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Welsh Government

The decision framework for the next phase of education and childcare: considerations, planning and challenges

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This document is also available in Welsh.

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Ministerial foreword

The education family in Wales has acted with great responsibility, innovation and expertise in our collective response to COVID-19. I know that thousands of children, teachers, support staff and parents and carers across the country are missing the simple joy and experience of classroom learning, drop-off and pick-up time on the yard or just catching up with friends.

Of course, many schools are already making provision for children of critical workers and vulnerable children, and we have the great advantage of the Hwb platform in Wales with all schools supporting learners remotely. Similarly the FE sector has moved swiftly to online learning offers. We are considering a phased approach to returning more children and other learners to face-to-face education or childcare. However, there is no option without some risk. No government in the world yet has a full understanding of how and whether children transmit the virus in the same way as other viruses or in the same way as adults.

Ahead of the next end-of-cycle review date at the end of May, my officials – working with scientists, public health experts, teachers, unions and local authorities – are considering the options for that next phase for schools and other education providers. This working document sets out our current thinking for how we change the operations of schools and other providers over time in response to COVID-19.

For the education sector, there are key principles for that next phase.

- The safety and mental, emotional and physical well-being of learners and staff.
- Continuing our contribution to the national effort and strategy to fight the spread of COVID-19.
- The confidence of parents and carers, staff and learners – based on evidence and information – so that they can plan ahead.
- Ability to prioritise learners at key points, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Consistency with the Welsh Government's framework for decision-making, to have guidance in place to support measures such as distancing, managing attendance and wider protective actions.

Similar considerations will also need to inform decisions to increase access to childcare and play settings and to inform both vocational and academic learning in further education.

In working through these principles, it is clear that any change to the operation of schools and other providers of education or childcare will be complex with many complicated and conflicting considerations. We are looking carefully at what is happening across the world, as well as elsewhere in the UK.

This working document includes a framework for our decisions, building on my principles for the next phase. This will not be one decision but a series of decisions over time increasing, or if need be, decreasing the operations of schools or other providers.

For example, in allowing time to plan ahead, there are a series of connected decisions. We will work towards the next end-of-cycle review, but I can also guarantee that the 'next phase' won't start midweek; there will be preparation and training time for teachers, and we will work with local authorities to ensure the necessary cleaning and hygiene operations and products are in place.

I can guarantee that an increase in operations will be a phased approach. I do not expect that schools or other education settings across Wales will be open for all learners, from all years, all week, anytime soon.

I am sharing this working document, and framework for decisions, to show the extent of the issues related to the next phase. I want it to be a stimulus for wider discussion and feedback from the education family, including parents and carers, children and young people.

Kirsty Williams MS
Minister for Education

The evidence: what we know

On 7 May, Welsh Government published the modelling update from the Technical Advisory Cell. This provides some more detailed information on current understanding of COVID-19 and its transmission. There is much that is still not yet certain about the virus; however, we are able to draw on a wide range of expert advice and evidence.

The *R* number

Critical to any decision to ease lock down is *R*, the reproduction number. This is the average number of people an infected person transmits the disease to at some point in the epidemic.

If *R* is below 1, each case will give rise to fewer than one additional case, so over time case numbers will decrease to zero. However, if *R* is above 1, case numbers will increase exponentially. *R* is currently estimated to be 0.7–0.9 for COVID-19 in Wales.

Any decision we take in respect of schools and other providers will have regard to its likely impact on *R*, both directly and indirectly. The impact of any decision on *R* will need to be monitored and evaluated: this is both key to securing public confidence and in order that we are able to adjust any decision if necessary.

Testing

On 13 May, the Welsh Government published *Test, trace and protect*, a strategy for enhanced health surveillance. Contact tracing has been, and is being used in countries around the world to limit the spread of the virus in the community by breaking the link in transmission.

The role of children in transmission

The role of children in the transmission of the virus and their susceptibility to it are not yet clear. There is an indication that children tend to be less symptomatic with COVID infection, and lower in terms of severity than adults, despite the possibility of very rare severe complications.

Younger children (under 11) seem to be generally less susceptible to infection than adults. Transmissibility by younger children may also be lower than in adults but the rate at which children pass on COVID infections is still uncertain. We will of course continue to monitor evidence and understanding as it develops.

