

Lynne Neagle MS – Chair, Children, Young People and  
Education Committee

John Griffiths MS – Chair, Equalities, Local Government and  
Communities Committee

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7 October 2020

Dear Lynne and John

**Inquiry into COVID-19 and its impact on matters relating to the Public Accounts  
Committee's remit**

As part of the Committee's work looking at the impact of Covid-19 on matters relating to our remit, we held an evidence session with the Welsh Government on 3 August, specifically considering education issues. Following that session, I wrote to the Director General seeking clarification on a number of issues and the detailed response was considered in Committee on 28 September.

Members were content with the response, appreciating that issues have moved on within this sector since we took our evidence.

However, we are concerned with a number of issues, as set out below.

Broadband at permanent Traveller sites

A number of local authorities have permanent Traveller sites with no broadband connections. We are concerned about what action the Welsh Government is taking to ensure local authorities prioritise broadband connections for these sites (detailed on page 3 of the letter).

Absence of permanent Gypsy and Traveller sites

The response makes it clear that not all local authorities have a permanent Gypsy & Traveller site. Members raised concerns that the implications of this are that local



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authorities are not fulfilling their responsibilities as contained in the Planning Act, which requires all local authorities to have such a site.

Low response rate to service provision to Gypsy and Traveller sites

The letter refers to a survey undertaken in 2018 which asked every local authority with authorised socially-tenanted Gypsy and Traveller sites about the provision of a wide range of services, including access to basic services such as water, electricity and gas. This survey included fixed telephone and internet services.

We were disappointed to see that only 6 local authorities responded. We therefore fear that only half of the permanent sites have any form of internet access at all. This is of particular concern not only given the wider implications of this for the rights of Gypsy & Traveller communities, but also given that Gypsy & Traveller children are amongst the lowest performing groups of children in Wales.

I have shared the response with you both, alongside our concerns, and ask that you consider the issues and keep under review as part of your Committee's work.

Yours sincerely,



**Nick Ramsay MS**  
**Chair**

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg / We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.



**Tracey Burke**

Cyfarwyddwr Cyffredinol / Director General

Y Grŵp Addysg a Gwasanaethau Cyhoeddus  
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Llywodraeth Cymru  
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Nick Ramsay MS  
Chair  
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08 September 2020

Dear Mr Ramsay,

Following my attendance at Public Accounts Committee on 3 August, and your subsequent follow up letter of 11 August, please find enclosed my response to the points raised.

Please let me know if the Committee would like further information or clarification.

Yours sincerely

Tracey Burke



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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.

**Public Accounts Committee meeting  
3 August 2020  
Follow-up Actions**

- 1) The most recent figures on the take up, by local authority, of the extra funding available as part of the ‘Stay Safe. Stay Learning’ programme, (to support digitally excluded learners during the current pandemic) to ensure traveller sites are equipped with broadband.**

As part of our ‘Stay safe. Stay learning’ programme, support for digitally excluded learners in maintained schools was mobilised through the wider Hwb EdTech programme.

The Minister for Education committed up to £3 million to support digitally excluded learners in maintained schools where there was no existing provision in place from their school or local authority. Working with their schools, local authorities utilised the funding to provide digitally excluded learners with repurposed school devices and 4G MiFi connectivity where required. Based on the demand identified by schools and local authorities, there have been 10,848 MiFi devices and 9,717 software licences funded by the Welsh Government and deployed across Wales. A high level breakdown of that take up by local authority is available as follows:

<b>LA</b>	<b>MiFi Provision</b>	<b>Software Licences</b>
Blaenau Gwent	100	1000
Bridgend	310	559
Caerphilly	842	800
Cardiff	2500	-
Carmarthen	300	750
Ceredigion	115	-
Conwy	226	123
Denbigh	125	-
Flintshire	165	-
Gwynedd	170	-
Isle of Anglesey	125	240
Merthyr	250	-
Monmouth	200	300
Newport	1300	800
Neath Port Talbot	200	1094
Pembrokeshire	300	-
Powys	600	700
Rhondda Cynon Taf	1400	1400

Swansea	500	65
Torfaen	560	1356
Vale of Glamorgan	350	230
Wrexham	210	300
Totals	10848	9717

The process has been managed by the local authorities and schools themselves and local authorities have engaged with their schools to identify digitally excluded learners. Therefore, we do not hold centrally recorded information for this specific intervention in terms of the onward distribution to families, children and young people and in the case of your specific question, traveller sites. However, I set out below the specific actions we have been taking in regard to traveller sites and connectivity including during the COVID-19 pandemic, working with a Gypsy, Roma and Traveller stakeholder group drawn from Local Authority and third sector service providers.

