

To: Frank Atherton  
Chief Medical Officer

**Via email only**

16 December 2020

Dear Chief Medical Officer,

I write further to the closure of secondary schools across Wales, and the publication of the Alert Levels in Wales Coronavirus Control Plan.

I wish to reiterate that I recognise the severity of the current virus spread in Wales and the risks that this poses. I recognise the need to make decisions at pace. However, this letter seeks to gain an understanding of how a policy goal to only close schools as a last resort could be overturned, as it was last week, and to seek reassurances for the new term.

As you may be aware, I issued a [statement](#) last week upon hearing of the closure of schools. I have been concerned that I haven't seen any new scientific advice which supports the decision to close school buildings rather than, for example, introduce any alternative community restrictions to combat the alarming rise in cases. I have also not seen an explanation of the decision addressed to the young people affected by this decision at such short notice.

I wrote to you back in October but cannot trace a response to that letter. My concerns at that point were about the lack of clear and well-explained information on the scientific advice in relation to schooling during the 'fire-break' to enable children, young people and their families to understand the decisions being made which have a significant impact on them. In addition, I offered to arrange discussions with young people for you to hear their views in order to help inform future decision-making.

These points do not appear to have been acted upon and I am concerned that learning such as the [report](#) I published on young people's experiences of the firebreak lockdown is not being taken on board. Whilst children's remote learning was improved from the summer, remote learning is not considered to be a full substitute for in-person teaching and it is the older young people, including those in exams years that are once again being sent home.

The control plan published this week assumes that schools remain open at all four levels, which is welcome. I am aware that many children, young people, teachers and parents will be concerned that this policy could be subject to variation however, as it was on the 10<sup>th</sup> December. I am keen to hear from you whether there are any conditions under which you may advise Ministers that this should be deviated from. I can then advise the many families that

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contact my office with queries of this kind, and so that everyone can prepare for the start of the school term in early January 2021.

I welcome the introduction of the proposed mass testing offer in schools as one option to enable schools to stay open, but this needs to come with wider messaging about schools as Covid-safe environments. Another option that should be considered, is to vaccinate teachers as frontline workers, to give protection to teachers and to instil confidence in the profession and for families in sending their children back in to schools.

I appreciate that, in some cases, individual schools may face difficulties due to staff shortages for example, but would want these decisions to be made on an individual school basis and not on a county or national level.

I would therefore welcome the following:

- An explanation of the scientific evidence behind the move to online learning for secondary schools on 10<sup>th</sup> December;
- The criteria upon which any future school closures would be based, bearing in mind the current published plan for schools and colleges to remain open at all alert levels; and
- Information on how children's views and their rights will be balanced as part of your role in advising Ministers on the broader impact of any proposals affecting children.

I have also written to the First Minister and other ministers regarding how these decisions are being made and communicated.

Yours sincerely,

**Personal Data**

Professor Sally Holland  
Comisiynydd Plant Cymru  
Children's Commissioner for Wales