Longer term trends

The likely levels of transmission in the longer term are still far from clear. From what we know, we cannot assume that schools and other providers will progress along a set trajectory. Future peaks may require schools and other providers to decrease operations at specific points. Decisions will need to be taken over time, having full regard to evolving evidence. It is not yet clear how long social distancing requirements will need to remain in place. So long as these are present, schools and other providers will be limited in the number of children/learners they can accommodate at any one time. We must assume that social distancing will remain in place for the foreseeable future and any decisions will need to take this into account.

We are also taking full account of a wide range of international examples and evidence to consider how different systems have responded to disruptions to education and childcare and approaches to recovery.

Scope

This decision framework sets out our current thinking for schools, colleges, work-based learning providers, childcare settings and play services and EOTAS providers. While there are specific issues and challenges facing each of these sectors, they all share the same key questions. The decisions taken for each setting may differ, as is appropriate to their context: there will not be a 'one size fits all' approach.

This framework sets out the high-level decisions that will need to be taken by Ministers. This will be supported by decisions and activity at each level: Welsh Government will provide high-level guidance but it will be for schools and other providers, working with local authorities as appropriate, to develop ways of working (in line with that clear guidance), which allow for the return of children/learners to a safe and supportive environment. Much of this is detailed below and further guidance will be provided in advance of any required action.

We have published a traffic light guide which represents broad phases as an illustration of how lockdown measures will progressively be lifted in Wales. Doing more in the current Red phase, or moving beyond, is dependent on continued progress in containing the spread of the virus. In particular, we need to have effective contact tracing in place to underpin our confidence in being able to move between the phases. The traffic light guide is not intended to be exhaustive but should be understood as an illustration of ongoing work, and provide further context for the education decision framework set out in this document.

How will we make decisions?

In gathering evidence for these decisions, we will draw on a range of expertise and evidence. We are meeting with the following groups regularly, if not weekly.

- **Technical Advisory Cell: children and education subgroup** – this includes a range of Welsh Government officials and expert advisors to provide evidence on the scientific and health factors and implications.

- **Headteachers and leaders stakeholder group** – drawing together a reference group of leads of schools and other providers from childcare through to university.
- **Strategic Education Delivery Partners stakeholder group** – providing reference from local authorities, regional consortia, Estyn, further education and Qualifications Wales.
- **Trade Unions partnership.**
- **Colegau Cymru Principals' forum.**
- **Childcare and Play Stakeholder Reference Group** – includes representation from the childcare and play sector, Care Inspectorate Wales, Estyn, local authorities, Social Care Wales and the Future Generations, Children's and Welsh Language Commissioners.

Confidence of parents/carers, children and young people are key factors in our consideration. Work is continuing to ensure we gather their attitudes, view and opinions systematically to inform decision-making.

In addition, we are considering international evidence around learning and child health and well-being. We are drawing on a range of international examples of response to disruptions to learning. For example, we are considering practice in Denmark around the use of other buildings to increase capacity; regular handwashing and cleaning; staggering arrivals and departures; and use of floor markings.

The table below gives an indication of the likely work that will need to be done to support any decisions. Further detail of this will be provided in future guidance.

Current actions:	Preparing for the 'new normal':	Working in the 'new normal':
What we are doing now.	**What we need to do before schools and providers increase operations.**	**What we need to do when schools and providers begin to increase operations.**
We are establishing a clear process and evidence base for making and communicating decisions.	We will support the system to make preparations in readiness for changes to the current level of operations.	We will support the system to operate for the whole period of responding to COVID-19.
We are gathering a wide evidence base in order to make informed decisions. This includes gathering input from our key stakeholder groups. The Welsh Government's *Stay Safe. Stay Learning* policy sets out how the system should support learners in schools remotely at this time.	We will clarify the expectations for schools and providers at this time. This will include explaining the timescales and recommended actions to take in response to any decisions. We will ensure that appropriate infrastructure is in place to deliver any decision (including transport). We will also ensure monitoring and reporting is in place to support any decision. We will provide high-level guidance to support schools on a range of practical implications, including: cleaning and supplies, ensuring social distancing, classroom layout, timetabling, transport and information to parents and carers.	We will provide guidance to schools on running operations at this time and to develop appropriate learning experiences. We will monitor the situation and impact of any decisions closely and respond accordingly. We will ensure that testing and tracing capacity is in place to support work.

