

The Rt Hon Lucy Powell MP
Secretary of State for Education
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

Sent via email

24th July 2026

Dear Secretary of State,

Congratulations on your appointment as Secretary of State for Education

On behalf of the British Furniture Confederation (BFC), I would like to warmly congratulate you on your appointment as Secretary of State for Education.

The BFC was established in 2006 and continues to act as the trusted, single voice of the UK's furniture and beds, furnishings, and flooring (FFF) sector. Together, our sector contributes £40 billion to the UK economy and supports more than 230,000 jobs across over 30,000 businesses.

The BFC brings together the sector's leading FFF trade associations - the British Furniture Association (BFA), Commercial Interiors UK (CIUK), Furniture Industry Research Association (FIRA), National Bed Federation (NBF), and the UK Sustainable Flooring Alliance (UKSFA) - and works closely with The Furniture Makers' Company (FMC). We also provide the Secretariat for the All-Party Parliamentary Furniture Industry Group (APPFIG), which was, until recently, chaired by Adam Thompson MP before his appointment to the Home Office.

The BFC remains committed to advocating for policies that strengthen the sector across four key pillars, one of which is Skills and Education. As BFC Chairman, I have identified three priorities that I believe are fundamental to the UK's long-term prosperity:

1. **Reframing the productivity debate** - productivity is not solely an industrial issue but a societal one. Too many young people leave education without clear pathways into skilled employment, limiting their own opportunities and the UK's economic potential.
2. **Championing the creative industries** - creativity is not an optional extra but one of the country's greatest competitive strengths. Design, craftsmanship, and making sit at the

intersection of manufacturing and the creative industries, and we believe every young person should have the opportunity to develop these skills.

3. **Aligning education with industry** - our education system should equip learners with the technical, practical, and creative skills that employers need both today and in the future.

We therefore welcome the Government's continued programme of post-16 education reform, including the establishment of Skills England and the publication of the Post-16 Pathways Implementation Plan. These reforms present an important opportunity to strengthen technical education and ensure it responds more effectively to the needs of employers across the country.

The FFF sector continues to face a significant skills challenge. An ageing workforce, combined with longstanding difficulties in attracting young people into manufacturing and craft occupations, has created shortages across many specialist roles, including furniture makers, upholsterers, designers, and production technicians. Our most recent industry survey found that 57% of businesses expect to experience skills shortages in the coming years.

While apprenticeship participation has grown in recent years, only around 40% of businesses currently employ apprentices. Employers continue to face barriers including limited access to specialist training providers, rising delivery costs, geographical challenges, and difficulties recruiting suitable candidates. Many learners with exceptional practical ability are also discouraged by academic barriers that do not necessarily reflect the skills required for successful careers in manufacturing and craft industries.

The Furniture & Interiors Education, Skills & Training Alliance (FIESTA) is working hard to simplify apprenticeship recruitment, strengthen the links between employers and training providers, and improve careers pathways into the sector. Likewise, FMC has recently launched a new early careers website to inspire more young people to consider careers within our industry. These initiatives demonstrate the sector's willingness to invest in future talent, but they must be supported by a policy framework that recognises the importance of technical and creative education.

We are particularly keen to see the long-term success of the Craft and Design T Level, especially the Furniture Maker and Upholsterer specialisms.

Unlike many other T Levels, this qualification is not replacing a long-established Level 3 course already familiar to students, parents, and schools. Consequently, awareness remains relatively low despite the qualification carrying the same academic value as three A Levels while also providing substantial practical experience and a direct route into highly skilled employment.

Our concern is that early recruitment numbers could be interpreted as a lack of demand when the real challenge is one of visibility. Experience already suggests that where awareness exists, learner demand follows. If the Craft and Design T Level is to realise its potential, it will require sustained promotion through skills, careers services, and Skills England alongside continued support from our industry partners.

More broadly, we support initiatives such as the Arts & Minds campaign, which seeks to place creativity back at the heart of the national curriculum. Britain's creative success has always been built upon strong foundations in design, craftsmanship, and practical making. These are not

simply cultural assets; they are essential economic strengths that underpin manufacturing, exports, innovation, and regional growth.

The BFC would welcome the opportunity to work with your Department in the following policy areas:

1. Strengthen engagement between schools, the Department for Education, and the wider FFF industry to improve the understanding of careers within manufacturing, design, and craft.
2. Promote the Craft and Design T Level more widely, ensuring the students, parents, teachers, and careers advisers understand its academic status, progression opportunities, and employment outcomes.
3. Review careers advice in secondary schools so that technical and creative career pathways receive equal prominence alongside traditional academic routes.
4. Increase funding for 16-19 technical education programmes, enabling providers to recruit specialist teaching staff and meet rising delivery costs.
5. Continue embedding creativity, design, and making within the national curriculum, recognising their importance to both advanced manufacturing and the UK's world-leading creative industries.
6. Establish regular dialogue between Skills England and the BFC to ensure employers are closely involved in shaping future technical qualifications and crucially the operation of the Growth and Skills Levy.

The FFF industry has a proud heritage, but it also has an exciting future. With the right partnership between Government, educators, and employers, we can inspire more young people to pursue rewarding careers that combine creativity, technical excellence, and innovation.

I wish you every success in your new role and would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and your officials to discuss how the Department and the BFC can work together to strengthen technical education, promote creative skills, and help secure the workforce our industry - and the wider economy - will need in the years ahead.

I would also like to invite you to two events this autumn to celebrate the talent, creativity, and innovation within the sector.

On 4th November, the FMC will host the New Furniture Makers Exhibition at Furniture Makers' Hall in the City of London from 2:00pm onwards. The exhibition showcases some of the UK's most promising furniture and furnishings designers, from GCSE students through to recent graduates. Should your diary permit, we would be honoured if you would present one of the New Furniture Maker Awards and say a few words to those beginning their careers in our industry.

Later in the month, on 25th November, the BFC and FMC will host a Furnishings Industry Showcase in the Cholmondeley Room and Terrace at the House of Lords between 12:15pm and 5:00pm. The event will bring together parliamentarians and leaders from across the FFF sector to demonstrate the breadth, innovation, and economic contribution of our industry. We very much hope you will be able to join.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tony Attard', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Tony Attard OBE
Chairman
British Furniture Confederation