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Y Gweinidog Addysg
Minister for Education



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Eich cyf/Your ref P-05-988
Ein cyf/Our ref KW/03594/20

Janet Finch-Saunders MS
Chair, Petitions Committee

9 July 2020

Dear Janet,

Thank you for your letter dated 1 July regarding petition P-05-989 to ensure the children of key workers have equal access to the '*check in, catch up, prepare*' sessions in their schools.

I am grateful for the opportunity to provide some clarity on this matter with the Petitions Committee. I understand this is a concern for many families across Wales now that the arrangements for the operation of schools and settings across Wales until the end of the summer term are in place.

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.

However, we must recognise that Wales remains in a state of lockdown, and the coronavirus remains a real threat and will continue to have an impact on our lives for a longer period of time. 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, and it is very clear this is a transitional position. In making the decision to re-open schools to more learners, I have made best 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, including the children of our keyworkers.

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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.

My key aim is that as many children as possible are provided with an opportunity 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. It is a safe space to check in, catch up and prepare for September. During this brief period schools and settings will be primarily focused on our children's wellbeing and their learning. 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.

As school operations increase over the summer term, we would expect children currently attending hubs provision (possibly at a different school) to move back to their own school or setting. For those learners, 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 our schools will also continue to offer additional childcare support to our vulnerable learners and the children of our critical workers.

However, having provided national guidelines for schools and childcare settings and in agreement with the WLGA, our local authorities and school trade unions, the Welsh Government firmly recognises that we are not the Employer of school staff. Local authorities have put in place local arrangements taking into account the capacity within each school and setting, staff numbers and the physical space; the operating models used by the authority; the demand for places in each area and the needs of learners. They have also considered local childcare arrangements and other options they are able to support. Local authorities have worked closely with schools and settings operating as hubs to manage the transition, and schools have been communicating with their school communities to explain the arrangements put in place locally, how they will operate and what provision is available.

I recognise this has not been easy, there are different needs in different communities across Wales which we must seek to meet. Inevitably schools are being flexible in their approach. To welcome back an increased number of children and young people conditions must be safe and the risk of transmitting the virus low. This has meant introducing stringent cleaning and hygiene measures for schools and settings that meet both national and local guidelines, social distancing measures and only a limited number of staff and children attending at any one time. Limiting social contacts is also an important part of reducing the likelihood of seeing large outbreaks of the virus. It is important that we continue to reduce mixing between groups of children. Keeping people in small, consistent groups of adults and learners which remain the same throughout the week, and separate from other groups, helps to do this and avoids creating chains of transmission.

In returning to school, we advise that children should attend just one setting wherever possible, and should remain in the same small, consistent group within that setting as far as possible, to help reduce the likelihood of the virus moving between groups within that one setting, or moving between groups in different settings. If a child therefore attends more than one setting, they should remain in the same, small group across both settings wherever possible. Mixing children from different groups, or different schools, is not consistent with the need to minimise overall levels of contact. Parents and settings may need to discuss these risks and consider how to manage them to reduce the spread of the virus, and this will mean working together and in line with the guidance provided.

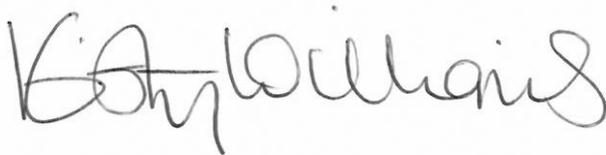
It is the responsibility of each school to introduce and communicate these local arrangements and where ever possible to provide an opportunity for all their learners to attend to check-in, catch up and prepare for September. I would encourage parents, carers and guardians to continue to engage with their schools and settings, and local authorities,

to understand what provision is available locally to the end of the summer term that best suits their circumstances.

I am sure the authors of the petition recognise this point, and I am glad to see the petition seeks a return to the provision of normal educational arrangements for the children of key workers at a later date when social restrictions are removed and schools and settings can return to more normal arrangements. I will shortly make a further announcement on plans for September.

I continue to have immense pride in 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. 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 putting in place additional measures if further restriction is necessary.

Yours sincerely

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

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