



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

PUBLICATION, DOCUMENT

Assessing the impact of increasing operations in schools and settings following the initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic

We assessed the impact of increasing operations in schools and settings following lockdown measures in March 2020.

First published: 28 September 2020

Last updated: 2 October 2020

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What action is the Welsh Government considering and why?

1. The initial education response

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has resulted in an unprecedented situation where, in order to respond to and where possible mitigate the public health emergency, significant, complex and often difficult decisions have had to be taken often within very compressed timescales.

This Integrated Impact Assessment (IIA) focusses on assessing the impacts of decisions relating to increasing operations in schools and education settings in Wales following lockdown measures in March. It relates to the **IIA covering the impact of the initial policy decisions taken in relation to the provision of education in response to COVID-19**. That IIA covers the immediate actions taken in March in light of evidence from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), Technical Advisory Cell (TAC) and advice from Public Health Wales

Importantly, the lessons learned from our experience in taking the initial decisions and the impact that these have had on groups of learners, the education profession and local communities has helped inform policies developed to support recovery in the education sector, such as increasing operations in schools and settings covered in this IIA.

For the purposes of this IIA, the term 'schools and settings' includes maintained primary, secondary and special schools in Wales, as well as Pupil Referral Units (PRUs). It should be noted, however, that ongoing assessment of impacts covered in this IIA include considerations for all children and young people of school age irrespective of how or where they receive learning.

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Separate impact assessments are ongoing regarding the restart and recovery of the childcare and play sector, and post-16 education and training.

The evolving context

As set out in more detail in the IIA on the initial education response to the pandemic, on **18 March the Minister for Education made a statement** announcing schools and settings would close for statutory provision of education at the latest on 20 March. A further **statement was made on 20 March** stating from 23 March schools and settings would be closed for learners with the exception of provision for those who were vulnerable, or whose parents were critical to the COVID-19 response so they could continue to work where alternative childcare arrangements could not be made.

As noted by Ministers over recent months, disruption to education as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic will likely be with us for some time. As such, this IIA on increasing operations in schools and settings remains ongoing, with this summary representing a 'snapshot' in that process. However, it is not possible to predict with certainty what decisions will be necessary and when, as that depends entirely on developments with COVID-19 in Wales over the coming months, as well as the experience of learners, schools and settings as they increase operations into the autumn. At this point in time, we plan to review and update this impact assessment in both August and October.

2. Increasing operations in schools and settings

2.1 Background to decisions

Following initial decisions to re-purpose schools and settings (for the children of key workers and vulnerable children) and approaches to keep learners safe and

learning were in train (as set out in the Stay Safe Stay Learning policy statement), planning for increasing operations in schools and settings got underway as part of a cross-Government response. Welsh Government has been clear that provision would not mirror what schools and settings would offer during normal times and consequently has been considering how the legal framework can be altered to reflect this.

The First Minister published a framework to lead Wales out of the coronavirus pandemic on 24 April to help determine when the strict stay-at-home restrictions could begin to be relaxed and help to find a way for people to live and work alongside coronavirus.

On 7 May, Welsh Government published the **modelling update** from the Technical Advisory Cell (TAC). This provided more detailed information on the understanding of COVID-19 and its transmission at that time. That showed that while the number of COVID-19 cases in Wales was decreasing, the number of new hospitalisations were falling, and that social distancing adherence in the population was good, the time was not right for easement in restrictions in respect of schools and settings; this particularly so without other interventions yet being in place and operating (such as Test Trace Protect – TTP).

On 13 May, the Welsh Government published **Test, trace and protect**, a strategy for enhanced health surveillance. This was implemented from 1 June, with weekly updates on testing being published. Contact tracing is being used in countries around the world to limit the spread of the virus in communities by breaking the link in transmission. The TTP strategy sets out the approach to tackling coronavirus in this phase; testing people with symptoms in the community, tracing those who have come into close contact with people who have tested positive for coronavirus, and protecting family, friends and our community by self-isolating.