**2) Details of which local authorities had permanent traveller sites with no [Broadband] connections and what action the Welsh Government is undertaking to ensure local authorities prioritise broadband connections for these sites.**

Not every local authority has a permanent traveller site and the number of sites and pitches can fluctuate over time. In 2018, we asked every local authority with Authorised Socially-rented Gypsy and Traveller sites about the provision of a wide range of services, including access to basic services such as water, electricity and gas. This survey included fixed telephone and internet services. This was not meant as a monitoring exercise, more as an opportunity to identify effective practice or potential gaps in provision. Local authorities responded within that context.

Responses were received from six local authorities covering eight sites and 164 pitches. No response was received from eight local authorities with sites, covering 14 sites and 239 pitches. Five of the respondent local authorities to this survey had taken action to provide phone/internet lines for residents.

The funding of fixed lines within sites is an eligible cost under the Welsh Government Gypsy and Traveller Capital Sites Grant. Over the past four years we have encouraged local authorities to develop and submit projects for the funding to support a range of initiatives, including the provision of broadband. As part of the funding we expect local authorities to evidence engagement with residents. Unfortunately the take up has not been as high as we would have hoped.

Since the *Designing Gypsy and Traveller Sites* guidance was last revised in 2015, many more services have become digital-first or digital-only and access to the internet is becoming part of essential services for citizens. We are aware that not all sites have good mobile data signals, available Wi-Fi, or broadband at the level of individual pitches.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we convened a Gypsy, Roma and Traveller stakeholder group drawn from Local Authority and third sector service providers. Stakeholders reported a range of issues around access to basic utilities, deliveries and access to services. A number of stakeholders reported significant issues with registering for and accessing services online. The inability to do so had an impact on education, obtaining benefits, seeking employment and accessing essential health messages.

In response to these concerns, officials commenced additional detailed mapping work on local authority sites to understand the provision of essential services to residents on sites and officials have written again to all local authorities in Wales to invite them to submit funding applications for projects that focus on overcoming infrastructure barriers to internet access, at up to 100% of eligible costs.

As with the exercise undertaken in 2018, our current information gathering on services available on sites faces considerable challenges on obtaining complete, consistent and clear information that would support targeted interventions. Of the current 402 local authority pitches across Wales, 19% are known to have “poor access”, 25% may have some access (which may include good mobile data signal) and 19% may have “good” access, which may include infrastructure needed for broadband. For 37% of pitches, we have insufficient information to understand if or how residents might access the internet.

Taking account the challenges and lessons learned from the 2018 information gathering exercise we are working more closely with local authorities to identify what forms of internet access, including high-speed mobile data, site-wide Wi-Fi, fixed telephone/broadband lines are present at each site and what gaps in essential infrastructure and/or barriers to uptake exist.

In addition, beginning in September, the Gypsy Traveller Forum – the Welsh Local Authority Gypsy and Traveller service provider network is planning a task and finish group to share good practice and develop strategies to re-engage Gypsy and Traveller learners and their families in education post lockdown.

### **3) How is the Welsh Government supporting schools in taking forward the requirements set out in the additional guidance bearing in mind the speed with which this guidance will need to be implemented?**

Throughout the summer, Officials have engaged with all key stakeholders, including trade unions, Directors of Education, head teachers and transport operators on [the operational guidance](#) for the autumn.

