

Social distancing in primary schools

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 15 Medi 2020
Petitions Committee | 15 September 2020

Reference: RS20/13467-1

Petition Number: [P-05-999](#)

Petition title: Implement a minimum of 1 metre social distancing in all Primary Schools in September 2020

Text of petition: Protect our Children, Protect our NHS. It is no secret that every winter our NHS struggles from winter pressures including seasonal flu, filling UK hospitals full to capacity. Each year our news channels/feeds are full with stories of these pressures. A surge in coronavirus cases would put additional pressures on the NHS potentially taking it to breaking point. Despite this our WG plan to return our children to school without social distancing measures to protect them.

Additional information: Evidence tells us that children need a level of normality to prevent mental health issues and ensure healthy lifestyles. Taking this on board but keeping the risks to our children & the NHS in mind I urge the WG to reconsider its proposal & consider a mixture of formal home schooling via distance learning along with the continuation of a “bubble model” which allows for social distancing. This would allow children to return to school on a part time basis while undertaking formal full time studies. I propose this method continue until the spring term when the annual period of winter pressures has passed.



1. Summary

Schools across Wales reopened to all pupils on a full-time basis from the start of September 2020. The Welsh Government took this decision on [9 July 2020](#) following advice from its Technical Advisory Cell.

At the start of August, the Welsh Government [eased the requirement on children](#) aged under 11 (therefore in primary schools) to socially distance.

This briefing sets out some relevant background and links to key sources and announcements.

2. Previous phases of school closures and reduced operations

2.1. Remote learning at home

Schools [closed for the provision of statutory education](#) on Friday 20 March 2020 on public health grounds due to COVID-19. They remained open for [vulnerable children and children of key workers](#) for whom there was no safe alternative childcare, as part of a 'new purpose' for schools, enabling the response to COVID-19. Following their closure to the vast majority of pupils, schools were expected to support pupils' learning from home, through the use of online resources such as [Hwb](#).

Senedd Research's [blog article of 8 April](#) gives more information about this phase.

2.2. 'Blended learning'

A gradual, staggered return to school began on Monday 29 June 2020. The purposes was for pupils to ['Check in, Catch up and Prepare'](#) for what the [Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams MS](#), [warned](#) was 'likely to be a very long and challenging autumn term'.

Due to the need for social distancing, this gradual return to school saw around one third of pupils present in school at any one time, with pupils having the opportunity to attend school on at least three occasions before the summer holidays. The majority of teaching and learning remained online as part of a 'blended learning' model.

Senedd Research's [blog article of 16 June](#) gives further information about this phase.

3. Back to school

The Minister for Education **announced on 9 July** that all pupils would return to schools on a full-time basis from the start of the new term on 1 September 2020, subject to coronavirus transmission conditions. The Welsh Government took this decision following advice from its **Technical Advisory Cell**, which recommended that:

schools in Wales [should] plan to open in September with 100% of pupils physically present on school sites, subject to a continuing, steady decline in the presence of COVID-19 in the community, and appropriate measures to protect staff and children.

The scientific advice noted the importance of the Test, Trace, Protect (TTP) scheme and recommended that the contact tracing programme should aim to trace an estimated 80% of contacts, at least 35% of which should be traced within 24 hours.

It also recommended that ‘preparations should always be in place to teach up to 100% of children remotely if needed’. The Minister’s letter to the Committee regarding this petition refers to the possibility of local lockdowns should conditions deteriorate. Blended learning is therefore very much being retained as a potential contingency plan if needed. However, as the First Minister said in **Plenary on 26 August** (paras 13-20), the Welsh Government is prioritising the reopening of schools in terms of what capacity is available in terms of easing restrictions:

... the Cabinet decided last week to reserve the bulk of the headroom we have available to assist in the safe and successful reopening of schools in Wales as from 1 September....

3.1. Practicalities

The Welsh Government has issued **operational guidance** to schools on managing pupils’ return as well as **guidance on learning**. There is also a **FAQs section** on its website.

The Welsh Government has allowed for a period of flexibility in recognition that schools may want to focus on priority year groups, such as those new to secondary schools, those sitting exams next summer or those in reception classes. This is allowing time, up to a fortnight, for any planning and reorganisation with pupils returning on different dates. The Welsh Government has also **modified statutory curriculum requirements** so that schools are only required to use their reasonable endeavours to deliver the full curriculum. This modification, issued under the Coronavirus Act 2020, lasts until 30 September 2020, and will be kept under review by the Minister.

The **Welsh Government announced on 31 July** that it was relaxing the requirement for social distancing among children aged under 11. It **said** this ‘reflects the scientific evidence, which shows

the risk of transmission is lower among this age group'. However, the Welsh Government added it is very important that older children and young adults continue to maintain social distancing as the level of risk is different in these age groups.

On 26 August, the Welsh Government updated its position on face coverings in schools. Face coverings are recommended for use in secondary schools but not primary schools. The Welsh Government said that, while scientific advice indicates that face coverings are likely to be of little value in children under the age of 11 years, they are recommended for all members of the public over 11 years in indoor settings in which social distancing cannot be maintained, including secondary schools.

4. Balancing the risk of transmission of the virus in schools against the harm to children and young people from not attending school

As the Minister's letter outlines, the risk of transmission of COVID-19 in schools 'have to be carefully balanced with the negative health impacts of being out of school'. The Welsh Government's operational guidance states:

Taking into account the improved situation we now find ourselves in, the balance of risk is now overwhelmingly in favour of children returning to school. Being out of school is detrimental for children's cognitive and academic development and their health and well-being, particularly for disadvantaged children; and, can have an impact both in the short and longer term. We know that lower academic achievement also translates into long-term economic costs. We also know that school closures have affected some families' ability to work. By getting our learners back into school as quickly and as safely as possible will bring positive benefits on a number of fronts not least their mental and emotional well-being.

On 23 August, the four Chief Medical Officers across the UK issued a joint statement on the evidence of risks and benefits to health from schools and childcare settings reopening. This has been interpreted as reinforcing the decision to reopen schools.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.