

CYPE(6)-06-21 - Paper to note 5

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Ein cyf/Our ref MA/JMEWL/2852/21

Jayne Bryant MS
Chair
Children, Young People and Education
Committee Welsh Parliament

Dear Jayne,

Thank you for your letter requesting further information on some of the issues we discussed during my attendance at the Children Young People & Education Committee on 23 September. My response is set out below.

Addressing ongoing concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on schools

On 14 October I [updated members](#) on the ongoing work to minimise disruption to education and ensure all settings remain as safe as possible. Provisional data shows that an average of 86.0% of all pupils were in attendance in school over the week of 18 October to 22 October 2021.

Alongside the analyses of data which we undertake on an ongoing basis, it is important that we have the best possible understanding of what is happening on the ground. I have asked my officials to undertake a comprehensive review of attendance patterns, to inform development of future policy interventions. This will involve the analyses and interpretation of data sources on current attendance/non-attendance rates in schools. We are also working with education stakeholders to collect intelligence on the emerging situation and what measures/interventions are needed to better re-engage learners. [Attendance guidance for schools](#) was also published on 20 September to reflect the current context.

Case rates amongst those aged 5-11 and 12-16 have increased since the start of the school term, although the latest [enhanced schools report published by PHW](#) shows that case rates in both age groups are reducing. We continue to monitor the data carefully and take a cautious approach before drawing any conclusions from any trends.

Before the start of autumn term we launched our Back to School/College campaign. A range of communication and marketing materials were developed targeting both learners and the workforce, outlining updated operational arrangements in schools and colleges, information regarding Lateral Flow Device testing arrangements and changes to self-isolation arrangements. Since the beginning of term we have tried to respond to concerns from schools and colleges swiftly. We also took proactive action to support schools to deal with malicious communications from anti-vaccination groups.

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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.



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

09 November 2021

Changes to policies, for example the [enhanced testing offer for secondary school aged learners](#) where a member of their household has tested positive for COVID-19, have been supported by communications to schools and parents. Public Health Wales has also taken the lead on providing information for parents and learners on vaccination of 12-15 year olds.

On a weekly basis a social media schedule and communication and marketing materials are shared with key stakeholders for use in their communications activity. During this time we have seen a marked increase in the sharing of these materials, particularly by local authorities, health boards and other key stakeholders. A full evaluation of this activity is currently underway to inform our future communications activity and messaging.

Working with the Minister for Health to see what more can be done to support TTP teams and settings

On 8 October we published the [Coronavirus Control Plan update](#) for autumn and winter 2021, in which we set out the role for Test, Trace, Protect (TTP).

Over recent weeks high case rates have put TTP teams under intense pressure, as the combined number of cases and contacts has exceeded all previous levels of activity. Nevertheless, through prioritisation of workflows, they continue to reach the vast majority of cases and provide advice to positive cases and their contacts.

With the isolation of contacts no longer the default position, unless they are unvaccinated, we intend to focus contact tracing where it can have the most impact. Our revised approach to contact tracing entails:

- **Protecting vulnerable individuals.** Rather than follow up all cases and their contacts in person, we will seek to target the work of our contact tracing teams in order that they can focus on identifying those who work in vulnerable settings (such as health and social care workers or emergency services) or who are not fully vaccinated.
- **Working towards digital by default.** We will look to automate more of our tracing via digital contact and target calls at those who require tailored advice.
- **Managing risks from international travel.** The increasing relaxation of international travel requirements continue to pose a significant public health risk of importing cases and variants of concern from abroad. It remains critical that arriving travellers into Wales should be contact traced to ensure that those who are required to isolate are aware of their legal duty to do so.

The ultimate aim of TTP is to support self-isolation in order to reduce and prevent onward spread. Identifying those who need to isolate is an essential element, but so too is delivering the support that helps people to do the right thing and comply with that requirements. In recognition of the crucial role that contact tracing plays we are extending the funding provided to TTP contact tracing teams until June 2022 so that their important work interrupting chains of Covid-19 transmission can continue.

Clarification of self-isolation rules for under 18s in relation to close household contacts

On 29 October the First Minister announced a change to the self-isolation guidance.