Recognising schools would need time to plan for learners returning, the Minister for Education provided schools with additional time at the start of the term to plan and prepare for all pupils to return on 14<sup>th</sup> September, this decision was made reflecting on the views of key stakeholders. We have continued to work closely with trade unions the profession and local authorities and the feedback received has been that schools have been working hard to develop their plans to enable the return of all

learners in the autumn. Schools have started to welcome learners back and all schools have arrangements in place for the return of all learners by 14 September.

We have shared live examples of the work some of our schools have done to prepare through social media. We have also worked closely with Estyn to provide further examples of how schools are preparing for the start of term. These are all accessible via Estyn's website.

Over the summer we have taken forward a reassurance campaign which has provided various material to parents, schools and local authorities. Responses received from local authority Directors of Education and comments from parents assure us that these have been positively received.

#### **4) Will the Welsh Government be providing any further guidance on the operation of schools in the autumn schools?**

- **Clarification on exactly what social distancing means in the context of primary schools – Does the guidance issued in July apply to primary schools?**

As part of the 21 day review of lockdown restrictions, the First Minister recently took the decision to relax the position on children under 11 having to maintain a 2 metres distance from each other or from adults. However, this does not mean that they are no longer subject to other restrictions on minimising contacts. It is simply a realistic balance of risk for those who live with and care for these children, who routinely are likely to need physical contact as part of everyday care. This age group must still observe the social restrictions on meeting other family groups or wider gatherings, and it is still up to parents to assess and evaluate the risks of their children's family and social contacts. It is still important to continue with staggered start times for example to minimise the mixing of parents for example at the school gate.

Consistent groups help reduce the risk of transmission by limiting the number of learners and staff in contact with each other to only those within the group. It is accepted that learners and especially the youngest learners, may not be able to socially distance from staff or from each other and consistent groups provide an additional protective measure. Maintaining distinct contact groups that do not mix makes it quicker and easier, in the event of a positive case, to identify those who may need to self-isolate and to keep that number as low as possible.

The use of small contact groups brings a number of educational and operational challenges which restricts the normal operation of schools. This is the case in both primary and secondary schools, but is particularly difficult in secondary schools. However, given the decrease in the prevalence of COVID-19 and the plan for the autumn term for the resumption of the full range of curriculum subjects, schools may need to change the emphasis on contact groups, increasing the size of the groups, but staying within their system of controls and building into their risk-assessments.

The latest updated guidance published on 2 September remains current and we currently have no plans to change our operational guidance in relation to the advice

for this specific age group. However, if the evidence changes, we will revisit our guidance and update as appropriate. The guidance already makes clear that minimising contacts and mixing between people reduces transmission of COVID-19. It also recognises that for younger learners the emphasis will be on separating groups as it is accepted that learners and especially the youngest learners cannot socially distance from staff or from each other and consistent groups provide an additional protective measure. Maintaining distinct contact groups that do not mix makes it quicker and easier, in the event of a positive case, to identify those who may need to self-isolate and to keep that number as low as possible.

**- Clarification on Free School Meal / school breakfast club / afterschool club provision from September.**

Continuing social distancing requirements and limited space for food preparation, serving and eating will result in varied school catering provision during the autumn term. Discussions with local authority catering leads indicate that some local authorities intend to provide more or less a full service with hot meals (although with simplified menus, adaptations to take account of the need for social distancing, staggered meal-times and sometimes delivery of meals to classrooms), whilst other local authorities have indicated that they will not be resuming their catering operations, at least during the first few weeks of term. Where local authorities are not able to provide pupils with a meal in school, the alternative provision for pupils who are in receipt of free school meals will vary. We understand that at least one local authority plans to deliver food parcels to pupils' home addresses, whilst others are considering cash and voucher payments in lieu or packed lunches.

The Welsh Government made an additional £40million available to local authorities to ensure provision of free school meals right through the school summer holidays until 31 August 2020. A further £1.28million has also been made available for the same purpose during the first two weeks of the autumn term whilst some schools are operating a staggered return to school. After that, local authorities will be expected to fund all free school meal provision from existing budgets.

Our operational guidance for schools states that local authorities, working with their schools, must consider resuming free breakfast schemes in primary schools and should consider resuming any other breakfast and after school provision, whether this is provision offered by the school or run out of the school by a private provider.

