

## CYPE(5)-02-21- Paper to note 3

**Kirsty Williams AS/MS**  
**Y Gweinidog Addysg**  
**Minister for Education**

Ein cyf/Our ref MA/KW/4547/20  
Lynne Neagle MS  
Chair  
Children, Young People and Education Committee  
Welsh Parliament



**Llywodraeth Cymru**  
**Welsh Government**

14 January 2021

Dear Lynne,

Further to my attendance at CYPE Committee on 26 November, and as part of your Committee's ongoing inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people, thank you for your recent correspondence highlighting areas which you intend to revisit this term and seeking clarification on a number of points. I will respond to each of your questions individually, as set out below.

### Steps being taken with regard to all pupils having access to the right digital equipment and infrastructure as part of blended learning

I recognise the challenge facing all learners, teachers and leaders as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and acknowledge that digital responses and solutions may not be as suitable for some as they are for others. We have therefore created a Blended Learning Working Group, consisting of officers from Welsh Government, Local Authorities and the Regional Consortia, and tasked them with addressing issues of equity of access to learning in periods of disruption.

The Working Group has explored how we can best gain an insight into the existing blended learning provision, solutions and guidance, including digital and non-digital, from a central, regional and local perspective. The Group have identified five system level challenges, and we are now mobilising national engagement with each local authority to establish a national baseline of the current provision at school and Local Authority level.

Schools in Wales are already well provisioned with access to digital services and infrastructure through the Hwb EdTech programme. The Hwb platform continues to play a crucial role in supporting the delivery of education during this incredibly challenging period. In November, there were over 2.9 million logins (a 148% increase on the previous year), and over 9.5 million page views (a 143% increase on the previous year). Over 99% of schools continue to be actively engaged in using the platform.

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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.

Through the wider Hwb EdTech programme, we have already seen the distribution over 74,000 end-user devices to local authorities, with the remaining 58,000 ordered devices expected over the coming weeks.

I have also committed up to £3 million (from within the £30 million 2020/21 Hwb EdTech capital funding allocation) to specifically 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 across Wales.

#### Clarification on the interface between Track, Trace and Protect (TTP) and schools and how consistently any advice is being provided across Wales

I have welcomed the weekly publication of data in relation to COVID-19 confirmed cases in schools and settings by Public Health Wales. I also continue to receive daily updates from the school early warning reports which includes details on those self-isolating. The situation in Welsh schools is an evolving situation, just like in other settings.

We are work with schools, local authorities and trade unions to ensure we are learning the lessons from the first half term and will continue to keep the guidance under review. I have published additional assets, which includes details on self-isolation and what this means in practice to further support schools and Local Authorities to ensure schools continue to operate safely and provide the learning necessary for all learners.

We continue to communicate the importance of self-isolation following a positive test and continue to work closely with colleagues in the contact tracing team to make sure this is happening on the ground.

Of course, we also have the offer of serial testing in schools and further education settings from January 2021, this goes some way to reducing the number of children and staff having to self-isolate. Whilst testing alone cannot eradicate the risks associated with contracting and transmitting COVID-19, testing will help to mitigate the risk to those in the school environment if taken alongside other current infection prevention control measures, including appropriate social distancing and hand hygiene measures.

#### Information regarding the depth and extent of consultation with the sector in England with regards to the decision on the approach to awarding A-Levels in 2021

Prior to making the announcement, on 10 November, that there would be no exams for learners taking GCSEs, AS and A levels in Wales in summer 2021, I held discussions with the Higher Education sector – this included universities based outside of Wales and members of the Russell Group. These representatives provided assurances that adopting a different approach to the awarding of qualifications within Wales, when compared with those awarded in other UK nations, would not disadvantage Welsh learners in terms of their application and admission to university courses.

During these discussions, universities highlighted their priorities as: early decision-making, a robust process, clear communication, and ensuring that opportunities for teaching and learning in order to cover the required content to support progression were maximised. This engagement with university representatives has continued as the detailed approach to assessment arrangements has been developed, UCAS is also a key member of our stakeholder reference group.

Further information on the considerations being given to the need to “recover standards” in the qualifications system, beyond the 2021 exam series

2020 was an exceptional year for qualifications, but this year is exceptional in different ways – not only have learners in exam cohorts been out of school and college during the summer term, but they have also already experienced inconsistencies in their learning experience. As such, grade outcomes in 2021 will overall align with 2020 outcomes, to recognise the loss of learning time and overall disruption – this is in line with the UK Government’s approach to grade outcomes in 2021 and will ensure that learners in Wales are not disadvantaged in comparison to learners from elsewhere in the UK. Qualifications Wales continues to work closely with the other UK regulators to maintain confidence and credibility in the qualifications system.