On 15 May, the First Minister published the roadmap, Unlocking our society and economy: continuing the conversation which built on its sister paper, 'Leading

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Wales out of the coronavirus pandemic: a framework for recovery' published on 24 April as noted above. It signalled a phased approach to increasing operations in schools when the time was right, and set out a red, amber, green traffic light system to define how restrictions could begin to ease.

On 15 May, the First Minister published the roadmap, Unlocking our society and economy: continuing the conversation which built on its sister paper, 'Leading Wales out of the coronavirus pandemic: a framework for recovery' published on 24 April as noted above. It signalled a phased approach to increasing operations in schools when the time was right, and set out a red, amber, green traffic light system to define how restrictions could begin to ease.

2.2 Decision making process

On 15 May the Minister for Education published the decision framework for the next phase of education and childcare: considerations, planning and challenges. That working document set out the approach to changing the operations of schools and other providers over time in response to COVID-19.

The development of the framework was informed by discussions with key stakeholder groups, including head teachers, unions, Public Health Wales and other education support organisations. It set out 5 key principles for the education sector in the next phase i.e. re-opening schools and increasing operation of schools:

- 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
- having the confidence of parents, 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

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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
- having guidance in place to support measures as part of a whole Government response

These principles, alongside consideration of children's rights and related duties, weigh up a number of factors as part of the decision making process. In particular, any increase in operation would only be considered when certain scientific or medical criteria were met. However, that could not mean there would be no risk, but rather that Ministers were satisfied that all reasonable steps had been taken to mitigate risks, including as part of the wider lockdown restrictions. This includes having due regard to children's rights and risks to them if they are not met; for example, their rights to survival and development, the highest attainable standard of health, and the right to education. Factors also include any adverse effects on well-being or access to learning arising from not going to school.

In publishing the decision framework, Ministers committed to giving time for schools and settings to prepare, and that advance work would take place with local authorities to ensure practical measures were in place, such as cleaning and hygiene operations.

The decision framework is designed to support Ministers to make ongoing decisions about the right level of operations in schools and settings each time they are reviewed – including through the summer and into the autumn term.

Questions include

- Should we increase/decrease operations in schools and other providers?
Does the health context allow or require a change?

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- Which groups of learners should physically attend? What is the most appropriate and viable level of operation at present?
- How do we plan to change this over time? Are our proposals sustainable if needed in the longer term?
- How do we ensure staff and 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 learners?
- 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?

As part of analysis and planning of possible options for schools and settings, the Minister for Education engaged key stakeholders (including local authorities, Estyn, teaching unions, parent groups, and the findings from learner surveys). Inputs also drew from the experiences of local authority staff and the education profession in working with learners and parents in managing remote learning arrangements, addressing specific needs identified and supporting provision at 'hubs' for the children of critical workers and vulnerable children.

These engagement mechanisms remain in place and are critical to informing impact analysis and decision making over the coming months. They are also integral to supporting the wider review (and capture of data and evidence) as part of the process.

2.3 Key decisions

Since the decision to close schools and settings in March, our understanding of the virus and its longer-term impacts has continued to develop. We know that we are going to have to live with the effects of COVID-19 for some time and that it will remain our biggest challenge for the foreseeable future.

On 3 June, the Minister for Education announced that schools and settings

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would increase operations from 29 June so all learners have the opportunity to 'check in, catch up and prepare for summer and September'. The school year would start on or around 2 September. The Minister also proposed that the summer term could be extended by a week to 24 July, and where that was the case with the autumn half-term break in October being expanded by a week, subject to local authority agreement. This would allow schools and settings more time to organise 'check in, catch up, prepare' sessions for their learners in advance of the summer break to provide all with better opportunities to engage with their learning. It would also provide a longer break mid-autumn for learners and staff, during a period that is likely to place both under ongoing pressure.