Where a primary school ran a free school breakfast scheme prior to the COVID 19 outbreak, they are still under a legal duty to provide the free school breakfast scheme at the start of the new school term. Local authorities, as well as school governing bodies and head teachers must have regard to the statutory guidance when considering whether to re-open free breakfast schemes in primary schools. We would expect that as schools should be open to all pupils full-time from the beginning of September breakfast clubs should operate as normal, unless it would be unreasonable for them to do so. It is not possible to say what will or will not be unreasonable in any particular situation and local authorities will consider a range of factors, including:



- demand for the provision of free breakfast in the maintained school;
- availability/suitability of a venue to undertake the provision of free breakfast;
- availability/suitability of facilities within the maintained school to provide the provision;
- availability / suitability of staff to supervise the breakfast provision.

Local authorities will also need to consider the health and safety of pupils and staff and social distancing requirements.

**5) We are concerned that in the current climate, schools that are not performing well will need to have been assessed and improvements made in a more-timely manner to minimise detriment to pupils. Even though you stated a wealth of good practice has been prepared and shared through other means, there remains the challenge of encouraging schools to take that practice up. Are you able to reassure us that underperforming schools will be addressed?**

I acknowledged the challenge the pandemic brought to facilitating and enabling continuity of learning. As we go into September, we plan to state clearly our expectation that schools do all they can to ensure continuity of learning under future conditions of disruption. As part of wider operational and risk-management guidance that is being issued, schools will be expected to set out in their plans pupils' entitlement to contact and support, the frequency and duration of teaching and learning sessions, and the amount of time pupils are expected to spend in independent study. Schools' plans will be scrutinised by their regional consortia and Local Authorities, and monitored as part of the work Estyn do in the coming year.

Schools will also be expected to set out the curriculum that will be available to learners involved in the [Recruit, Recover, Raise Standards](#) programme and the general curriculum available to all learners in the case of disruption to normal operation.

Where schools do not provide appropriate plans or do not deliver the requirements of the *Recruit, Recover, Raise Standards* programme they will be supported by their regional consortia and Local Authorities to address any issues. We will work with local authorities on the protocols to identify and address underperformance and with regional consortia on their provision of monitoring, support and Professional Learning as appropriate to the needs of the school.

Local authorities have now received the grants and the school-level allocations, as part of the additional £29 million provided for the recruitment of extra teachers and teaching assistants. We are working with the Education Workforce Council, regional consortia and local authorities to get the recruitment programme up and running. Whilst we expect schools to be focused on the day-to-day business of operating under changed conditions for a couple of weeks, we then want to see recruitment as a priority for head teachers and local authorities.

**6) Childcare settings - What is the Welsh Government doing to assess the requirement for these to be operational again by September as parents need assurances that childcare will be available.**

Since my attendance at Committee there have been a number of developments in relation to the provision of and funding for childcare services in Wales.

On 4 August, the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services announced that provision under the Childcare Offer for Wales would be restarting from September. Local authorities began processing applications from 10 August. We know access to the funded childcare under the Offer is key to supporting both working families and to providing childcare settings with certainty on demand and funding. Alongside this, we published updated guidance for childcare settings on 5 August enabling them to further increase their operations.

The updated guidance takes account of the latest scientific evidence regarding the transmission of the virus amongst children, and the announcements regarding social distancing for children under 11. We have removed the restriction on contact group sizes in light of this, and there is an explicit reference in there to the operation of wrap around and out of school childcare.

On 12 August we also announced the Childcare Provider Grant which will provide funding to those childcare settings which have been unable to access the wider coronavirus support schemes. This opened for applications on 24 August, with a condition that grant recipients are open and providing childcare in September. We are also undertaking a health-check survey of the childcare sector to get a better understanding of their current operations, their plans for the autumn and any issues or concerns they have about the coming months. This survey is now closed and headline results are expected in the next week.

We will be working with the education and childcare sectors to ensure as many of these settings open as possible and to support them into the future. The latest figures show that of the 3,615 childcare settings registered in March 2020 (before the pandemic), 73% are currently open.