

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

11 August 2020

Dear Tracey

Inquiry into COVID–19: Impact on Education Services

Thank you for attending the Committee meeting on 3 August and also for your letter of 14 July. A number of issues were discussed and during the meeting you agreed to provide the Committee with the following information:

- The most recent figures on the take up, by local authority, of the extra funding available as part of the ‘Stay Safe. Stay Learning’ programme, (to support digitally excluded learners during the current pandemic) to ensure traveller sites are equipped with broadband.
- Details of which local authorities had permanent traveller sites with no [Broadband] connections and what action the Welsh Government is undertaking to ensure local authorities prioritise broadband connections for these sites.

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

The Committee is concerned that the guidance for resumption of full time schooling in September, which was in addition to guidance set out in July, was only issued in August. We are concerned that teaching staff will not have time to consider and implement the additional guidance particularly during a period of time which is set out as protected time for them to take annual leave. How is the Welsh Government supporting schools in taking forward the requirements set out in the additional guidance bearing in mind the speed



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with which this guidance will need to be implemented?

We are also concerned that none of the guidance issued so far sets out a clear statement on what exactly 'social distancing' means within the school environment. This is particularly confusing given the recent decision (effective from 3 August) by the Welsh Government that children under the age of 11 no longer have to socially distance. The guidance issued in July set out a number of measures for schools to reduce contact, for example, staggered break times and the prohibition of larger pupil gatherings such as school assemblies. It is not clear whether these are still applicable in primary schools.

There also seems to be a lack of clarity and consistency in terms of school meal provision in September and whether hot meals will be provided or not and what alternatives might be available. It was also unclear as to whether all school breakfast clubs and afterschool clubs will be able to reopen.

Will the Welsh Government be providing any further guidance on the operation of schools in the Autumn schools which clarifies the issues raised above?

During our evidence session with you on 22 June, we noted that the experiences of pupils during lockdown had been quite variable and were informed that Estyn has been brought in to evaluate good practice. In following this up with you on 3 August, we were disappointed to hear that Estyn was only about to now start this work and this seems to be too late. We are concerned that in the current climate, schools that are not performing well will need to have been assessed and improvements made in a more timely manner to minimise detriment to pupils.

Even though you stated a wealth of good practice has been prepared and shared through other means, there remains the challenge of encouraging schools to take that practice up. Are you able to reassure us that underperforming schools will be addressed?

Finally, we asked about the proportion of childcare settings that were going to be able to reopen and an update on the consideration of a package of support being made available for childcare settings that had not been eligible for support previously.

We heard that just under 1000 childcare settings remain closed, which is just under a third of the sector in Wales, but acknowledge that a number of these are ones that would not operate during the summer anyway. Acknowledging that these figures will be different in September, what is the Welsh Government doing to assess the requirement for these to be operational again by September as parents need assurances that childcare will be available.



I look forward to receiving your response.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nick Ramsay". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

Nick Ramsay MS
Chair

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