Continued overleaf

Current actions:	Preparing for the 'new normal':	Working in the 'new normal':
Local authorities are supporting schools in making provision for children of critical workers and vulnerable children. Regional consortia and Estyn are supporting schools in developing and delivering remote learning.	We will work closely with strategic partners to ensure that schools and other providers are supported to begin preparations now, before any decision is made or communicated. Strategic partners should consider practical, well-being and training needs of school and setting staff and ensure these are appropriately supported. Local authorities should work with schools to assess risk and capacity.	We will work closely with strategic partners to ensure that schools and other providers are supported on an ongoing basis throughout this period. Local authorities will continue to work with schools to understand how provision for children of critical workers and vulnerable children should be best supported. Local authorities should continue to work with schools in assessing and managing risk and capacity.
Schools are delivering provision for children of critical workers and vulnerable children, and providing learning to all remotely. FEIs are developing and delivering remote learning. Schools can consider lessons learned and effective practice from hubs provision to inform preparation and practice. Schools and other providers should clarify needs of staff and children/learners who are at risk.	In line with government guidance, schools and providers should begin preparations in readiness for changes to operations, considering the wide range of practical issues, including cleaning and supplies, ensuring social distancing, hygiene, classroom layout, greater use of outdoor spaces, staggering the timetable, transport and information to parents and carers. Schools and providers should also begin to think about their children's/learners' needs and appropriate learning experiences for them on return: in particular, supporting health and well-being. Schools and other providers should undertake assessment of capacity, likely take-up of any additional provision and risks.	Schools and settings have contingency and planning in place for future increases and decreases in operations. Schools and other providers should ensure that adherence to hygiene guidance and social distancing requirements are, so far as possible, modelled and adhered to. Schools and other providers should ensure remote learning contributes to learning 'in school'. Schools and other providers should continue to monitor and update assessments or risks and capacity.

A framework for making decisions for schools and other providers

It is designed to support Ministers to make decisions about the right level of operations in schools and other providers each time they are reviewed.

1. **Should we increase/decrease operations in schools and other providers?** Does the health context allow or require a change?
2. **Which groups of children/learners should physically attend?** What is the most appropriate and viable level of operation at present?
3. **How do we plan to change this over time?** Are our proposals sustainable if needed in the longer term?
4. **How do we ensure staff and children/learners are kept safe and well?** What mitigating measures should be put in place to ensure social distancing and the mental, emotional and physical well-being of staff and children/learners?
5. **How do our proposals contribute to the national effort and strategy to fight the spread of COVID-19?** Do they meet the wider Welsh Government tests for easing lockdown?

All decisions will of course be taken with consideration of a range of impact assessments.

1. Should we increase/decrease operations in schools and other providers?

The decision about whether we are ready for a change will depend on *R*, the reproduction number of the virus. This is critical to understanding our scope for change: whether *R* is low enough to allow an increase of operations, or if it begins to rise, whether operations need to be decreased. We will also consider NHS capacity and the well-being and social impacts on children/learners and families. Regional differences may also influence our decision-making.

We will also use this health evidence to inform our assumptions for the other decisions: how will social distancing and guidance around 'at risk' and shielding individuals impact on schools' or other providers' capacity?

2. Which groups of children/learners should physically attend?

We are currently considering a wide range of options for which children/learners could attend when operations are increased. This allows us to prioritise specific groups of children/learners if required.

Primarily in respect of schools, possible options could include, but are not limited to:

- **disadvantaged children/learners** – schools would be open full time to the most disadvantaged children/learners. This would need to be defined, but could be capped at a specific percentage or defined in another way
- **transition year groups** – schools would be open to focus on specific year groups who are about to make a key transition in learning. This would include Years 6, 10 and 12, but could also include Nursery into Reception, Years 2 or 9
- **learners at the end of a cycle** – focusing on Years 11 and 13. This could be expanded to other year groups
- **all children/learners at a reduced time** – schools and providers would be open for all children/learners who would attend for a limited time, depending on maximum safe capacity: for example, one day a week. Staff would similarly rotate
- **earlier years** – earlier year groups would attend first
- **children of parent/carers who need to leave home to work** – focusing on children whose parents/carers are able to return to work through the easing of lockdown and parents/carers who need to work but have childcare commitments, in particular, single parents/carers
- **increase current provision** – working with local authorities, schools and hubs, we would encourage more of those who are entitled to attend to do so.

In respect of childcare and play settings, decisions will need to be taken in parallel to those around schools, to support families in accessing wrap around and out of school childcare as needed. The consideration is therefore whether or not to allow settings to open to all ages, but taking account of guidance around social distancing, or to start initially with younger children and gradually phase in older age groups. These decisions will be informed by full consideration of the evidence, the likely impacts and after consultation with the sector.

