



Ein cyf/Our ref KW/04442/20  
Janet Finch-Saunders MS  
Chair, Petitions Committee

13 August 2020

Dear Janet,

Thank you for your letter of 05 August regarding Petition P- 05-988 - Give key worker children equal access to their schools and teachers. I am grateful for the opportunity to share some views on this matter with the Petitions Committee.

In considering the petition, and the correspondence from the petitioner, regarding the personal experience they received during the pandemic, I would like to reassure the Petitions Committee that I have been guided by the [latest scientific and technical advice](#) and recommendations from the Technical Advisory Cell to Welsh Government throughout the pandemic.

**Consideration of local or regional disparities in education provision for the children of key workers and whether they could be avoided in the event of any future reduction in school provision**

In my role as Minister for Education, when I made the decision for learners to 'check in, catch up and prepare for summer' during the last four weeks of the summer term, this was in collaboration with Local Authorities and teaching unions. Our proposal was for teachers to work one extra week, the fourth week in July and get that week back as an extra week at the half term in October. I appreciate different Local Authorities face many different sorts of contexts and, where Local Authorities were able to open schools for the fourth week, they did, but where they were not able to, the Local Authority, as the employers were able to make that decision.

My proposal that schools open for an extra week in July with an extra week in the Autumn half term break was well thought out and based on the best health and scientific advice available to us at that time. I believed that the additional week would be hugely important in helping schools take a phased approach in supporting children and young people. However, I recognise that Local Authorities take the decisions over term dates and governing bodies as they are better placed to understand their local circumstances.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

I understand Local Authorities consulted with their headteachers, staff, and parents within their school communities in making these decisions.

The latest scientific advice is that the risk to children of becoming severely ill from COVID-19 is very low. The Welsh Government Technical Advisory Cell, which provides scientific and technical advice to Government during emergencies, has reviewed the current evidence that suggests that where children are infected with the virus, it takes a milder course than in adults. Children generally present with mild symptoms or are asymptomatic. Very few develop severe symptoms or life threatening levels of infection.

Furthermore, the Technical Advisory Cell reported that transmissibility in children under the age of 12 seems to be particularly low, with emerging evidence showing limited child to child transmission. It is for these reasons that the Technical Advisory Cell has concluded children can be 'covid secure' using a broad range of measures. This evidence supports the return of schools to full operation from September. However, it also assesses the evidence on children in general and is, therefore, also relevant to the childcare sector.

Alongside the updated evidence, our Test, Trace, Protect system is operational, and we are clear about the measures that need to be in place to create safer environments within settings and provision. However, there cannot be a one-size fits all approach. We recognise that each provision will have individual challenges to address.

The position concerning the virus and our understanding of both the susceptibility of children and their role in transmission have developed. There is now more and better information available to inform our decisions for the measures to be taken in education settings.

The exceptional nature of the pandemic, and how circumstances developed over time, meant that during the initial period following the repurposing of schools there was variation across Wales. That was understandable and, to an extent, to be expected. However, steps were taken to bring greater consistency through advice and guidance, for example through our Continuity of Learning plans.

I am committed to continue to work closely with all those involved in the schools system in Wales and I have used various engagement methods to listen and to improve our plans throughout the evolving situation. For example, our learning and operational guidance for schools to support reopening and preparation for Summer and September, built upon discussions with employers, practitioners, employees, unions, parents and learners. Stakeholders have different perspectives and have helped shape the steps we have taken and with the respective guidance. We have also been looking at what has been done elsewhere in the UK, as it has been clear during this pandemic that whilst the challenges have been similar, the approaches have differed.

The education system in Wales adapted quickly and effectively to the challenges it faced, and we have all learned important lessons about what support we can put in place and what works well in particular circumstances. There can be no one size fits all approach as we face the ongoing uncertainty of this virus and we must continue to understand what is needed, and be prepared to adapt to changing circumstances. However, we must also continue to strive for the best for our learners; this will be front and centre of what we will do, and consistency in that regard is of critical importance.

Many uncertainties face the education system as we prepare for the next academic year. The UNCRC's right to an education applies without exception, regardless of the scenario or any barriers to learning faced by individuals. A further lockdown or a period of blended

learning does not absolve Local Authorities of their duty to provide a suitable education. However, it is recognised that that duty may need to be implemented differently for some learners for periods.

