

Continuity of schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 29 Medi 2020
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Reference: RS20/13467-1

This briefing provides information for the Committee's consideration of two petitions: P-05-1011 and P-05-1015

Petition Number: P-05-1011

Petition title: Virtual On-line teacher-led lessons to be provided for all school children

Text of petition: There is a strong possibility that social distancing will remain in place beyond September when the new school year starts. Schools will struggle to accommodate all children returning to school. We are calling on the Welsh Government to work with Local Authorities and Teachers Unions to find a National solution for all children to receive the education they need to progress their education. This will require a combination of school and home-based learning through virtual classrooms.

Additional information: If social distancing has to be maintained beyond September the Welsh Government (WG) needs to start developing a national strategy to educate our children and to provide support for children that might need shielding. As is likely that only 1/3 of children can be in school at any one time, therefore, a combination of lessons provided in school with virtual on-line lessons will be needed supported by Learning Management Systems.



Teachers, schools and Local Authorities will need support and funding in overcoming, setup cost for learning platforms, safeguarding issues but also in delivering of lessons online which might require different skill sets by teachers.

It is not good enough for the WG to wash its hands of this issue. Countries like Singapore, China are embracing these technologies due to Covid restrictions on schools. Wales needs to be on the vanguard, leading the way to ensure our children receive the best education during these difficult times.

Petition Number: P-05-1015

Petition title: Categorise schools as critical infrastructure

Text of Petition: Categorise schools as critical infrastructure.

With test, track and trace in place and community transmission across Wales extremely low nationwide, school closures should not happen again in Wales.

This is essential for children's mental wellbeing, their education, and any safeguarding issues.

Additional information: Should any schools be required to close due to a severe outbreak of C19 they must immediately be able to deliver all lessons live and online by way of an education contingency plan. Furthermore they also need to ensure that all children are present in registration and lessons, with any absences followed up in the same as they would in school ensuring children's safeguarding and continuation of education.

*This method of education must only continue for as shortest time as possible before all children must then re attend school as normal.

Schools specifically for children with SEN including disabled children should not close and should have a contingency to continue to remain open even throughout localised lockdowns.

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.
- The Welsh Government's priority is to 'keep schools open where possible'. In the event of future disruption to schooling at a local level, the Welsh Government says it

will 'clearly state our expectation that schools do all they can to ensure continuity of learning'.

- The Welsh Government also says it has been 'working with stakeholders from across the sector to develop guidance on the use of models of blended learning that may include both face to face teaching and online provision'.
- This briefing sets out some relevant background and links to key sources and announcements.

2. Previous phases of school closures and reduced operations: March to July 2020

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: September 2020

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.

The scientific advice 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 petition P-05-1015 refers to the **possibility of 'future disruption to schooling at a local level'** 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 allowed for a period of flexibility in recognition that schools might 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 allowed time, the first fortnight of the new term, 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. From 14 September, face coverings have been required in shops and other indoor premises.

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

4.1. Keeping 'schools open where possible'

As a previous letter from the Minister outlined, the risks 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.

The Minister's letter regarding petition P-05-1015 'Categorise schools as critical infrastructure' reiterates the **First Minister's priority to 'keep schools open where possible'**. It also recognises the 'possibility of future disruption to schooling at a local level.

At the time of writing, schools have remained open in Caerphilly County Borough despite the local lockdown with the Welsh Government saying 'keeping schools and colleges open if possible remains our top priority'.

4.2.The contingency of blended learning

The Minister's letter regarding petition P-05-1011 'Virtual On-line teacher-led lessons to be provided for all school children' reiterates that schools would open fully to all pupils in September. It refers to the guidance on learning in the autumn term and also states:

Additionally there is **planning being undertaken to cope with a range of scenarios that would include partial or full closure of schools if circumstances required.**

Officials have been working with stakeholders from across the sector to develop guidance on the use of models of blended learning that may **include both face to face teaching and online provision.**

The Regional Consortia have also developed **models and examples of delivering blended learning** that have been made available to all Local Authorities and schools to support them to continue to provide consistent and quality learning for all learners in Wales, should the need arise to use these routes. [bold is Senedd Research's emphasis]

The Minister's letter also says the delivery of learning remains the responsibility of local authorities and schools and it is for them to ensure provision that meets the needs of their learners.

5. Welsh Parliament action

The Children, Young People and Education Committee have held several scrutiny sessions with the Minister for Education regarding the disruption and continuity of education as part of its inquiry into the **inquiry into the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on children and young people in Wales.**

These sessions took place on **19 March, 28 April** and **7 July.**

The CYPE Committee has also commissioned **research on approaches to remote teaching and learning** from Dr Sofya Lyakhova at Swansea University under the **Senedd Research COVID-19 Expert Register scheme.**

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.