

Tracey Burke
Director General – Education and Public Services Group
Welsh Government

9 December 2020

Dear Tracey

Covid-19: The impact on education and local government

Thank you for attending the Public Accounts Committee on 30 November when we further explored the effect Covid-19 has had on education services and also considered the effect on local government, particularly in the light of the recent Auditor General for Wales Reports within this sector.

During the evidence session on education, your officials reported the percentage of learners attending school. The Committee noted the most recently published Welsh Government statistics, which at that time related to the period 16 to 20 November. These showed an average of 87.3% of pupils were present at school over that week. You agreed to send a note and we would welcome analysis to better understand the pattern of attendance, particularly whether there is any correlation with areas of deprivation. You also agreed to provide an update on work undertaken to assist learners from the Gypsy and Traveller Community.

During our discussions of the evidence received, Members raised a number of further queries which are detailed below:

- Members were concerned to hear of the different approaches taken by schools throughout Wales regarding the self-isolation rules and feel there should be a consistent approach taken by schools across Wales. We are particularly concerned given the number of pupils who may unnecessarily be away from school for prolonged periods of time.



Senedd Cymru
Bae Caerdydd, Caerdydd, CF99 1SN

✉ SeneddArchwilio@senedd.cymru

☎ 0300 200 6565

Welsh Parliament
Cardiff Bay, Cardiff, CF99 1SN

✉ SeneddPAC@senedd.wales

☎ 0300 200 6565

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- Discussions have been ongoing for a considerable number of months regarding blended and mixed learning and we are again surprised that the Blended Working Group has not yet reported. Can you keep us updated and provide us with the outcome of the Group's work when available, including that about addressing digital exclusion?
 - In your evidence to the Committee on 3 August, you reported that Welsh Government has been sharing good practice about how schools have operated during the pandemic since pupils' experience to that point had been variable. You noted case studies have been available on the Hwb platform and you advised that Estyn was about to engage with local authorities to identify best practice. You also mentioned the sharing of good practice at the session on 30 November. We would welcome more information about the case studies and the work carried out by Estyn. How is this being used to drive improvement and what evidence is there that it is making a difference.
 - You told the Committee that Welsh Government has reduced the burdens placed on schools during the pandemic. We welcome the steps taken to reduce the pressure on schools, but would like more detail on the changes you have introduced, about the decision-making that led to them and what assessment has been made that they make a difference. Will these remain in place in the post Covid-19 world?

Finally, on examination arrangements, you told the Committee the Design and Delivery Advisory Group's work was underway with a view to reporting to the Minister before Christmas. It is likely, therefore, that it will be the new year before any announcements will be made and we are concerned this does not provide a meaningful time period for measures to be put into place for the learners in examination years. The level of uncertainty for learners and teachers alike is unhelpful and we are concerned about the additional stress this is causing. We urge the findings of the Group to be considered and any subsequent Ministerial announcements to be made as soon as possible in the new year.

Regarding local government, we held a substantial discussion on the level of usable reserves held by local authorities and note that Audit Wales will be undertaking a further piece of work examining the reserves of each local



authority. We await that Report and will be recommending, in our Legacy Report, that the successor Committee considers undertaking an inquiry into reserves held by local authorities.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Nick Ramsay". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending from the end of the name.

Nick Ramsay MS
Chair

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