The Welsh Government should review its guidance to the Higher Education sector to ensure it is clearer that institutions are able—and empowered—to organise or facilitate lawful, safe and COVID-secure social activity on campus, and to recognise the link between learning and well-being

In March I established a Higher Education Task and Finish Group with stakeholders from across the sector with student and trade union representatives and the support of public health colleagues. I am very grateful to that group and its Chair, Ben Calvert, for their continued work and support. We have worked together over the past year to ensure we consider the needs of the whole university community alongside the need to protect public health. The work of this group has allowed the Welsh Government to issue guidance to the higher education sector on COVID-19 and to revise and refresh our guidance as the position has changed. The guidance covers keeping both staff and students safe and a revised version that reflects the alert levels will be published shortly.

I recognise that this is not a normal year for students and I have made an additional £10 million available to support activities such as increased mental health services and student financial hardship funds and will help universities bolster their student support services, including food services for students who are required to self-isolate. The funding is also available to help increase capacity in students’ unions and universities to provide advice and support for both students and staff, with a focus on mental health support and suicide-safer measures. This includes online services and support through the medium of Welsh.

The Welsh Government Guidance to Higher Education has been clear that they should facilitate lawful social activities to support students during this difficult time. However, we need to be clear that in the current climate, the safest social interactions will need to be virtual or restricted to interactions within a student’s household or contact group. The move to the new alert level system has allowed the guidance group to review the guidance document to ensure universities, accommodation providers and student unions are able to support students lawfully and how that changes with the alert levels.

Prior to the end of term the Welsh Government worked with the UK Government to deliver a mass lateral flow testing pilot at the majority of our universities to offer asymptomatic testing to students and staff, with Cardiff University and Cardiff Metropolitan using the Cardiff University Screening Service. The data from this pilot is not yet available.

In relation to the spring term, in December, I asked our universities to delay the return to in person teaching until after 11 January and to make decisions in relation to their own students and staff and determine which students need to come back for in person learning when. Universities had already planned to continue with blended learning through the spring

term and universities will commence online learning as planned and universities will communicate plans to their students.

This flexible approach has given universities in Wales the autonomy to make decisions based on the needs of their students and the need to deliver high quality academic qualifications. This has allowed universities to prioritise students with practical elements that require in-person teaching and access to on campus facilities as well as those on placements and the future workforce we need for essential public service delivery such as allied health care, teaching, veterinary, applied sciences, social services and many others. I have also been clear that universities must also consider, but are also best placed to determine how to support, the needs of the large cohort of commuter students in Wales and those students who did not travel for the holiday period and for whom access to on campus facilities is essential.

For those students who have travelled for the holiday, the Welsh Government has issued clear messages that students should not to return term time accommodation until their university lets them know that in person teaching will resume.

In light of the recent increased restrictions, I have worked with the Guidance group and Vice Chancellors to consider the impact of that decision on our plans in Wales. I am confident that the plans we have in place for a staggered return are robust and our universities will be asking students to return over a period of four weeks from 11 January. This will mean that students will be supported to return at the appropriate time to access essential in person teaching based on the academic needs and the needs of the students.

As students and staff return to university they will again be able to access asymptomatic testing. Our guidance asks students to access a test as close to their return as possible, reduce contacts including within your household between tests and then access a second test. This should provide significant reassurances that students returning to term time accommodation will not put their friends, contact groups, university and the wider community at risk. If students choose not to access a test they are expected to self-isolate for 10 days on return to term time accommodation. Again the data from the asymptomatic testing will be valuable evidence on how we can best support our universities as we continue to live with the impacts of COVID-19.

#### Intended use of the £400,000 that has been provided to local authorities for 2020-21 for support to home-educating families, and how its impact will be monitored

For the financial year 2020/21, £400,000 has been allocated to local authorities in Wales in respect of support for home education. This has been disseminated on a pro rata basis – based on the number of known home educated children in the authority as reported in the 2018/19 Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC). This funding is specifically for providing support to home educating families. Whilst our thinking is that the funding could be used to help with exam fees, learning resources / software, education trips etc. the allocation and management of this funding is at the discretion of local authorities.

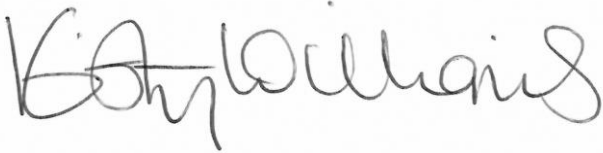
We have not been prescriptive on how the funding should be used since needs may differ from local authority to local authority. My officials will be following up at the local authority operations group as to how the funding has been used.

Additional information on the timescales for changes to the requirement for teachers in independent schools to register with the Education Workforce Council (EWC)

I have been clear previously about my intention to progress changes in regulation so that staff at independent schools are required to register with the EWC. I believe that taking forward this legislation is desirable, and I had hoped that this would be progressed during the current Senedd term. However, given the significant and unprecedented legislative pressures, many of which were simply not foreseeable in relation to Brexit and COVID-19, unfortunately it is not going to be possible to progress this to that timescales.

I hope these responses assist with your ongoing inquiry. Should you require any further information, please do not hesitate in contacting me.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kirsty Williams', written in a cursive style.

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