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Cyfarwyddwr Cyffredinol / Director General

Y Grŵp Addysg a Gwasanaethau Cyhoeddus
Education and Public Services Group



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Nick Ramsay MS
Chair
Public Accounts Committee
Senedd Cymru
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1NA

28 January 2021

Dear Mr Ramsay,

Following my attendance at Public Accounts Committee on 30 November, and your subsequent follow up letter of 9 December, please find enclosed the additional information I agreed to share and my responses to the further points raised.

I would, of course, be happy to provide any further information or clarification requested by Committee.

Yours sincerely

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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.

Public Accounts Committee: 30 November 2020

Follow-up Actions (Tracey Burke, Director General, Education & Public Services)

School attendance - *We would welcome analysis to better understand the pattern of attendance, particularly whether there is any correlation with areas of deprivation.*

Since the start of the academic year we published weekly management information on pupils present in maintained schools. (This can be accessed here: <https://gov.wales/pupils-present-maintained-schools>)

We analysed attendance rates in November and December using the Welsh index of Multiple Deprivation (WIMD) 2019 as our measure of deprivation and there is a clear pattern. As deprivation increases then attendance decreases. The date range was chosen to avoid the impacts of the firebreak and the decision by some Local Authorities to close their schools before the end of term in December.

We will continue to provide support to the most vulnerable families and target our initial efforts at making sure those most in need have access to help when they need it. This can be demonstrated by our prioritisation of funding for free school meals, increase in funding for PDG access and continuation of PDG funding to schools.

In addition, we will continue to work with Local Authorities, schools and parents, to encourage increased attendance at our schools when face-to-face learning for all returns. However, the most important thing at this time is to ensure that communication and engagement continues so schools, settings, Local Authorities and families understand any barriers to learners returning to school and identify any further support needed.

Support - *Update on work undertaken to assist learners from the Gypsy and Traveller Community*

The Gypsy Traveller (GT) Forum and the Minority Ethnic Achievement Local Authority (MEALA) Group continue to regularly discuss the challenges associated with supporting Gypsy and Traveller learners during the pandemic. The network met to discuss the challenges and return to school rates for these learners on 11 September 2020. This an on-going agenda item and was also discussed at their last meeting on 13 November. Local Authority services continue to monitor the situation with regards to education support for these learners and to provide all the support they are able. They have shared best practice with us and across the network via the MEALA and GT forum. The groups are meeting again on 29 January to specifically discuss Gypsy and Traveller learner challenges in accessing education and effective practice in supporting their education.

On 8 September, I wrote to the Committee providing information on support for digitally excluded learners and broadband access on traveller sites. At that time we had identified that 19% had "poor access", 25% had some form of access, 19% may

have “good access” and that for 37% of pitches, there was insufficient information to understand if or how residents might access the internet.

Over the summer we wrote to all Local Authorities with public Gypsy and Traveller sites to remind them that internet access is becoming an essential service and to offer funding at up to 100% from our Sites Capital Grant for projects aimed at overcoming infrastructure barriers to internet access. Further information about this funding was provided at the All-Wales Local Authority engagement event in mid-September.

We have worked extensively with Local Authorities throughout Wales to improve our understanding of the uptake of internet services and the barriers to accessing them on sites. Feedback from Local Authorities has shown that barriers to internet access can be categorised as physical infrastructure barriers, socio-economic barriers, and digital exclusion barriers. Evidence is emerging that ensuring access to fixed broadband on the same basis as those in conventional housing is an important step and is the preference for some, although there are significant additional issues for some residents on sites around affordability.

We have now confirmed that all socially-rented Gypsy and Traveller sites in Wales have fixed line broadband available locally, with 13 sites having access to fast speeds in their area, one site having access to average speeds and eight sites having access to slow speeds in their area, however at some sites additional infrastructure is required to make lines available to residents. We are working with Local Authorities to confirm the sites affected.

Officials have met with eight Local Authorities, with a total of 11 sites, since the beginning of October to explore options for improving access to broadband. This represents some 64% of the pitches in Wales. Local Authorities are following through individually agreed actions and we are in regular discussion about the uptake of internet provision.

We are also working with Local Authorities to develop a pilot for low-cost area networks similar to those seen in other social housing settings, as a means to address economic barriers. We have identified two sites that may have some coverage through BT hotspots and we are exploring options for the provision of vouchers to allow access. We are also working to explore the expansion of these hotspots to bring more sites into coverage.