A paper from the COVID-19 TAC, dealing with the understanding of the virus with respect to children and education at the time is available. That is part of an ongoing series of published updates and sets the context for informed decisions based on the decision framework referenced in section 2.2 above. For example, the paper notes the impact of early years returning having a smaller impact than scenarios with older children; smaller groups returning on a staggered or rotating basis having the potential to reduce transmission if groups do not mix (including staff); and that younger children might be less susceptible to clinical disease than adults. However, it is also clear that our understanding of COVID-19, while growing, is far from complete and further and ongoing investigative work is necessary and underway to monitor progress and the impact of decisions. The paper notes that the indirect effects of re-opening schools (regardless of which approach is taken) would likely have a greater impact on transmission than the schools themselves (for example, work-related reopening, behaviour changes).

A summary of advice from the SAGE Children's Task and Finish Group is included in the published TAC paper. SAGE makes the point that schools do not only affect children. Staff and parents would also be directly impacted; it is probable that opening of schools and settings will increase transmission in these groups. So any relaxation of closures would also need to consider how to reduce risk from the potential mixing of adults at school gates, in the staff room etc, and have protocols in place for vulnerable groups.

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That advice has, therefore, been used to directly inform the guidance for schools and settings noted in section 2.9 below. Further detail on wider evidence used to inform decisions, and how the situation will be monitored and reviewed is also set out in the relevant sections below.

Creating the opportunity for learners to ‘check in, catch up and prepare’ provides most learners with vital contact time before the summer holiday. This will have important social, learning and attainment gap benefits in the short term, as some of the negative effects of lockdown on learners (explored in greater detail in the [IIA on the initial education response](#)) are mitigated.

This period will also help prepare learners for contact time after the summer holidays and also allow schools and settings to test and refine operations before the autumn term.

In using the decision framework, consideration of overarching points were undertaken in the first instance. For example, consideration of options resulted in the approach from a children’s rights perspective that all learners (that are able) should be given the opportunity to return to their school or setting before the summer. The establishment of this broad approach first then allowed further consideration of how this could be applied in practice, including for those not able to attend.

None of the potential options targeting particular groups of learners for earliest return to operations in schools or settings (by age, year or learner type) addressed all the inequalities of provision highlighted during lockdown. Each option for early return by learner group would result in greater disadvantage to other learner groups. While evidence and inputs from some stakeholders did favour prioritising particular groups, there was no overall consensus on which groups should be targeted, and which should not. While the assessment of impact on children and young people remains key, there also remain important logistical considerations that need to be taken into account.

The decision to introduce a phased approach to increasing operations in schools and settings from 29 June, with choice being provided to parents/carers, was influenced by a range of factors. These are explored in greater depth throughout this IIA, including in the sections below based on the five key principles of the decision framework.

2.4 Wellbeing of learners and staff

The operation of a school or setting has an important impact on learners' physical, mental and emotional and social well-being. The safety and mental, emotional and physical well-being of learners and staff has, therefore, been set out at the first key principle for decisions regarding increasing operations in schools and settings as part of the education response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Minister for Education has consistently said that operations in schools and settings would only increase when the health context allows. The current trend is that infection and cases are reducing, allowing an easing in lockdown measures in a managed way. Younger children (under 11) seem to be generally less susceptible to infection than adults. Our latest understanding of COVID-19 with respect to children and education which informs decision making was published on 3 June.

A further formal 3 week review point occurred on 18 June in advance of the increase in operations from 29 June. A Health Impact Assessment of the 'Staying at Home and Social Distancing Policy' in Wales in response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been undertaken by Public Health Wales. It provides an overview of the potential health and well-being impacts of the Staying at Home and Social Distancing Policy (commonly referred to as 'Lockdown') on the population of Wales in the short, medium and long term. In addition, details of testing of key workers in Wales is published weekly, with positivity rates for education staff across the UK generally being among the lowest within the key

worker cohort.

Local authorities continue to work with schools and settings to consider how best to support the ongoing well-being needs of all learners and staff at this time. Building our evidence base continues, and will inform the next phase of considerations and decisions regarding the operation of schools and settings through the autumn. This evidence includes outputs such as on [the complex and long-standing disadvantages exposed by coronavirus pandemic](#); the disproportionate impact coronavirus is having on Wales' black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities.

