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Dear Minister Smith,

I am writing to provide an update on the progress of the Access and Participation Task and Finish Group.

Engagement in the work of the group across the sector has been strong and constructive. We have seen positive participation from sixth form colleges, further education colleges and higher education providers, alongside key sector bodies. The group has attracted significant interest, and participants share a clear commitment to improving progression into higher-level study, particularly for learners who have not traditionally accessed Level 4+ pathways. The group's ambition is that its outputs directly support delivery of the Post-16 education and skills white paper, particularly its focus on clearer routes through the system, greater parity of esteem between technical and academic pathways, and stronger progression from FE into higher-level skills.

The main Board brings together a wide range of senior leaders, and we have established two subgroups to draw in additional specialist expertise. The first, led by Nick Harrison, Chief Executive, The Sutton Trust, supported by Krisha Bainham, Head of Access and Participation Policy within my central policy team, is exploring the barriers to higher education and higher-level technical study. The second, co-led by Professor Graeme Atherton, Vice-Principal, Ruskin College, Oxford, and Professor Tom Sperlinger, Academic Director for Civic Spaces, University of Bristol, is examining regional disparities in access and progression.

Both subgroups are now moving from scoping into detailed analytical work on priority learner groups. A central task is to ensure we are focusing on the right target populations and to deepen our understanding of why some learners do not progress to Level 4+, including the role of geography, local provision, and labour market context. This place-based lens aligns with the white paper's emphasis on local skills ecosystems. Alongside this, the wider barriers subgroup is examining cross-cutting systemic, institutional, and individual factors that constrain progression, such as information and guidance, financial constraints, pathway design, and learner perceptions. As this work develops, it will inform both the key priorities and the socialising of new ideas and interventions with stakeholders. The role of Level 7+ pathways has been considered in framing the wider landscape, however, the group's primary analytical focus is on strengthening progression into Levels 4/5, which represents the most significant opportunity to address participation gaps.

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While the work will have an overarching focus on socio-economic disadvantage (as the largest low participation group), we are also mindful of the challenges faced by care leavers, young carers, and mature learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. Of course, these groups are significantly overlapping. Note that young carers may not be easy to identify in the data but, given that many carers are place-bound and reliant on local provision, their needs may significantly overlap with mature students. This will be a specific line of enquiry within the regional disparities subgroup and links to the wider objective of ensuring that flexible and modular routes are genuinely accessible.

For transparency, we have decided not to make SEND a discrete priority of this group, as there is some related work being taken forward elsewhere. However, we expect that the findings from both subgroups, particularly where they relate to intersectional disadvantage and transition from Level 3 to Level 4+, will be relevant to SEND learners.

The breadth of engagement and insight from group members is being strengthened through our data and evidence work with partners across the sector, including HEAT, TASO, UCAS and the OfS, as well as individual experts such as Baroness Blackman-Woods. We are also developing a more dynamic understanding of labour market demand and progression routes for these target groups, including engagement with the Social Market Foundation and the Career Development Institute. This is helping us connect access and participation more explicitly to skills outcomes, employment pathways, and the value of Level 4/5 and higher study within priority sectors.

Finally, we are working closely with teams across government, including those leading delivery of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement and the Higher Education Oversight team, to ensure our recommendations are aligned with the wider post-16 reform programme and support a more coherent, flexible, and progression-focused system.

I would value any thoughts you have on the task and finish group's intended focus and approach and welcome an opportunity to discuss our progress further at your convenience.

Yours sincerely

Professor Kathryn Mitchell CBE DL
Vice-Chancellor & Chief Executive