Self Isolation - *Concerns about different approaches taken by schools throughout Wales regarding the self-isolation rules?*

Drawing on the experience of those working with education settings such as the TTP Teams and the Health Protection Teams and reflecting on feedback from key stakeholders, we have worked with Public Health Wales and the TTP team to produce additional guidance for schools. This guidance seeks to clarify the measures that schools/settings can take to help keep the number of pupils and staff members who need to self-isolate following a positive case to a minimum. It also provides clarity on the purpose of self-isolation, who should self-isolate and when. (The guidance can be accessed here:

<https://gov.wales/operational-guidance-schools-and-settings-support-limited-attendance>)

Blended Learning - *Can you keep us updated and provide us with the outcome of the Blended Working Group's work when available, including that about addressing digital exclusion?*

We recognise the challenge facing learners, teachers and leaders as a result of Covid-19, and we acknowledge that digital responses and solutions may not be as suitable for some as they are for others.

The Blended Learning Working Group, consists of officers from Welsh Government, Local Authorities and the Regional Consortia and is tasked with addressing issues of equity of access to learning in periods of disruption. The Working Group has explored how we can best gain an insight into the existing blended learning provision, solutions and guidance, including digital and non-digital, from a central, regional and local perspective. The Working Group has also identified five system level challenges, and we are now mobilising national engagement with each Local Authority to establish a national baseline of the current provision at school and Local Authority Level.

In terms of addressing digital exclusion, schools in Wales remain well provisioned with access to digital services and infrastructure through the Hwb EdTech programme. We have already seen the distribution over 97,000 end-user devices to Local Authorities, with the remaining 35,000 ordered devices expected over the coming weeks.

At the outset of the pandemic, the Minister for Education committed up to £3 million (from within the £30 million 2020/21 Hwb EdTech capital funding allocation) to specifically support digitally excluded learners in maintained schools where there was no existing provision in place from their school or Local Authority. Working with their schools, Local Authorities utilised the funding to provide digitally excluded learners with repurposed school devices and 4G MiFi connectivity where required. Based on the demand identified by schools and Local Authorities, there have been 10,848 MiFi devices and 9,717 software licences funded by the Welsh Government across Wales.

Some Local Authorities have since reported that a small number of families have since contacted their schools for additional support. Officials have been working with all Local Authorities to establish a national baseline of the current digital provision level for learners and staff.

The Hwb platform also continues to play a crucial role in supporting the delivery of education during this incredibly challenging period. Usage of the Hwb platform has exploded since remote learning re-convened this term. Hwb is currently delivering a daily average of up to 50 logins a second, which provides learners and practitioners with access to our Hwb digital services including email and online learning tools. The platform itself is recording record logins of over 337,000, with over 1 million page views per day.

Sharing best practice - *We would welcome more information about the case studies and the work carried out by Estyn. How is this being used to drive improvement and what evidence is there that it is making a difference.*

We worked with schools to launch a new collection of Covid-19 playlists on Hwb to celebrate and share distance-learning practices. A range of resources have been published providing examples of how different schools and settings have responded to key elements of the pandemic – from reopening to using the Recruit, Recover, Raise Standards funding. Regular updates will continue to be added to these ‘live’ resources. (The playlists can be accessed here:

<https://hwb.gov.wales/distance-learning/sharing-our-experiences/>)

The professional learning journey (PLJ) has been developed to help guide schools through the structural and professional learning aspects of preparing for Curriculum for Wales. It helps schools find their way through the different models for professional learning, and plan their own school’s journey. Further work on the next phase of PLJ is underway and further playlists and resources will continue to be added to the Hwb in the coming months. (Resources can be accessed here:

<https://hwb.gov.wales/professional-development/professional-learning-journey/>).

Our Talk Pedagogy, Think Learning project provides a digital space to share practice and support collaboration within and across our schools to share pedagogy and practice. It helps practitioners to find out what others are doing and what is working through sharing practice and being able to collaborate, as well as engage in professional learning opportunities regarding pedagogy and the new curriculum and engage in conversation about pedagogy in relation to blended learning. During the Covid-19 period the project has been focused to provide opportunities for collaborative professional learning by sharing experiences of ‘what works’, and perhaps ‘what has not worked’, which will be of benefit as we move beyond the pandemic. (Talk Pedagogy, Think Learning can be accessed here:

<https://hwb.gov.wales/professional-development/national-pedagogy-project>)

Estyn’s report was published on 15 January, and we will work with Estyn and the regions to ensure that the lessons learned from this are implemented. (A copy of the report can be accessed here:

<https://www.estyn.gov.wales/thematic-report/local-authority-and-regional-consortia-support-schools-and-prus-response-covid-19>)

We have also analysed the Lessons Learned Report from the Stay Safe Stay Learning programme in the spring and will use these to determine next steps, especially in relation to remote learning and the operation of schools for the rest of this school year.

