



Ein cyf/Our ref: MA/KW/3706/20

Lynne Neagle MS
Chair
Children, Young People and Education Committee
Senedd Cymru

3 November 2020

Dear Lynne,

Thank you for your recent correspondence to Welsh Ministers requesting clarification on a few issues relating to the current Firebreak Lockdown in Wales. I will be responding as your questions are associated with the Education portfolio. For ease of reference, I will respond to each of your questions individually as set out below.

Was a Children's Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) produced to inform the decision to introduce a two week fire break from 23 October? Please can a copy be shared with the Committee and published?

An Integrated Impact Assessment was published on our website last week outlining the firebreak measures taken by the Welsh Government, including attendance at school and further education. A copy is available [here](#).

What rationale underpins the decision to re-open as normal, after the half-term, primary, special, and secondary schools for children in years seven and eight, but not for other secondary school or college year groups (many of which will be undertaking examinations during this academic year and whose well-being may already have been affected by the pandemic's impact to date)?

The latest evidence from our Technical Advisory Group which helped inform decisions related to the fire-break is published on our website and can be accessed [here](#).

The fire-break is the shortest we can make it, but that means across Wales we all have to play our part for it to have the maximum impact on reducing the prevalence of the virus. Scientific evidence suggests that though limiting attendance at schools is likely to have a moderate impact on slowing the spread of the coronavirus, when combined with other restrictions, this will make a significant contribution to reducing the rate of transmissions. Therefore restricting the numbers of learners in our schools is part of the contribution to our wider, national effort. During this time we are doing everything we can to maximise education, minimise disruption and keep Wales learning. Schools have learnt lessons from the first lockdown and have put in place arrangements in case of disrupted learning this term.

In balancing the scientific and medical advice, as a Government we decided that during the second week of the fire-break primary, special schools and learners in years 7 and 8 pupils will receive face to face learning. Learners will also be able to attend to sit exams.

For those learners in years 9 -13 we appreciate these are extremely difficult times and children and young people and their families will be anxious about their futures. That is why during the second week of the fire-break these learners will continue to receive their education through blended learning. These year groups are better able to undertake self-directed learning, and they will be supported for the week by their teachers who will be in the classroom.

How was the Welsh Government's duty to give due regard to article 28 of the UNCRC applied to the decision that year 9 upwards would be educated at home?

As outlined earlier, an Integrated Impact Assessment was published on our website last week outlining the firebreak measures taken by the Welsh Government, including attendance at school and further education. A copy is available [here](#).

What guidance and support has/will be issued to ensure that students in years 9-13 and/or college receive quality online provision after the half-term break?

The Welsh Government issued [Learning guidance](#) for the firebreak on Wednesday 21 October. This was published after discussion with stakeholders and reflected their comments. The guidance includes expectations of what learning should encompass, and what teaching should cover for this period, particularly for school years 9-13 who are not on school premises. The guidance also includes resource web links for schools to support them in their remote learning offer.

We also published blended learning [guidance](#) for colleges and other post-16 providers, developed in partnership with Estyn, Jisc and sector representatives through our blended learning working group. We are continuing to work with the sector to help ensure that relevant guidance is in place, including in response to feedback from UCU about challenges faced by FE lecturers.

We provided £3.2m capital funding for devices, connectivity and software for digitally excluded learners earlier this year, and will shortly be announcing further funding secured through the Star Chamber. Post-16 providers can also access advice and support through Jisc, which supports the use of technology in the FE and HE sectors.

What specific arrangements have the Welsh Government, in cooperation with the higher education sector, ensured are in place in relation to student well-being, support and accommodation during this two week fire break, and beyond?

As recognised in your letter, we have allocated an additional £10m funding for universities in Wales, to support student mental health services and financial hardship funds during this unprecedented time. Priorities for this funding include increasing capacity in students' unions and universities to provide support services for students and staff, including support through the medium of Welsh, and to provide support and services, including food services, for students required to self-isolate. The funding will also be directed at ensuring extra provision is in place for learning support for vulnerable students, those with disabilities, and those with caring responsibilities, including helping to address digital poverty.

From the £10m allocation, HEFCW has allocated an additional £900k to the £1.8m they have allocated previously for the implementation of institutional well-being and health strategy plans. HEFCW has allocated £50k to NUS Wales to support students' unions in providing a range of student services, and a further £50k to institutions to support their students' unions directly. Many young people attending university will be facing financial

hardship as a result of the pandemic and HEFCW has allocated £5m to hardship support for full-time students. A further £2.65m has been allocated to widening access students, addressing our steer to support students more likely to be adversely impacted by the pandemic.