The application of a rights-based approach regarding greater equity allows learners of all ages, stages and needs who are not subject to shielding to experience 'check in, catch up, prepare' sessions in advance of the summer break. Given likely capacity issues in schools and settings, targeting particular learner groups for early return would directly result in others having to miss out; it may also result in stigmatisation for some.

Allowing all learners contact time before the summer holiday provides for important social, learning and attainment gap benefits. Feedback from education professionals and [evidence](#) demonstrates that contact time is more effective for learning, as well as allowing learners to revisit and develop relationships. It also allows schools and settings better access to help identify well-being needs, safeguarding issues, and any residual digital accessibility issues before a further break in contact over the summer period.

- Even though schools will have been engaged in transition planning and experiences for some time before the lockdown, it provides a final space for learners about to transition to say goodbye to their old class, teachers and setting. Something evidenced in the 'Coronavirus and me' survey as important for year 6 learners.
- Prioritising full return for early years learners first would be difficult to

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manage for the short summer period, and adequately staff over a more sustained period given finite capacity in schools and settings, and the need for smaller groups of learners. Ensuring the well-being of whole cohorts of our youngest learners is more staff intensive, which would draw staff time away from supporting remote learning for other age groups.

- Expanding the ‘hubs’ provision would not result in additional educational benefits or address the ongoing and growing well-being learning needs of learners, particularly across various groups. It would not best meet children and young people’s right to education.

Allowing more time for most learners to have the opportunity to engage ‘check in, catch up, and prepare’ before the summer was also an important consideration; this linked to the proposal for local authorities to extend the summer term by a week. It provides schools and settings more time to apportion between learners attending during a period of better weather (when we know the spread of COVID-19 can be more manageable).

Clearly if a learner or member of staff lives in a household with someone who is vulnerable or extremely vulnerable, they should only attend a school or setting where they can adhere to social distancing and the learner is able to understand and follow those instructions. Guidance is, therefore, being provided to schools and settings regarding those shielding and clinically vulnerable children and adults.

The operational guidance published on 10 June (see section 2.9 below) states that when planning to increase operations, schools and settings should consider how this impacts on well-being. They need to consider the potential impacts on the health and well-being of staff and leaders, including work–life balance.

Learning guidance is clear that schools and settings should have particular regard to meeting the needs of those unable to attend contact time. The need for outdoor learning is also highlighted on multiple levels. This has clear learning

and well-being benefits but also has important benefits during the COVID-19 outbreak as:

- evidence indicates that the risk of infection is reduced outdoors and that the virus does not survive long for long periods in sunlight social distancing can be easier to observe and maintain outside

Additional resources are being made available, including through the **Hwb** online education platform, to support learners and practitioners in distance or blended learning. This includes a focus on supporting learners' mental and emotional health and well-being and providing well-being support in the new environment. The first of these resources was launched on 1 June and is a '**young person's mental health toolkit**' comprising a variety of online resources which can help them through lockdown and beyond. It contains information on websites, apps, helplines, and more which support mental health and well-being.

2.5 Contribution to the national effort

The Minister for Education highlighted as her second key principle in the decision framework the need to continue our contribution to the national effort and strategy to fight the spread of COVID-19.

Sections 1 and 2.1 above provide information on the broader arrangements for review in response to COVID-19 in Wales, links to relevant documents, and how increasing operations in schools and settings fits into that approach. Legislative provisions remain under review and the cycle of 21 day formal reviews is ongoing, drawing on the range of advice and guidance available at each point.

Information on the education response both drawn from and informs the national effort across

Wales and in the UK. Welsh Government education officials remain engaged in

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internal cross- government considerations, including through: the TAC children and education sub-group; the 21 day review group; and the safeguarding and vulnerable children and young people work stream. We also maintain close contact with colleagues in the other UK education jurisdictions, as well as regularly reviewing approaches and results from other jurisdictions internationally.

Discussion with stakeholders included option proposals to change term dates for the summer term and the next academic year. Evidence suggests that COVID-19 is less transmittable in the sunlight, so there may be benefits to organising school holidays to provide for greater opportunities for outdoor learning. Engagement with parent groups highlighted the decision framework principles, for which there was broad support. Equally, learners' views on how COVID-19 is impacting them, as expressed through the '**Coronavirus and me**' children and young people survey, are being taken into account.

