

Kirsty Williams AS/MS
Y Gweinidog Addysg/Minister for Education

Adam Calcutt

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4th July 2020

Dear Ms Williams,

Thank you for your response to my petition: P-05-985 to provide childcare equivalent to what was available prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. I am pleased that it will be discussed at the Petitions Committee meeting on 17th July.

I am glad to have the opportunity to respond to the points you raise in your letter and to clarify my arguments.

To give you some background: my wife and I are both clinical NHS staff, working for the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board; we have amassed a total of 43 years of NHS service between us. As lockdown restrictions commenced back in March, our major concern, along with the obvious worries regarding the health of loved ones, was how we would be able to continue to work when schools shut. We have two young children aged five and seven, who clearly cannot be left at home on their own. Thankfully, our local authority (Monmouthshire County Council) provided childcare for the children of those designated key workers at school "hubs" and so we were able to continue to work every day as usual throughout this period of national crisis, reassured that our children were safe and happy. The school hubs have provided an invaluable service, allowing key workers to continue their essential roles, and we are very grateful for this provision.

However, we were informed by Monmouthshire County Council late in the evening of 15th June that from the following Monday (22nd June) hub childcare provision would be substantially cut with hubs open only from 8.30am to 4.00pm, as opposed to the previous hours of 8.00am to 6.00pm. These reduced hours make it impossible for anyone to work a standard eight-hour day. We were given less than a weeks' notice of the impending changes. No explanation for the change was given. No alternative options were offered. By initially offering childcare for the extended period of 8.00am to 6.00pm, the requirement for this to counteract the loss of the usual mechanisms of care has obviously been recognised; how, suddenly, are key workers expected to be able to manage without this resource?

We lobbied Monmouthshire County Council to reverse this decision but, as they refused to relent, I decided to launch my online petition. We are well aware of how these changes have adversely affected the key workers using the hub our children attend at Llanfoist Fawr Primary School, but also wanted to represent the wider community of key workers across Wales who will also be facing difficulties with this change in hours. It is for this reason that I launched my petition: to support the key workers of Wales in asking for childcare to be maintained during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

As you rightly state in your response, breakfast and after school club provision are essential for parents to meet their work commitments under "normal" circumstances. We have based our working days around childcare being available between the hours of 8.00am and 5.00pm. Working families throughout the country require these extended hours. At the point the hours of the school hubs were reduced, no alternative childcare arrangements were available due to the restrictions in place. Families could not help and most other childcare providers were closed. This has made it impossible for critical workers to fulfil their essential roles.

You request clarity as to when we wish to see a return to "normal" childcare hours; we did not want the hub school childcare hours to be reduced to below those of a normal extended school day. We wanted childcare to remain available for a minimum of 8.00am to 5.00pm until such a point as "normal" schooling, incorporating breakfast and after school clubs as usual, resumes.

Unfortunately, as time has gone on, this means that my petition will not be discussed until your meeting on 17th July which is now the end of the summer term as our local authority has failed to provide the additional week of term directed by you in your announcement on 3rd June. This means key worker families will have struggled over the last four weeks to drop off and collect their children in time while still fulfilling their work commitments – which have not changed. To this end, my campaign now has to focus on ensuring that at the start of the next academic year in September, schools will provide childcare for their normal extended days, not just the hours children attend lessons.

You state that "we cannot sustain the same level of childcare support from our teachers and school staff... this should not be expected of them at this current time if we consider the role they need to play". However, without adequate childcare in place, key workers cannot fulfil the roles *they* need to play. We were defined as "key workers" because the services we provide are deemed essential to maintain the health, safety, security and wellbeing of the nation. The services we deliver have not altered; they remain just as necessary now as they did at the height of the crisis. The message is clear and simple: key workers cannot work without adequate childcare. If longer hours of childcare were necessary to support key workers before, they are still needed now; nothing has changed. If we, as a nation, want essential services to continue, adequate childcare must be in place.

We understand that the teaching workforce may be depleted by staff illness and shielding, but this is no different in key worker roles. We are told that background NHS sickness levels have decreased recently, as staff make the extra effort to maintain services, but levels of stress-related absence have increased. Putting extra strain on working families by removing childcare will only add to this burden. You raise school staff's own issues with caring responsibilities; of course we appreciate that school staff have childcare concerns as well, but surely ensuring adequate provision would benefit school staff, too, as they also constitute key worker roles.

Breakfast and after school clubs were mainly staffed by teaching assistants and lunchtime supervisors. With school sessions being restricted to just a few children at any one time, these support staff are not necessary for lessons, thus freeing them up to provide care within the hubs. The majority of schools have sufficient of these support workers to allow a rota system for staffing the extended hours and, given that they usually staff breakfast and after school clubs, it would make no difference to their usual working hours. Just a few school support staff providing extended hours childcare would enable far greater numbers of key workers to continue to fulfil their roles to the benefit of us all. Working families are already used to paying for this wrap-around childcare. We are happy to return to this, which may well affect willingness to deliver provision.

Alternatively, childcare at hubs over the school holidays was provided by local authority leisure staff; could this additional resource not be utilised instead?

I must also take issue with our assertion that "we expect schools and settings to continue to make available additional provision for those learners [key worker children], alongside the learning that they are entitled to for the remainder [sic] of the summer term". Key worker children are not being allowed to access hub childcare on either side of the "Check in, Catch up, Prepare" school sessions currently being offered, a stance that effectively excludes them from accessing education. These children have already missed out on home learning and so are further penalised by this measure. A recent survey conducted at Stranmillis University College in Northern Ireland by Dr Noel Purdy reported key workers had "particular difficulties in home-schooling their children". We accept they have had opportunities while attending hubs to see and play with their friends, to spend time with teaching staff and to be engaged in many varied and interesting activities, but they

have received no formal age-appropriate teaching throughout this entire period and will therefore be falling substantially behind their peers in academic attainment. How can this be considered fair? We all joined in with the weekly “clap for carers”, but is this how key workers should now be “rewarded” with their children receiving sub-standard education as a thanks for all their hard work?

