



Eich cyf/Your ref P-05-1011 & P-05-1015
Ein cyf/Our ref KW/05834/20

Janet Finch-Saunders MS
Chair, Petitions Committee
Petitions@Senedd.Wales

5 November 2020

Dear Janet,

Thank you for your letter and the additional queries that you have been raised following your committee meeting. Please let me reassure you that I agree completely that school is vital for the wellbeing and futures of our children. I also agree that it is an important factor in allowing families to work and keeping the economy going. These are, in fact, why the Government has made the decision to ensure that the majority of school year groups remain open during the forthcoming 'fire break'.

Re: The importance of each child continuing to receive their education via online, interactive teaching if they have to self-isolate or face further lockdown

I understand the concerns that have been raised by parents and learners on this issue. I have been clear that children and young people should have access to learning while isolating. We published our learning guidance in July, which emphasised the need to promote learning in all operational scenarios, including a focus on blended learning.

The decisions on how schools approach blended learning, such as 'live' or asynchronous, are made at school level. We expect schools, as part of their risk assessment for the autumn term, to develop a plan which sets out how, what and when they will deliver if normal teaching and operations are disrupted, such as cohorts requiring to self-isolate. Specifically this should include:

- a. Delivery of high quality teaching and assessment approaches to promote progression from the beginning of the autumn term;
- b. Achievement of blended learning pedagogical approaches which are relevant in all scenarios to improve the teaching offer; and
- c. Implementation of flexible pedagogical approaches to ensure that learners do not miss out if they are away from school for a period.

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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.

Our [Stay Safe. Stay Learning](#) policy sets out how the education system in Wales should support distance learning, mitigating the impact on many of our learners of not being physically present in schools and ensuring continuity of learning. Wales is well placed to support schools, practitioners and learners with online distance learning, as we have our national digital platform, Hwb. Additionally, we have supported local authorities and schools across Wales in mobilising support for digitally excluded learners. We have also issued clear guidance to schools and local authorities on delivering distance learning and also on the use of pre-recorded and live streaming of lessons.

A dedicated area on Hwb is available <https://hwb.gov.wales/distance-learning/> that contains all the information relevant to distance learning. Guidance has been produced by Estyn and our regional consortia in regard to blended learning, with a range of support to schools being made available.

We are currently producing resources to support the development of practitioners' skills in learning design to support better asynchronous learning opportunities moving forward (that is, better blended and online learning opportunities). We know that teacher demand for training and support to undertake blended learning has been significant and we welcome schools' commitment to ensure learners continue to progress.

Re: The negative impact being out of school has had on many children, in particular those with additional learning needs

I recognise that the uncertainties arising from the coronavirus pandemic are particularly challenging for children and young people with additional learning needs (ALN), their families and those who support and care for them. I am committed to doing everything possible to support these learners, parents and carers during this difficult time.

Given the challenges all learners have faced over recent months, and acknowledging that this impact has been significant, I have published supplementary [guidance](#) for the autumn term, which is dedicated to the practical, emotional and learning needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged children, including those with ALN. This guidance was published along with [operational guidance](#) for schools and guidance for [learning in schools](#).

The Operational Guidance sets out that, although it is not possible to ensure a totally risk-free environment in educational settings, the risks associated with the pandemic have to be carefully balanced with the negative health impacts of learners not being in school. Being out of school can be detrimental for children's cognitive and academic development and their health and wellbeing, which may have an impact both in the short and longer term.

Each school has been required to carry out a full risk assessment and implement sensible and proportionate controls to reduce the risks to all from COVID-19. Schools should ensure that any measures they put in place do not negatively impact the wellbeing of learners.

There have been no modifications to the statutory duties of local authorities in respect of Special Educational Needs (SEN). Wales is the only country in the UK not to have modified these duties as a result of the current pandemic. The duties of local authorities arising from the Education Act 1996 and the Education (Special Educational Needs) Regulations (Wales) 2002 remain in force, and the SEN Code of Practice for Wales 2002 still applies. The Code focuses on removing barriers to participation and learning. It provides practical advice to local authorities, maintained schools, early years' settings and others on carrying out their statutory duties to identify, assess and make provision for learners' SEN.

We know most learning will have been impacted in some form over recent months, with more significant impacts expected in vulnerable or disadvantaged groups. I have therefore announced an additional £29m to 'recruit, recover and raise standards', bringing teachers into schools and settings to provide in-depth, focused support for those who have specific challenges to enable them to achieve their potential. 600 extra teachers and 300 teaching assistants will be recruited throughout the school year, targeting extra support at Years 11, 12 and 13, as well as disadvantaged and vulnerable learners of all ages.

Local authorities, schools and education settings should prioritise preparation for potential further national or local lockdowns to seek to ensure as little disruption as possible to the learning of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. As part of this planning, local authorities need to consider how best to deploy resources, creatively and flexibly to meet the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged learners, and their families. Any such response will need to be based on appropriate public health advice.

In the event of a further national or local lockdown, consideration will be given to issuing detailed guidance relating to undertaking risk assessment to support SEN learners. Work on this suite of measures was well advanced ahead of the decision to return to full operation of settings in September, with detailed engagement having taken place with a range of partners, including local authorities. As a consequence, we would expect to be in a position to move swiftly to implement a new set of arrangements were the need to arise.

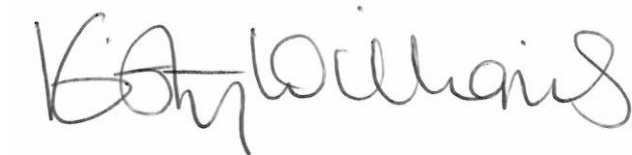
The views of learners, where practicable, and their parents/carers should be considered when making decisions that affect them. The Welsh Government is committed to ensuring the rights of children and persons with disabilities and consulting with them helps give real effect to children's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), in particular to the right in Article 12 for those who are capable to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them.

Re: How many pupils in Wales do not have access to the Internet for the purposes of accessing online teaching at home, according to Government data?

We do not currently have access to accurate data concerning how many pupils in Wales do not have access to the Internet for the purposes of accessing online teaching at home. However, to support digitally excluded learners in maintained schools during the pandemic, we have allocated 10,848 MiFi devices and 9,717 software licences to local authorities for distribution to digitally excluded learners. Based on local authority

feedback, through their own arrangements or via our nationally provided support, we understand that provision for digitally excluded learners is now in place. If a parent or carer hasn't accessed this provision, they need to contact their local school for provision to be made. Further information can be found here - <https://gov.wales/device-and-connectivity-update-digitally-excluded-learners-during-coronavirus-covid-19>.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kirsty Williams', written in a cursive style.

Kirsty Williams AS/MS
Y Gweinidog Addysg
Minister for Education