This funding was released to universities at the end of October 2020, during the firebreak period. Further details regarding the funding can be found in [HEFCW Circular W20/32HE](#), published on the 22 October.

What arrangements have the Welsh Government put in place to work, coordinate and liaise with higher education providers? What significant issues or risks have providers raised with the Welsh Government in relation to both the fire break and longer term measures, and which of these remain to be resolved?

Higher education providers are continuing to offer a model of online and in-person teaching, and students continue to be able to access education facilities in universities such as libraries.

Keeping students engaged in their education and remaining in their current place of residence was an important goal in planning for the firebreak, in order to minimise the risk of an uncontrolled exodus of students from universities which might worsen spread of the virus. While incidents of Covid-19 have risen in the student population, evidence shows this is taking place outside the teaching and learning environment.

Therefore we worked with colleagues within the university sector to ensure that maintaining access to in-person education opportunities and facilities as part of a blended approach with online learning would be workable during the firebreak period, and ensured that our regulations would allow for this.

Major issues in respect of universities and the fire break have been resolved given the continuity in our approach. However, as the committee will be aware, we are still finalising plans to organise the conclusion of term, and to enable students to return to their non-term time household if they so wish. We intend to finalise and share details of these plans soon.

What work will take place during this two week fire break to monitor and assess its impact on children and young people (including those in further and higher education)? What plans are in place to learn lessons – and inform the principles that should be adopted – for decisions about any potential future fire breaks?

We continue to work closely with key stakeholders including local authorities, trade unions and schools to discuss the impact of the fire break and what this means moving forward. Last week I met with Directors of Education, trade unions and the WLGA to discuss this very issue. We have sent out a clear message that where possible all learners need to be in the school environment, however we recognise we all have a part to play in responding to the national effort of reducing the R rate. Local Authorities and School leaders are doing everything possible to ensure effective measures are in place to enable schools to continue face to face learning and I applaud them for their resilience and hard work.

We also receive updates from various sources such as the babies in lockdown report and from our Vulnerable Children and Young People external stakeholder group and frontline professionals to inform our understanding of the impact on children and young people. I am also, of course, working closely with the Children's Commissioner for Wales to ensure a flow of information on issues facing Children and Young People.

We are also allowing learners who have exams during the firebreak period to attend college for their exams, and regulations are in place to ensure that vulnerable learners can continue to attend college where this is important for their mental and emotional health. In Further Education, most learners are working towards qualifications, and many are studying vocational courses which require practical, hands-on learning. Our guidance therefore gives colleges as much flexibility as possible to plan and manage their approach using blended learning models, so that the time in college and online can reflect the specific needs of learners and the courses they are studying.

We are planning a survey of learners in colleges, sixth forms, work-based and adult learning later this term to help understand the impact of Covid-19 on their educational progress and wellbeing, and this will help us to define principles and guidance for future delivery.

Can you confirm the main factors and sources of advice you will be taking into account when deciding on arrangements for awarding qualifications in 2021 and the timescale for making and announcing this decision?

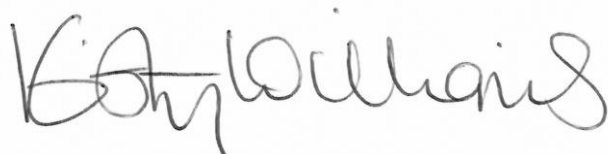
I have confirmed that I will make an announcement on our approach to qualifications in 2021 on 10 November when learners in exam cohorts are back in school or college and have their teachers around to provide support and advice.

To support me in making this decision I will be drawing on the interim report for the Independent Review that I commissioned to look at the arrangements put in place for summer 2020 and the lessons that can be learnt from this to inform our approach to qualifications in 2021. In light of the continuing disruption I also requested further advice from Qualifications Wales about the options now available, with a clear focus on equality and deliverability.

It is also critical that we hear from learners themselves, as well as professionals, in informing the way forward so we can learn from their experiences in taking qualifications this year and in preparing for them next year. I will be undertaking further engagement with learners and the workforce next week ahead of making an announcement on 10 November.

I hope these responses assist with your Committee's ongoing scrutiny of the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people. Should you require any further information, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely



Kirsty Williams AS/MS
Y Gweinidog Addysg
Minister for Education

cc

Mark Drakeford MS, First Minister
Eluned Morgan MS, Minister for Mental Health, Well-being and Welsh Language
Vaughan Gething MS, Minister for Health and Social Services
Julie Morgan MS, Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services