If during the next academic year, there is a return to lockdown, or some form of blended learning approach is necessary, the following expectations will apply in terms of contact and duration of learning. All learners should be contacted regularly to 'check in' – this will provide an opportunity to check on the safety and well-being of the learner as well as to explore their learning experience and consider possible additional support. Further, all learners should be provided with the duration of learning time they would receive were they in their school or setting, regardless of whether or not some of their learning is taking place at home or elsewhere. There will be exceptions to the implementation of this expectation. However it should be the starting position for all learners.

The recently published guidance on learning in schools and settings from the autumn term details, that at any level of operation, schools and settings will need to think carefully about how time in the school or setting should be used. During this period, contact time will be valuable. Practitioners should think about the balance and relationship between learning time in school and learning elsewhere, using contact time carefully and effectively and identifying how time at home or elsewhere, if needed, can support making connections and consolidating learning.

They should consider a wide range of pedagogical approaches that effectively use school and out-of-school learning to empower learners. Learning time at home can include practising skills and deepening knowledge that has been introduced during contact time but also could include acquiring new knowledge and understanding. Time at home can also allow older learners to research prepare and think before exploring and consolidating concepts, knowledge and skills during contact time. They should seek to support these skills both in school and out of school. Practitioners should always seek to develop digital skills in the context of wider learning rather than trying to teach them in isolation. In developing their approach to learning experiences, schools and settings should consider guidance on blended learning.

### **Will contact groups or 'bubbles' from September will be available in full to the children of key workers, or any parents who need to access wraparound childcare?**

We have taken the decision to change the measures in relation to children under 11 as part of the formal review of the need for the lockdown requirements. The law in Wales requires that Ministers review lockdown restrictions and their proportionality every 21 days. The advice remains that the risk to and from children under 11 is low. However, they are still subject to the other restrictions and they must still observe these restrictions. This also includes social restrictions on meeting other family groups or wider gatherings.

We know that minimising contact and mixing between people reduces transmission of COVID-19. Schools must consider how to best implement this and do everything possible within their own context to minimise contacts and mixing, while delivering a broad and balanced curriculum. It is acknowledged, however, that schools will have constraints relating to buildings and staffing resources and an element of flexibility may be needed in order that children can be accommodated in this return to school.

The overarching principle to apply is reducing the number of contacts between learners and staff. This can be achieved through keeping groups separate and through maintaining distance between individuals. Both measures will help, but the balance between them will change depending on the:

- Learners' ability to distance;

- Layout of the school; and
- Feasibility of keeping distinct groups separate while offering a broad curriculum.

It is likely that for younger learners the emphasis will be on separating groups, and for older learners it will be on social distancing. For learners old enough, they should be supported to maintain distance and not touch staff where possible.

Maintaining a distance between people while inside, and reducing the amount of time they are in face-to-face contact, lowers the risk of transmission. There is strong public health advice that staff in secondary schools maintain distance from their learners, staying at the front of the class and away from their colleagues where possible.

Ideally, adults should maintain a 2-metre distance from each other and from learners. I appreciate that this is not always possible, particularly when working with younger learners, but if adults can do this when circumstances allow, that will help. In particular, they should avoid close face-to-face contact and minimise time spent within 1 metre of anyone. Similarly, it will not be possible when working with many learners who have complex needs or who need close contact care. These learners' educational and care support should be provided as normal.

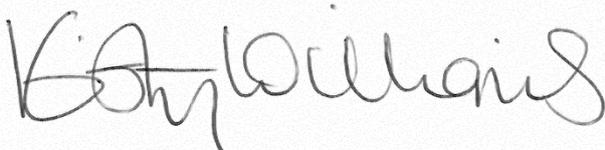
Childcare arrangements for the summer can now include the use of extended family support and will help many families, in addition to seeing more and more childcare providers opening up. We are also working to ensure school breakfast and after school clubs can reopen, which I appreciate will be a key concern for many. I expect schools and Local Authorities to communicate local arrangements accordingly.

I fully understand how families juggle their working time and annual leave to cover school holidays normally. For many, the breakfast club or after school club are essential for the children who attend and for the parents to be able to meet their work or other commitments.

I understand that part-time school provision without wrap around provision and childcare can mean that parents may quickly exhaust the option to use annual/flexible leave and that we in Government must continue to encourage employers to support flexible working arrangements wherever they can at this time, including homeworking where possible for those who have caring commitments.

I fully recognises the incredibly difficult and uncertain circumstances that school staff, children and young people and their families have been experiencing. I feel the decision for September is a positive development in line with the latest scientific and technical guidance and I am very proud of the way people in Wales have responded. We will of course continue to keep our policies under review as the evidence evolves and more is learned about the transmission of COVID 19.

Yours sincerely



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Y Gweinidog Addysg  
Minister for Education