To support local authority social services departments and their partners we published Operational Guidance for Children's Social Services on 21 April. We set out in this guidance that where it is felt that physical sight of a child is necessary because of the level of risk for the child, these should happen following Public Health Wales guidance on social distancing or PPE as appropriate. The guidance also sets out that statutory safeguarding visits to see children on the Child Protection Register should continue to be carried out at least every 10 working days. If following a risk assessment a decision is taken that this requirement can be met through remote/virtual contact for some children on the Child Protection Register, this decision must be agreed by a manager and the rationale for it must be recorded. We have been clear that all cases should be subject to a review of risks on a frequent basis and at least once per week. The intention of this advice is that face-to-face contact with children at risk should be maintained wherever possible with remote contact as an exception subject to risk assessment.

There was a marked reduction in safeguarding referrals relating to children at risk during the start of the lockdown period. We have published a webpage on reporting concerns and a Written Statement and two press releases have also been issued to encourage that everyone reports concerns. At the same time, the Safeguarding Boards and local authorities have issued messages to practitioners and public facing communications to encourage the reporting of concerns. The Welsh Government also continues to provide funding to the NSPCC Childline and to fund the MEIC helpline so that children can talk to someone if they are being harmed. Information from Heads of Children's Services and the Safeguarding Boards assures us that the rate of safeguarding referrals in relation to children at risk is steadily increasing.

In England the UK Government have made temporary changes to ten sets of children's social care regulations to allow greater flexibility for local authorities and providers during COVID-19, via Statutory Instrument 445. We are concerned about the impact of such changes on safeguarding and on children's rights, so we have no plans to amend regulations in Wales. Local authorities have not been calling for Welsh Government to make amendments to regulations, indeed from feedback so far, local authorities are keen to manage services within the flexibilities they have and as per Welsh Government guidance.

On 14 May we published our refined definition of 'vulnerable children' for the purposes of attending an educational or childcare setting (https://gov.wales/vulnerable-children-and-young-people-coronavirus#section-40031). We have set out the expectation for children and young people with a social worker, the expectation of children with a statement of SEN and the additional flexibility for other vulnerable children on the edge of receiving care and support if they are known to be vulnerable by the school or family support services. This discretion should be determined on a case by case basis by the school and local authority.

Since 11 May we have published the statistics for attendance at educational settings on a weekly basis (https://gov.wales/attendance-local-authority-settings-during-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-11-15-may-2020-html). There has been a sustained increase in vulnerable children and young people attending provision in schools. However, we continue to work with local authorities to increase the attendance at hubs for vulnerable children and ensure they are supported through the most appropriate means for their needs.

In addition we have started collecting data from local authorities on a weekly basis in relation to children's social services during lockdown. These are answered either by a traffic light response or if it is an increase, decrease or static in comparison to the week or the year before. Local authorities are asked to provide a snapshot of their services on the day they complete the return.