Burdens on schools - *You told the Committee that Welsh Government has reduced the burdens placed on schools during the pandemic. We welcome the steps taken to reduce the pressure on schools, but would like more detail on the changes you have introduced, about the decision-making that led to them and what assessment has been made that they make a difference. Will these remain in place in the post Covid-19 world?*

While we are facing great uncertainties across the Education system, we seek to support our learners in the best way possible. In this context, we recognise that the pressures resulting from Covid-19 have meant increasing expectations on schools and other educational settings, and therefore, in the broadest possible sense, on the staff working to support learners.

In response, we have taken wide-ranging actions to introduce greater flexibilities and ease regulatory requirements on the school system.

It was clear from the impact of the Covid-19 that many of the normal statutory requirements placed on schools, with respect to the reporting of pupil attainment and attendance data, would not be reasonable. As such, we undertook a public consultation with stakeholders to bring into force The Relaxation of School Reporting Requirements (Wales) (Coronavirus) Regulations, which permanently revoked school target setting requirements and relaxed a number of other school reporting requirements for 2019/20.

The vast majority of responses were in favour of the proposals and felt that they were sensible and fair, would reduce the administrative burden on schools and remove pressures. The proposed changes were communicated to schools early, and in advance of the consultation and legislative process. This was done in order to provide schools with as much notice as possible. Specifically, the regulatory changes include:

- Revoking requirement for schools to set and publish performance and absence targets that are then agreed by Local Authorities.
- Excluding data on authorised and unauthorised absences in 2019/20 from being published in any school prospectus.
- Removing the requirement for governing body annual reports to include 2019/20 performance and attendance data.
- Modifying requirements on reports to parents to a “reasonable endeavours” basis for the 2019/20 school year, with the exception of the requirement to provide a school leaver’s report
- Removing the duties on governing bodies and Local Authorities to provide data to Local Authorities and Welsh Ministers, respectively, on teacher assessment outcomes and authorised or unauthorised absence for the pupils registered at schools in the 2019/20 school year.

We will shortly be consulting on similar proposals to relax some of these reporting requirements for 2020/21. These early and clear actions will have a positive impact on schools. Consultation responses should also help to reaffirm feedback from last year’s consultation, that these changes are valued by stakeholders and are making a positive difference in reducing bureaucracy and supporting flexibility where necessary in schools. In addition to the regulatory changes above, other interventions that have been undertaken to date include:

- Early clarity of extending the suspension of Key Stage 4 and legacy sixth form performance measures to the 2020/21 academic year.
- Suspending the national schools categorisation process.
- Relaxation of certain requirements relating to school admissions appeals.

- Disapplication of changing of school session times requirements.
- Modification to the School Organisation Code.
- Modification to pupil registration.
- Extension to the deadline for notifying Welsh Ministers of school term dates.
- Provision of extra planning days at the start of autumn term 2020/21.
- Modification of Curriculum and Assessment Requirements to a Reasonable Endeavours Basis.

These interventions have had an immediate effect in reducing the burden on schools generally and have provided increased flexibility to schools. Additionally, much of this activity was undertaken early. Going forward, we will keep these interventions under review and address any required changes as appropriate.

Examination arrangements - *The level of uncertainty for learners and teachers alike is unhelpful and we are concerned about the additional stress this is causing. We urge the findings of the Group to be considered and any subsequent Ministerial announcements to be made as soon as possible in the new year.*

As noted above, we are very conscious of the uncertainties faced right across the Education system. The Minister for Education announced the detailed approach that would be taken to qualifications on 16 December, having received policy proposals from the Design and Delivery Advisory Group and accepting them in full. In light of the move to remote learning for most learners until at least 29 January, Qualifications Wales announced the cancellation of the internal assessment window and the Design and Delivery Advisory Group reconvened to develop proposals that prioritised learner wellbeing and public confidence in this new situation. The Minister for Education made an announcement on 20 January on the advice of the Design and Delivery Group, confirming her intention to move to Centre-Determined Grades, based on evidence of learning and supported by an assessment framework to be developed and published by WJEC, working with Qualifications Wales, and supported by the Design and Delivery Advisory Group. The Group are now working on possible details around this to provide further clarity and certainty to learners, parents, teachers, and lecturers as soon as possible.