Fully vaccinated adults and children aged five to 17 must self-isolate if someone in their household has symptoms or tests positive for Covid-19 until they have had a negative PCR test result. If they are not vaccinated, they must self-isolate for 10 days.

This change is being made to reflect new evidence that, while being fully vaccinated does reduce the risk of becoming infected, there may be a one in four chance of a fully vaccinated person contracting Covid-19 from someone they live with.

[Further information and advice for specific circumstances](#) – for example if an exam date coincides with a self-isolation period for a learner – have been published online.

Expectations from higher education providers in relation to teaching and assessment arrangements?

You have noted that teaching and assessment arrangements are a matter for individual universities, as autonomous bodies. However, we have been clear that we do not wish to see any students being unfairly penalised for studying during the pandemic. We continue to work with HEFCW and the HE sector to understand the impact of the disruption on students and their institutions. I am aware that the pandemic required changes to pedagogy, learning, teaching and assessment, but also accelerated some developmental changes. In particular, institutions have taken advantage of the opportunities offered by the pandemic to redesign assessments, to make them more meaningful and accessible to all students, and to minimise the potential for academic misconduct.

Institutions have adopted a range of approaches to assessment in 2021/22 and have evaluated approaches taken during the pandemic, and reflected on how these innovations could benefit students moving forward.

Protecting the Educational Maintenance Allowance.

The Welsh Government is committed to ensuring young people continue in education beyond compulsory school age. EMA currently supports around 18,000 learners a year and is designed to incentivise and support eligible young people to go on to study in sixth form or at college, providing a weekly allowance to help with costs while they study. Our Programme for Government commitment to protect EMA for this, and future years of this government's term, demonstrates that we are not planning to remove this support. The £30 per week, paid fortnightly, is the same as that paid in Scotland and Northern Ireland. England abolished the EMA in 2011.

While we do not currently have plans to increase the amount paid under EMA, any future consideration to do so would need careful planning in light of increasing targeted support for those most in need and the additional education, work and training opportunities created by the Youth Guarantee.

Expectations of Qualifications Wales in relation to vocational qualification reform.

Qualifications Wales' programme of sector reviews looks specifically at whether vocational qualifications available in Wales meet the needs of Welsh learners. Sector reviews in health and social care and child care, construction and building services and engineering and advanced manufacturing have concluded, and where appropriate have led to the development of qualifications designed specifically for learners in Wales.

Qualifications Wales also has a programme of phase 2 sector reviews which are focussed on reviewing the availability of post-16 qualifications in response to the policy changes in England. The findings of the first phase 2 sector reviews, focussed on Sport and Public Services, was published in September 2021. The review of Agriculture, Horticulture and Animal Care has recently started and a programme of reviews is in place for the next three years including the review of the Travel, Tourism, Hospitality and Catering sector which is ongoing.

The Department for Education (DfE) in England is currently reviewing all post-16 qualifications at level 3 and below. This proposes that any qualification with no or low take-up, or that overlaps with T levels, will be defunded in England by August 2023. The real impact on Wales will not be known until DfE releases the list of qualifications it intends to cease funding for, with the first of these lists likely to be sent to awarding bodies by the end of 2021.

I have asked Qualifications Wales to ensure they have early sight of qualifications likely to be defunded and monitor where gaps in the qualifications market are at risk of emerging. I have been assured by Qualifications Wales that it is taking appropriate steps to mitigate risks for Wales posed by the qualification review reforms in England.

The amount of additional funding that has been allocated for school counselling services

The amount of additional funding allocated for school counselling services this year (2021-22) is £2,042,170.

The Welsh Government's modelling in relation to the impact on Welsh institutions if access to higher education for English students is controlled or if English fees are cut following the UK Government's response to the Independent Panel report to the review of post-18 education.

We are still waiting for the UK Government response to the Augar report in which cuts to fee levels and number controls are two possible options amongst the recommendations, but there are others.

As the Committee would expect, we have modelled the impacts of possible changes in England and it's clear that any reduction in fee levels would result in a substantial income loss for the HE sector in Wales. There are also implications for Welsh students and Welsh institutions on UK Government changes to loan student number controls, but we await the detail on proposals from UK Government. More analysis will be needed once this detail becomes clear and modelling can then be done on a much sounder basis.

I hope the Committee finds this information helpful. Should you require any further clarification, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,



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