In respect of further education, many of the options above will apply. In addition, a key priority group will be one option is to prioritise **vocational learners** who need to complete practical assessments in order to achieve their qualifications. Furthermore, in any decision in respect of learners beyond 16, we will consider the importance of equity for learners across both sixth forms in schools and in colleges.

At present, provision for children of critical workers and vulnerable children is intended to ensure children are safe and actively occupied. This is not intended to substitute school learning. However for schools, the assumption is that for each of the options above, apart from the last, that children/learners would undertake some degree of learning experiences, likewise for EOTAS provision. Guidance will be provided to support learning 'in school' and how 'out of school' learning should support this and ensuring equity between all learners. This includes those who may need to remain at home.

These options will need to be assessed against a range of relevant factors, including:

- **impact on transmission** – what is the option's likely impact on *R*?
- **capacity** – which options are schools and providers able to implement, having regard to social distancing requirements and children and staff who will need to stay at home in line with guidance around self-isolation and 'at risk' and shielding categories?
- **impact on children/learners** – which options have the most beneficial impact on learning and well-being? This will need to include consideration of equality and children's rights impacts
- **economic impact** – increased time in schools and providers will allow more families to return to work. This will need to include considerations around wider economic and equalities impacts
- **practicalities** – how practical is the option? Is the infrastructure in place to support it?
- **setting and geographical specific** – how appropriate is the option for specific phases/providers or geographical areas? Should any of these be dealt with differently?

In respect of childcare and play settings, decisions will be taken in parallel to those around schools: to support families in accessing wraparound childcare as needed.

3. How do we plan to change provision when capacity allows?

Any decision to change the operations in the short-term cannot be taken without regard to the medium- and long-term. We must consider how operations could increase over time, but also, if limited operations continue for a prolonged period, how we ensure equity between different groups of children/learners. This also allows us to prioritise different groups of children/learners at different key points, if required.

We are currently considering a wide range of options for how operations could be increased over time. Possible options could include, but are not limited to:

- **linear roll out of options** – we would adopt one of the options set out in Decision 2 and then roll out to add or remove other options as capacity allows. This would prioritise one group in the short-term
- **cycle of different options at different times** – we would adopt different options over time at different points, to support different groups of children/learners at key points. This would then expand/contract to combine options at any given point as capacity allows. This would allow schools/providers to balance the needs of different groups over time

- **combination of options at reduced times** – we would combine different options above but at reduced time for each. This would allow different groups to benefit from contact time. The time given to each option would then expand/contract as capacity allows.

These options for how to phase an increase over time will need to be judged against a range of relevant factors, including:

- **health impact** – including, what is the option's likely impact on *R*?
- **impact on children/learners** – which options have the most beneficial impact on learning and well-being?
- **capacity** – what ways of changing provision are schools and providers able to implement?
- **economic impact** – which options allow for most families to return to work?

4. How do we ensure staff and children/learners are kept safe and well?

We will then need to consider what mitigating measures should be put in place to ensure:

- schools and providers have the capacity in terms of staffing and physical space to embed social distancing for any staff and children/learners present. This includes how other civil amenities can be used to create more space.
- the mental, emotional and physical well-being needs of staff and children/learners are supported
- the take-up and impact of any proposals are monitored and evaluated. This is critical to ensure that any decision can be reversed if necessary.

These measures will be fundamental in keeping staff and children/learners safe and securing the confidence of children/learners, staff and parents/carers.

5. How do our proposals contribute to the national effort and strategy to fight the spread of COVID-19?

Finally, any decision will need to be considered and tested against the wider criteria, set out in *Leading Wales out of the coronavirus pandemic: A framework for recovery*. These are threaded through the framework, but it is critical that decisions are considered in the context of the wider Welsh Government approach to easing lockdown. These are:

- to what extent would easing a restriction have a negative effect on containing the virus?
- is the measure at the low end of risk of further infection?

- how can it be monitored and enforced?
- is it capable of being rapidly reversed if it has unintended consequences?
- is it a measure of relatively high positive economic benefit?
- does it have a high impact on social and psychological well-being?
- does the measure have a high positive equality impact?

Further steps

In addition to the framework decisions, there will be a wide range of support schools and providers will require in the practical steps to prepare and implement any change in operations. This will need to include transport and cleaning. We will work with local authorities, schools and other providers in advance of any announcement to ensure that preparation work can begin and that schools, providers and their staff are prepared. Further detail of work needed is set out in the table on page 7.

As part of planning for any decision, we are considering what modifications will need to be made to the statutory framework in order to support changes to operations.