

To: Rt. Hon Mark
Drakeford MS

First Minister for Wales

Via email only

16 December 2020

Dear First Minister,

I write further to the recent decision to move secondary schools and colleges to online learning across Wales for the final week of term, 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 only to close schools as a last resort could be overturned, as it was last week, and to seek reassurances for the new term.

Firstly, I wish to seek assurance that the decision-making on December 10th included consideration of the disruptions to education that many children had experienced throughout the term and also included the likelihood that some groups would be unable to engage with online learning.

Secondly, while encouraged by the commitment to keeping schools open at all alert levels published on Monday, I'd like to understand the conditions which might lead to that being overturned on a national or regional basis in January. To be clear, I feel it is vital that schools re-open their doors on the first day of the new term to remain consistent with the Government's own Children's Rights Impact Assessment.

As you may be aware, I issued a [statement](#) last week upon hearing of the closure of secondary schools. I have been concerned that I haven't seen any new scientific advice which supported the decision to close school buildings rather than introduce any alternative community restrictions, nor an assessment of the impact this would inevitably have on young people. I have also not seen an explanation of the decision addressed to the young people affected by this at such short notice.

Many primary schools have also chosen to close to the majority of pupils since this decision was taken, and my view is that it would have been helpful to have stronger messaging from Government in relation to the importance of these schools remaining open, unless specific school-level risk assessments indicate otherwise. This is despite robust children's rights impact assessments that I am aware have been undertaken by officials which



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strongly assert the importance of school attendance for children's broader rights and needs.

These broader children's rights concerns do not appear to have been acted upon and I am concerned that learning such as the [report](#) I published on children and young people's experiences of the firebreak lockdown is not being considered. 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, who have once again been 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 10th December. I ask you to communicate clearly a commitment to schools and colleges re-opening in the first day of term so that I can advise the many families that 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 am keen to hear whether there are any conditions under which this may be deviated from.

In addition, following last week's decision to move to online learning in secondary schools there may be a need to review public messaging in order to reassure everyone that schools remain safe places for learners and teachers. I welcome the introduction of the proposed mass testing offer in schools as one option to enable pupils to remain in schools following a positive case in their contact group, 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 protect teacher's health, to ensure schools are able to stay open with safe staffing numbers, and to instil confidence 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, and would have to consider a period of closure, but I would want these decisions to be made on an individual school basis and not on a county or national level.

I therefore ask please for you or your officials to consider these points carefully and advise on:

- The scientific basis for the move to online learning for secondary schools this week;
- The government's assessment of the impact on children's rights of that decision;
- The plan for schools to open as expected at the start of the new term;



- Any conditions which could lead to further school closures in January; and
- The wider plan to maintain schools as Covid safe environments that can remain open at all alert levels.

I have copied this letter to the Health Minister as co-signatory of the control plan, to the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services as lead on children's issues and children's rights, and to the Education Minister.

I have also written again to the Chief Medical Officer regarding these issues and the scientific evidence that appears to have been crucial in the decision on the 10th December.

Yours sincerely

Personal Data

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

cc. Vaughan Gething, Minister for Health and Social Services

Julie Morgan, Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services

Kirsty Williams, Minister for Education

Karen Cornish , Deputy Director Children and Families Division

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