School sessions are currently running for, on average, three hours only. In order to accommodate caring for their children around these hours key workers would have to take annual leave for the full day. Working families struggle to provide childcare during school holidays at the best of times; annual leave does not cover the length of time children are off school. We dare not take any leave at the moment as, despite numerous requests and with less than two weeks until the end of term, there has still been no confirmation of what childcare provision will be available over the summer holidays. We do not have enough leave to cover a six-week break. It is also not only just a matter of having leave available, that leave has to be negotiated with colleagues. In order for essential services to keep running a certain number of staff need to be present in work. Critical services cannot just shut down for six weeks. The children of key workers have been disadvantaged over the past few months as their parents have not been at home with them to enable them to participate in home learning. Any learning key worker families have managed has had to be squeezed into days off, not at all comparable with the opportunities for daily educational activities other children have been able to undertake. Key worker children are, therefore, already at risk of falling behind their peers. To discriminate against them when there is no evidence that by accessing the hub for wrap-around care they would pose any more of an infection risk than that families with multiple siblings accessing different year groups or even different schools would be exposed to, is discriminatory. Alun Davies, MS for Blaenau Gwent, has kindly taken forward our concerns on behalf of his key worker constituents and the local population who will suffer as a result of reduced critical services and has informed us that when he approached Public Health Wales regarding key worker children accessing school sessions and wrap-around hub childcare he was told that “so long as the WG guidance is being adhered to as much as possible in both mainstream school setting and hub setting, then I see no reason why pupils could not attend both settings and I can see nothing in the WG guidance to say that they should not do so”, but this guidance is not being followed by local authorities. It unfairly penalises the children of key workers who are unable to take time off work to manage a much-reduced school day.

Our concern is that should, as expected, this situation with shortened school hours and reduced attendance days with a focus on home learning, persist into the new academic year we will not be able to manage at all. You acknowledge that “parents may quickly exhaust the option to use annual leave” but fail to provide a viable alternative. Homeworking is simply not an option for the vast majority of key workers. Key workers include clinical NHS staff, hospital domestics and porters; refuse collectors; home carers and care home staff; police officers and firefighters; supermarket workers and delivery drivers – none of whom can utilise the option of homeworking. You suggest that employers should be encouraged to support flexible working, but this often does not work in practise even when it could be a possibility. Staff within our Health Board who perform office-based roles and who believe they could work from home are having this opportunity refused; indeed, our Health Board has recently placed an embargo on new VPNs, thereby removing an avenue for homeworking.

While some alternative childcare settings may now be starting to open, accessing these is not an option for many. As you say, they will have their own restrictions in place and capacity will be limited. Now is not an appropriate time for parents to be seeking out new childcare arrangements. Before feeling confident with sending their children somewhere new, parents first need to visit facilities and meet staff, whether that be childminders in their own homes or larger-scale childcare providers; this is not feasible at present. If it is considered too much of an infection risk for children to access school hubs before and after school sessions, how can children attending alternative providers for wrap-around care be a safer option? Changing site necessitates transport arrangements which surely create an additional level of exposure.

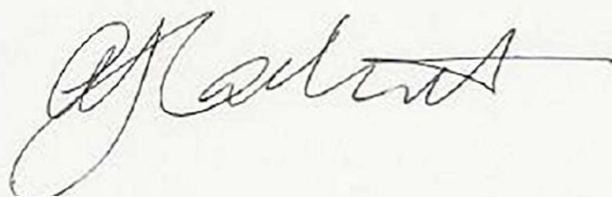
We are now allowed to "bubble" with just one other family which may help some with informal childcare arrangements, but for many this will make no difference at all and this option was not in place when hub childcare was first reduced. Family assistance relies on, as you point out, usually grandparents and is only an option when they live close by. By definition, grandparents will fit into the older age category and many will be shielding due to various health issues and therefore unable to assist with childcare. Others may be physically well but, given the well-publicised greater effects and poorer outcomes of covid-19 for older people, they may be concerned about the prospects of taking on childcare on a regular, lengthy basis. Many older people have hardly left their homes over the past few months and will have their own fears to contend with. It is unfair to put working families in a position whereby they have to request elderly grandparents to look after their children, knowing that grandparents may be (justifiably) too frightened to do so. Children need to be cared for in an environment which is safe and familiar. Moving between settings surely creates a much greater infection risk than remaining on a school site which already has safe social distancing measures in place.

In addition to more informal care with friends and relatives, working parents rely on childcare schemes run in centres such as local leisure centres (for example the Mon Games) over the long summer holidays. With leisure centres in Wales remaining closed and no date yet set for reopening, it is highly unlikely this resource will be available in two weeks' time when the holidays commence. We desperately need confirmation of what childcare will be available over the holiday period to enable us to negotiate leave from work, whilst maintaining services and remaining fair to other hard-working colleagues.

The key workers of Wales have worked tirelessly throughout the last few highly troubled months. We want to keep working to provide the essential services we deliver, but cannot do this without adequate childcare in place. We are asking, therefore, for childcare to be provided at schools, as previously, for the usual extended school day hours or 8.00am to 5.00pm. Additionally, we need provision for childcare over the school holidays and for the children of key workers to be able to access childcare at school either side of attendance of lessons to prevent further disruption to their education.

Please do contact me should any of the points I have made require further clarification.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Adam Calcutt', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Adam Calcutt