

Kirsty Williams AS/MS
Y Gweinidog Addysg
Minister for Education



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Ein cyf/Our ref KW/03229/20
Janet Finch-Saunders MS
Chair, Petitions Committee

Dear Janet Finch-Saunders MS,

30 June 2020

Thank you for your letter dated 18 June regarding petition P-05-985 to provide childcare equivalent to what was available prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

I am grateful for the opportunity to share some views on this matter with the Petitions Committee. I understand this is a concern for many families across Wales and the arrangements for the next phase of how schools operate from 29 June will need to strike a balance between the national guidance and local needs and circumstances of communities.

In considering the petition there are a number of matters I will wish to think about in my portfolio area and there are some matters which go beyond my remit that require attention. These include for example the frequently seen role of the wider family including grandparents, and how the social restrictions in place impact on the support network many families come to rely on.

We must recognise that Wales remains in a state of lockdown. Noting the exceptional response from the people in Wales, from families and individuals, from all our services and our critical workers, and the tremendous progress we have made, the coronavirus remains a real threat and will continue to have an impact on our lives for a longer period of time.

In considering the petition we must be live to this. Whilst we continue to tackle the coronavirus and plan for the potential of a second peak, the First Minister is simultaneously making best and cautious use of the headroom available to put in place minor adjustments to ease the social restrictions in place. I think we all welcome those easing measures including most recently the lifting from non-essential retail, places of worship and outdoor activities, however it is very clear this transitional position, neither fully one nor the other, brings a high degree of complexity in the issues we see.

I am sure the authors of the petition recognise this point and I would be glad to see acknowledgement and clarity over whether the petition seeks a return to normal childcare

Canolfan Cyswllt Cyntaf / First Point of Contact Centre:
0300 0604400

Bae Caerdydd • Cardiff Bay
Caerdydd • Cardiff
CF99 1SN

Gohebiaeth.Kirsty.Williams@llyw.cymru
Correspondence.Kirsty.Williams@gov.wales

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.

arrangements now, given we remain in a state of lockdown and continue to manage unprecedented circumstances, or at a later date when social restrictions are removed and schools and settings can return to more normal arrangements.

I fully support the petition's praise for the immense effort, dedication and sacrifice of our critical workers during the coronavirus pandemic. Our NHS and social care workers, our supply chains and essential services, our emergency services, and our teachers and school staff have played a key role as critical workers in reducing the impact of the pandemic, safeguarding against loss of life and avoiding the greater hardships that might have been.

Since the closure of statutory education on 20 March, our schools have continued to support our children and young people and I note with pride that more than 700 hub settings have remained open to provide childcare for our more vulnerable learners and the children of our critical workers who needed it. In taking on this different role and contributing to the national effort to tackle the virus, our teaching and school staff have been able to help release thousands of critical workers to maintain their key roles, support the country at a time of national need and ultimately save lives. As a country we are indebted to all of our critical workers.

Next phase of schools' operations from 29 June

We know the impact of the coronavirus will be felt for some time to come. In making the decision to re-open schools to more learners I am making use of the headroom available to us to ensure the vast majority of children have some vital contact time with their schools and settings at the end of this summer term. This time will be primarily focused on our children's wellbeing and their learning. It is a safe space to check in, catch up and prepare for September. Without this opportunity before September, the majority of learners would spend six months away from school. The impact of this on their wellbeing and learning is of great concern to me. From next week the vast majority of learners will be able to see their friends safely, see their teachers in their normal schools, engage with their schools and the school routine, re-visit their learning and focus on their wellbeing.

Having directed a significant proportion of our teachers and school staff to provide childcare and support in our hub provision over the past months, and now re-directing their focus to opening all schools for the end of the summer term and their primary function, we cannot sustain the same level of childcare support from our teachers and school staff. I also believe this should not be expected of them at this current time if we consider the role they need to play, the role they are best placed to play, in supporting the education of our children and young people. I have received a large volume of correspondence from families who feel they struggle to cope with home learning or who tell me about the additional needs their children have and the additional support they required. Many are concerned with their children's mental health and wellbeing with sustained separation from their friends, teachers and routine.

In my role as Minister for Education, I must look to the teaching and learning of our children and young people as a priority. Our workforce is reduced with a number of staff shielding, issues with their own caring arrangements and challenges with the physical space restrictions. Two of the key challenges with schools re-opening to more learners are firstly how we service that need, and secondly that we cannot sustain the level of childcare support temporarily provided in local hubs and how national and local government and employers in Wales can support our critical workers to continue their vital role.

From Monday of this week, 22 June, as part of the adjustments and easing of social restrictions, childcare and play settings are able to reopen. Settings that have remained open will be able to care for more children and those settings which have closed temporarily

are able to reopen. This provision is planned to continue throughout the remainder of this term and over the summer. Childcare settings will play a vital role and offer much needed support to the children and families who need them. It will take some time for capacity to increase and we must be mindful that these settings will continue to need to work within the restrictions and parameters in place, with social distancing, added controls over hygiene and infection control and the full guidelines for childcare settings at this time.

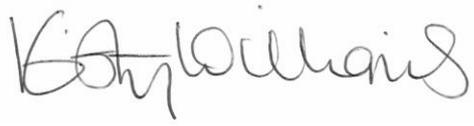
In addition to our childcare and play settings, our schools will also continue to offer additional support to our vulnerable learners and the children of our critical workers. We expect children attending hub provision to move back to their own school or setting wherever possible. For those learners who are currently using hub provision, we expect schools and settings to continue to make available additional provision for those learners, alongside the learning that they are entitled to for the remainder of the summer term. This means childcare support will continue to be available for our critical workers over and above the contact time schools are able to put in place locally for the end of the summer term.

Local authorities are working closely with schools and settings operating as hubs to manage the transition. I do recognise this will not be easy and there are different needs in different communities across Wales which we must seek to meet. Having provided national guidelines for schools and childcare settings and in agreement with the WLGA and our local authorities and school trade unions, the Welsh Government firmly recognises that we are not the employer of school staff. Local authorities will put in place local childcare arrangements and other options as they are able to support taking into account the capacity within each school and setting including of the staff and the physical space, the operating models used by the authority, the demand for places in each area and the needs of learners. Schools have been communicating with their school communities, explaining the arrangements they are able to put in place locally, how they will operate and what provision is available. I would encourage parents, carers and guardians to continue to engage with their schools and settings and local authorities to understand what other provision may be made available locally.

The Welsh Government and local government continue to monitor the transmission of the virus in Wales. We must be ready to respond to developments in the virus including making best use of the headroom available or putting in place additional measures if further restriction is necessary. We have confirmed there is no expectation that schools will continue hub provision during the summer holidays. Childcare and play settings are able to open and local authorities may make alternative provision available for this time.

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. One of the key issues I see is that where part-time school is without the adequate wrap around provision and childcare, parents may quickly exhaust the option to use annual leave and we 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 and of course for those who are shielding.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kirsty Williams'.

Kirsty Williams AS/MS
Y Gweinidog Addysg
Minister for Education