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Y Gweinidog Addysg
Minister for Education



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Eich cyf/Your ref Petition P-05-985
Ein cyf/Our ref KW/04439/20
Janet Finch-Saunders MS
Chair, Petitions Committee

13 August 2020

Dear Janet,

Thank you for your letter of 05 August regarding Petition P- 05-985 - Provide key-worker childcare equivalent to what was available prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. I am grateful for the opportunity to share further views on this matter with the Petitions Committee.

In considering the petition, and the correspondence from the petitioner, regarding summer provision available to children of key workers and the personal experience they received during the pandemic, I would like to reassure the petitions Committee that I have been guided by the [latest scientific and technical advice](#) and recommendations from the Technical Advisory Cell to Welsh Government throughout the pandemic.

In my role as Minister for Education, when I made the decision for learners to 'check in, catch up and prepare for summer' during the last four weeks of the summer term this was in collaboration with Local Authorities and teaching unions. Our proposal was for teachers to work one extra week, the fourth week in July, and get that week back as an extra week at the half term in October. That was our national preference, based on the best health and scientific evidence available to us at the time. However, I recognise that Local Authorities are the employer and are best placed to take decisions over term dates, understanding their local circumstances and issues. Where Local Authorities were able to open schools for the fourth week, they did, but where they were not able to, the Local authority, as the employers took that decision.

I know the Local authorities consulted with their head teachers, with their staff and with their parents.

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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.

Summer Holiday and Key Worker Child Provision

The latest scientific advice is that the risk to children of becoming severely ill from COVID-19 is very low. The Welsh Government Technical Advisory Cell, which provides scientific and technical advice to Government during emergencies, has reviewed the current evidence that suggests that, where children are infected with the virus, it takes a milder course than in adults. Children generally present with mild symptoms or are asymptomatic. Very few develop severe symptoms or life threatening levels of infection.

Furthermore, the Technical Advisory Cell reported that transmissibility in children under the age of 12 seems to be particularly low, with emerging evidence showing limited child to child transmission. It is for these reasons that the Technical Advisory Cell has concluded children can be 'covid secure' using a broad range of measures. This evidence supports the return of schools to full operation from September. However, it also assesses the evidence on children in general and is, therefore, also relevant to the childcare sector.

Alongside the updated evidence, our Test, Trace, Protect system is operational and we are clear about the measures that need to be in place to create safer environments within settings and provision. However, there cannot be a one-size fits all approach. We recognise that each Open Access Play work provision will have individual challenges to address.

Since 22 June, childcare settings in Wales have been able to extend their operations, providing care for all children, not just those of key workers or vulnerable children. In many cases, this has been on a reduced basis taking account of the protective measures put in place to help reduce the rate of COVID-19 transmission.

In the period since then, over 900 settings that had closed in the initial period of the pandemic have reopened. Over two thirds of childcare settings across Wales are now open with a number running summer holiday provision. Since 05 August, settings have been able to further expand their operations, increasing the size of contact groups and caring for more children. This is in line with the scientific evidence on transmission in children.

We have updated our guidance on the protective measures to be taken in childcare settings. The guidance for Open Access Play work provision is based on the childcare guidance with the appropriate amendments to reflect the different provision.

Whilst the term Open Access applies to registered provision for children under 12 years, such provision usually caters for a wide age range of children, including those over 12 years. The purpose of the provision is to provide staffed play opportunities for children in the absence of their parents. Children have the freedom of choice as to what range of play activity they wish to undertake and with whom they play. The measures set out in this guidance should be considered alongside the requirements contained within the [National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare](#).

I would like to highlight to the Committee an announcement that I made together with the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Care. As school staff take a much-needed break over the summer holidays, we announced an additional £1.6 million available via the Local Authority Emergency Hardship Fund, to allow Local Authorities to enhance their childcare and play opportunities for children and young people aged 5-16 who may need additional support over the summer.

Local Authorities are best placed to use the services and facilities available to them to help those most at risk in their area. In addition, it has also been confirmed that the Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme will continue during the summer holiday period to the end of August.

Children of critical workers and vulnerable children under the age of five will receive funded care in childcare settings until the end of the summer period. I have also committed to funding Free School Meals for eligible children over the summer holidays. Wales was the first UK country to make this commitment.

In very recent developments, I am pleased to confirm the childcare offer for Wales has re-opened to applications in August and September. This Government was elected on a pledge to provide 30 hours of early education and childcare to the working parents of three and four-year-olds for 48 weeks per year. This has been available throughout Wales since April last year and around 14,600 children were taking up the childcare offer in January 2020.

