

Date: 21 June 2020

Your Ref:

Our Ref: 210621 Williamson/PR/CW

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP
Secretary of State
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
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NASUWT

The Teachers' Union

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General Secretary
Dr Patrick Roach

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Dear Gavin,

Long Covid

I know from our previous discussions that you share my concern about the need to better support the mental health and wellbeing of teachers and headteachers. The profession has delivered a tremendous amount for young people and the level of expectations has far from diminished since the start of the pandemic, rather it has increased.

We have received increased self-reporting by our members of work-related stress and conditions analogous to post-traumatic stress amongst teachers, which appears common with other front line workers who have delivered so much for so many during the pandemic.

With increasing numbers of Coronavirus cases linked to transmission of new Variants of Concern amongst young people, we trust that you will want to do everything possible to support safety at work and to give those teachers who contract Covid as a result of doing their jobs additional reassurance.

The NASUWT recognises that the impact of the pandemic on all sections of the population has been considerable. Mental health concerns have increased during the pandemic, irrespective of whether individuals have or have not contracted Covid. However, we also note data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) which indicates that rates of Long Covid amongst teachers are second only to workers in the NHS. We believe that this is an issue that is serious to warrant your urgent attention and action.

Regrettably, we must report to you the lack of compassion from employers that has been reported by many teachers when they have contracted Covid or where teachers are suffering from Long Covid or the side-effects of receiving a Covid vaccine. Many teachers have reported to us that they have been met by employers that fail to offer appropriate support, recognition or reasonable adjustments and, instead are keen to utilise Draconian absence management procedures where teachers need to take time off.

We know, too, that many disabled teachers and teachers who are clinically vulnerable or previously shielding have returned to the workplace against medical advice they have received, and because of insistence by employers that they do so.

It is estimated that more than one million people in the UK are now living with Long Covid. Long Covid is a debilitating condition and many sufferers report their daily activities severely impeded and are left unable to work.

With the serious risk of further emerging variants, more teachers could yet become vulnerable to this condition and find themselves unable to work, at threat of financial hardship and without sufficient legal protections. We hope that you would agree that no teacher experiencing Long Covid should be forced to live in fear of being disciplined by their employer or dismissed from their job because they have contracted this debilitating illness.

Guidance to school and college employers making clear the need to make reasonable adjustments, including extended phased return periods and to enable better access to flexible working opportunities would be a start, and would enable those teachers who are able, with support, to work to continue to do so.

However, for those teachers who are not able to continue in their chosen profession, we believe the Government should consider changes to the ill-health retirement provisions and the provision of financial compensation for teachers who are left unable to work for an extended period or permanently as a result of Long Covid.

The NASUWT is, therefore, advocating for Long Covid to be legally recognised as a Disability under the Equality Act of 2010 and for better support for teachers suffering from Long Covid, including improved access to ill-health pension provision.

We hope that our proposals can be supported by your Department and by the Government and we would welcome the opportunity to discuss these matters with you.

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