary**