

Female genital mutilation: Michael Gove to meet 17-year-old campaigner

Education secretary to meet Fahma Mohamed as petition demanding action to end FGM attracts 170,000 signatures

- [Alexandra Topping](#)
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Fahma Mohamed: 'I will reiterate to him that FGM is child abuse and try and make him understand how important his role is.' Photograph: Patrick Hoeschler

The education secretary, [Michael Gove](#), has agreed to meet 17-year-old student Fahma Mohamed, following a Guardian-backed [petition](#) demanding action to end to female genital mutilation that has attracted 170,000 signatures since launching last week.

Mohamed's petition – supported by the Guardian, Change.org and a coalition of FGM campaigners and activists – calls on the education secretary to write to every teacher in the country before the summer holidays, asking them to train teachers and parents about the horrors of FGM in a bid to help bring an end to the practice.

Mohamed, one of nine girls in a Somali family that came to the UK when she was seven, said that she looking forward to talking to the education secretary about how he could play a vital role in bringing an end to FGM in the UK within a generation. "It's amazing that Michael Gove has agreed to meet with us – he is manning up and that is fantastic. Now finally I hope we can get our point across," she said.

The campaign, which launched last Wednesday quickly became one of the fastest ever growing petitions on Change.org, attracting two signatures a second at its peak. Mohamed paid tribute to the signatories, adding that they had played a key role in securing the meeting. "I think

everyone who has signed the petition has made the department of education realise just how many people support this, and how everyone agrees about it – he can't ignore it any more," she said.

There are an estimated 66,000 victims female genital mutilation – which involves removing the outer sexual organs from girls, and has life-long repercussions – in England and Wales while 24,000 girls under the age of 15 are believed to be at risk. Last week the government introduced a series of measures in an attempt to combat the practice, including the mandatory recording of FGM in hospitals, money for publicity campaigns and a NSPCC helpline and global funding.

The Department for Education said it would redraft safeguarding guidelines to include advice on FGM, but while other government ministers spoke out against the practice and the new measures being taken, until now the education secretary has remained silent.

In a letter to Mohamed, a private secretary informed the teenager that "the secretary of state has been following your important campaign closely", adding that the DfE was considering the most effective ways to address the crime. The letter added: "He has been impressed by your courage and success in raising awareness, and is very keen to meet you to discuss the issue in more detail."

Mohamed, a trustee of anti-FGM charity [Integrate Bristol](#), said she was nervous but would not hold back from sharing her opinions. "I have never met anyone so high up before, so I am nervous but I am also excited," she said.

"I will reiterate to him that FGM is child abuse and try and make him understand how important his role is. He could help save girls from going through FGM if he writes to every head teacher in the country, asking them to teach teachers, parents and children about it."

Following the Guardian's campaign the [Scottish government has already promised to write to every head in Scotland](#), asking them to teach the risks of FGM – after organisations working with victims told the Guardian that girls – as well as being taken abroad during the so-called "cutting season" – were also [being cut in the UK](#).

Efua Dorkenoo, senior FGM adviser at charity Equality Now, applauded the move from the education department, but said action must follow.

"The time has moved on from words, promises, guidelines and committees," she said. "What we need now is urgent action to implement policy and we encourage the secretary of state to follow Scotland's example, but not only write to all head teachers but to implement major reforms of child protection guidelines. We are on the crest of a wave at the moment in terms of ending FGM in the UK and we cannot afford to lose momentum."