To all Chairs of FE College and Sixth Form College Corporations, College Principals and Chief Executives of Independent Training Providers

I am delighted to be writing to you as the new Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills.

First of all, I am very grateful for the warm welcome I have received from the sector and would like to pay tribute to you all for the tremendous work you are doing. Since my appointment, I have visited a number of colleges across the country and have been really impressed by what I have seen. The excellent BAE-sponsored practical facilities at Blackpool and The Fylde College, for example, show just what can be achieved by high quality leadership, working in close partnership with employers. I also sampled a range of delicious food prepared by the outstanding apprentices at Cambridge Regional College. It has been a privilege to see first-hand the positive impact our programmes are having on learners.

I also want to acknowledge the great steps made by my predecessor Nick Boles. The introduction of the apprenticeships levy and the new Post-16 Skills Plan give colleges, providers and employers a major opportunity to transform people’s lives. I am confident that we can work together to achieve this.

My appointment of course comes on the back of the Machinery of Government changes in July, which brought further and higher education within the Department for Education. This will allow us to create better links and improve consistency for the benefit of young people and adults throughout their education journey.

My passion for apprenticeships and further education stems from their vital role in offering young people and adults the chance to learn vital skills for life. In my maiden speech in the House of Commons, I urged teachers to encourage students to do apprenticeships rather than seeing university as their only
choice. Apprenticeships are a high quality and, for some, a more relevant alternative to university. It is essential that this message is fully recognised across society.

The further education sector also has a crucial role to play in improving social mobility. As you will know from the good work you have been doing in this area for a long time, this is about breaking the link between family background and what a person achieves in life. It is clear that FE is making a huge difference and included in the policy brief attached we have set out more about the impact being made and how our policies are supporting those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds to progress. This includes the significant funding of £544m being allocated to providers to support young people who are disadvantaged.

We must also work hard to eradicate the bullying of transgender students. Last October, Nick Boles gave evidence to the Women and Equality Select Committee in relation to their enquiry into transgender equality. The Committee concluded that the levels of bullying and harassment experienced by trans students in FE and HE were unacceptable. It recommended that Ministers raise the issue with institutions to ensure complaints are properly investigated, that staff receive gender identity awareness training and take steps to promote trans equality. The attached brief contains links to research and guidance which I urge you to read and act on appropriately.

You will be aware that, in July, we published Lord Sainsbury’s report on Technical Education, along with the Post-16 Skills Plan. This ambitious vision for reform marks a watershed moment. It replaces the current system of thousands of competing qualifications with 15 high-quality routes encompassing college-based and apprenticeships. I am encouraged to note that initial responses from the sector have been highly favourable. I am looking forward to leading further development of the plans and implementation of the changes.

Ensuring that young people and adults achieve good levels of literacy and numeracy also remains a priority for this government. This summer, thousands more 17-year olds successfully re-sat their maths and English GCSEs, thanks to colleges and schools across England. However, I recognise the impact that the 16-19 maths and English requirements have had on post-16 pass rates. We will, therefore, work with the sector to address the issues that are holding back the progress of students in securing the basics.

I am also pleased that the majority of area reviews are now well underway or complete, with Wave 4 steering groups meeting for the first time over the coming weeks. A large number of recommendations have been agreed from Waves 1 and 2. This promises a far reaching programme of transformation across the sector. I recognise that delivering on these changes will be challenging, requiring strong leadership and a commitment to working collaboratively. We are putting in place a range of support – both financially through the Restructuring Facility and Transition Grants and through access to guidance and expertise - to support you in that process. New guidance has
now been published and can be accessed at: Further education area reviews: guidance for providers. I am hugely grateful for the commitment and ambition shown by colleges and partners to work together on delivering better outcomes for all.

I attach a policy brief on recent progress in implementing the FE and skills reform programme. I would be grateful if college Chairs would ensure this is disseminated to all their governors.

Please forward any comments you have to fegovernance@bis.gsi.gov.uk.

Yours sincerely,

Rt Hon Robert Halfon MP