We had to take the unprecedented step of pausing the childcare offer to new entrants on 01 April because of the coronavirus pandemic as we focused resources on supporting the childcare needs of critical workers and vulnerable children through the Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme (C-CAS).

I want to thank our Local Authorities for the way they have run C-CAS and supported families with diverse and often complex needs. Childcare providers have been fantastic; many stayed open when the virus was at its peak to ensure critical workers were able to contribute effectively to the national effort against the pandemic.

At the same time, we have enabled childcare providers to increase their operations to support working families as more workplaces open, while putting in place measures to reduce the risk of transmission of coronavirus as much as possible. As childcare services continue to increase their operations, we believe there will be sufficient provision for those who need it.

A further £1million has been allocated from the education budget to fund support for children and young people over the school summer holidays to help them re-engage with education, giving them the opportunity to take part in activities, which they may have missed while not at school, including socialising with their peers and physical activity.

We will continue to work with the Welsh Local Government Association to determine how this funding will be allocated. We would like to see it targeted towards those children who have missed out the most while they have not been able to attend school and particularly towards the needs of vulnerable children in deprived communities. Altogether, a further £2.6million will be invested to support Local Authorities to provide childcare support and play provision for children during this year's school summer holidays.

I have been clear that if there is a local outbreak of the virus, then the Welsh Government, local authorities and schools, working closely with Public Health Wales (PHW) should be prepared to implement appropriate restriction measures. This firmly recognises that whilst the presence of Covid-19 is declining in our communities, it has not disappeared and we must continue to be aware of the threat of the virus and take safety measures to reduce risk at every opportunity.

I understand these last months have been a challenge for all of us. Many families have struggled with home schooling, juggling work and other priorities and responsibilities. We understand the challenges and benefits of blended learning. On 09 July, I announced an additional £29 million for schools to boost support for learners entering crucial stages in their education from September; to recruit, recover and raise standards and minimise the impact of time away from school as far as possible.

The support package will enable the equivalent of 600 extra teachers and 300 teaching assistants to be recruited throughout the next school year and target support at Years 11, 12, 13 as well as disadvantaged and vulnerable learners of all ages. I have been clear that we must never lower our expectations for any of our children and young people, no matter their background.

I fully recognise the incredibly difficult and uncertain circumstances that school staff, children and young people and their families have been experiencing and we know the impact of the coronavirus will continue to be felt for some time. I feel the decision for September is a positive development in line with the latest scientific and technical guidance and I am very proud of the way people in Wales have responded and of the resilience which continues to be shown during this time.

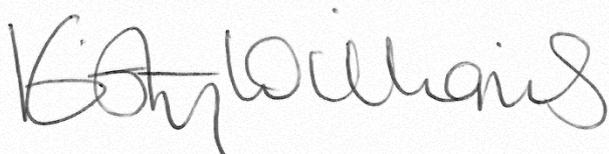
Extended hours provision available for key workers in the autumn when schools fully re-open

During the pandemic, our schools have provided critical childcare and support to enable other key workers, acknowledging firmly that teachers are designated as critical workers, to continue their roles knowing their children are safe. I take it as a compliment to their credit that some critical workers are calling for these arrangements to continue. I am proud of the way our schools have responded. We must however acknowledge that teachers are classed as key workers for their educational role and it is this role that I am most occupied with as we take opportunities safely to increase footfall in schools, make up lost ground, and return fully to school in September. Our teachers must be able to direct their time and efforts to their core teaching and educational roles.

This is of course far more difficult in the gradual easing of restrictions than the more abrupt and immediate instigation of lockdown measures. I have however been clear, that there are no plans at this point to provide funded childcare for those currently identified as critical workers beyond the end of August. The childcare arrangements for summer including support from extended families will help many parents and guardians. In addition we are seeing more and more childcare providers opening up and we are working to ensure school breakfast and after school, clubs can reopen. This includes both school based provision and provision operated across the wider childcare sector.

I believe the pandemic has brought into sharp focus how much social reliance there is on our schools beyond the educational role, which must be their priority. I therefore have great sympathy with families who juggle their lives, childcare, working time and annual leave to cover the summer period. That is why I feel the decision for September is a positive development in line with the latest scientific and technical guidance and I am eager to see our schools able to return to normal as soon as it is safe to do so. I am very proud of the way people in Wales have responded and of the resilience, which continues to be shown and I take heart from this. It is to our credit in Wales.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kirsty Williams', written over a light grey grid background.

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