



Eich cyf/Your ref P-05-1143  
Ein cyf/Our ref KW/01042/21

Janet Finch-Saunders MS  
Chair  
Senedd Cymru Petitions committee  
Ty Hywel  
Cardiff Bay  
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18 February 2021

Dear Janet,

Thank you for your letter on behalf of the Petitions Committee, seeking views on the issues raised in Petition P-05-1143 calling for schools to fully re-open after the February half term break, before your formal consideration.

Since the Petition was submitted, things have moved on at pace. Although the situation in Wales and across the UK remains very serious and Level 4 restrictions currently apply in Wales, Phase 1 of the vaccination programme is progressing well. On 05 February, I [wrote](#) to all head teachers to outline the plan for a cautious return for our youngest learners. Schools should now prepare for a phased, flexible and progressive return of primary school age learners after 22 February, if the rates of coronavirus continue to fall. Further details, and plans for the return of secondary school aged learners, will follow.

However, we all know that the pandemic is a fast changing situation, which often makes it difficult to plan for, and, on occasion, has necessitated changes to our advice at very short notice. This is because we keep the situation under constant review, and decisions are based on the very latest medical and scientific advice. This is also why we are planning a cautious and flexible approach to re-opening schools for face-to-face learning.

As a Government we understand the challenges facing all learners, teachers and leaders as a result of the pandemic, and recognise that this has been a difficult year for everyone. I fully understand the lasting impact of school closures on the education and the emotional and mental health and well-being of learners in Wales, and appreciate how disappointing it is to have face-to-face learning further disrupted in recent weeks. We have all had to adapt in these challenging times and consider different ways of learning. We know that blended learning is not a substitute for face-to-face teaching, and I applaud the efforts made by education staff and children for their resilience and their determination to continue to teach and to learn. I continue to hold discussions with schools, local authorities, unions and other

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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.

stakeholders in relation to measures that can be taken to make up for an education that has been missed during the pandemic, and a safer return to in-school learning.

In the meantime, I have put in place a range of measures to support remote learning including extensive professional learning, significant investment in devices and the enhanced £29 million Accelerating Learning Programme to [recruit, recover and raise standards](#) in Welsh schools. Building on guidance to support blended learning, further guidance has been published to help schools effectively support learners during their [exam years](#), to support [vulnerable and disadvantaged learners](#), guidance and additional funding is available for learners with [ALN](#), and changes to [qualifications](#) for 2021 has been announced. The Design and Delivery Advisory Group, officials and Qualifications Wales have worked closely on the approach and guidelines for the 2021 qualifications assessment process, I attach a link to the [Qualifications Wales website](#) which enables practitioners, learners and parents to keep up to date with any changes to assessment that may occur going forward, due to these exceptional circumstances.

The emotional and mental well-being of learners is also a key priority for the Welsh Government. I am aware that time away from friends, family and the classroom can have a lasting impact on the wellbeing of learners. I convened a Joint Ministerial Task and Finish Group on a Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Wellbeing to advise on the work needed to support the wellbeing of learners, and together with the Minister for Mental Health, Wellbeing and the Welsh Language, we have made additional funding of [£9.4m](#) available to support the well-being and mental health of pupils and school staff. The Welsh Government also supports C.A.L.L. (the Community Advice and Listening Line), a helpline for Wales which is open 24 hours each day. Anyone who is concerned about their own wellbeing, or that of a family member or friend, can contact C.A.L.L. using the free-phone number 0800 132 737 or by texting HELP to 81066 for confidential advice and support.

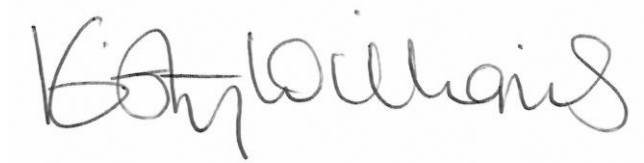
Regarding the vaccination programme, I understand the anxieties of teachers and others who may be exposed to the virus in the workplace. As you will know, we are working to the priority schedule determined by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI). The JCVI determined that the first priorities of the vaccination programme roll out should be the prevention of Covid-related deaths and the protection of health and social care staff and systems. This means we vaccinate people in order of clinical risk, and school staff and other key workers will be immunised depending on their age and risk. In Wales the COVID 19 vaccine roll-out began on 8 December, education workforce members who are clinically extremely vulnerable and have been shielding, and those over 50 years are included in Phase 1, school staff who provide intimate personal care for children with complex medical needs are also included in the priority list along with social care workers. We await the information regarding the Phase 2 priority schedule.

Following recent discussions regarding the need for additional mitigating measures in schools, such as PPE, we will however introduce a number of measures to provide school staff with an added level of assurance for their safe return to face-to-face teaching. This includes the introduction of twice [weekly testing](#) for staff members and increased financial support for new high quality face coverings. We will also be providing an additional £5 million to support schools, colleges and local authorities to invest further in items they need to keep their premises safe.

Thank you again for contacting us, and for allowing me the opportunity to share this information. I recognise that parents, pupils and the wider community wish to see a full return to in-school education as quickly as possible. I assure you that this remains our ambition,

but we must be guided by medical and scientific advice and the evidence available to us. Please be assured that the Welsh Government's priorities during this pandemic continue to be the safety and welfare of students, school staff and the wider community, and the continuing education of learners.

Yours sincerely

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

**Kirsty Williams AS/MS**

Y Gweinidog Addysg  
Minister for Education