The more equitable approach to ensuring most learners have some contact time with trusted education professionals before the summer would become particularly important if operations in schools and settings have to be decreased again in the autumn in a response to a second peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The summer holiday also acts as a natural pause and review point in learner attendance to check for any adverse effects on COVID-19 transmission.

The decision framework option for prioritising children of parents who need to work, whilst worth exploration given the potential benefits in releasing capacity and greater work / life balance at home, didn't receive notable support from stakeholder groups engaged. These included parent, practitioners and local authorities. In addition, in practice it would be very difficult to define such groups of parents beyond existing definitions for critical workers, could likely result in larger groups of learners returning than capacity would allow, and would still result in inequity between those covered and those not.

2.6 Confidence of those involved

The Minister for Education's decision framework highlighted the confidence of parents/carers, staff and learners as the third principle. It noted that the basis of confidence would be evidence and information, for the purpose of being able to plan ahead. Therefore, how decisions are made, as well as the evidence for decisions, would draw on a range of expertise and evidence.

In addition to the wide range of evidence linked to throughout this IIA, regular discussion is taking place with the following groups for the purpose of agreeing approaches and informing advice on decisions:

- TAC: 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 –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.
- Diocesan Directors of Education
- Parent Advisory Group
- 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

The confidence of parents/carers and learners was highlighted as key factors in our consideration. This included capturing the views of parents or carers on the issues raised in the decision framework. The establishment of the Parent

Advisory Group, alongside drawing from parental surveys (via the advisory group and ParentKind) work continues to ensure we gather their attitudes, views and opinions systematically to inform decision-making.

To seek the views of children and young people, the Minister for Education is engaged with the Youth Parliament and the Welsh Government launched a 'Coronavirus and me' online survey in partnership with the Children's Commissioner for Wales, Children and Wales and the Youth Parliament. The survey provided a snapshot over a two week period of the views of over 23,000 children and young people on a variety of issues relating to their health, education, social lives and their feelings through the COVID-19 crisis. The survey sample was self-selected, and disseminated via school learning platforms; as a result, the findings will not be representative, and learners who are less engaged or who have limited access to the internet or a device to log on to, will have been poorly represented. The **results** have been published on the Children's Commissioner's website, though it should be noted that feedback from the survey into the decision making process happened in real time; thus allowing some learners' views to be taken into account.

This consultation signals a range of different experiences since the outbreak of the pandemic. Some learners have experienced bereavement, distress and worry. Many have missed friends, families and feel they are missing out on their education. At the same time, many learners have described how they have valued a chance to spend more time with their family, to play and relax more, or to learn in a different way. More detail is contained in the Children's Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) at Annex A.

In addition, discussion with parents / carers are important to understand their, and learners' experiences during this ongoing period of disruption. Additional support will be required for many, such as learners who are experiencing grief, learners with special educational needs (SEN) or other barriers to learning and those with existing mental health problems. Learners who may have been resilient and performing well before lockdown may have been equally affected

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during this period and need additional support for their well-being and/or learning on return.

The more equitable approach of providing for most learners to attend 'check in, catch up, prepare' sessions before the summer provides for a smoother transitional experience for learners into a period of blended (face-to-face and remote) learning, which may run for some time. For parents and teachers too, the decision to start a phased increase in operations from 29 June is an important opportunity to experience and become confident about the safety measures in place. It remains essential that direct and indirect communications regarding both learner and parental expectations are clear and consistent throughout this ongoing period of education disruption.

2.7 Ability to prioritise

Ability to prioritise learners at key points, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds represented the further key principle in the Minister for Education's decision framework.

There is **evidence** that the long summer holidays has an adverse impact on the attainment gap. It is anticipated that a lack of face to face contact for a period extending over five months would have a significant negative impact on learning development for many children and young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, there were concerns that prioritising only those from disadvantaged backgrounds for early return would clearly identify them (as they would not form part of a larger group, such as those attending 'hubs' provision), which could create stigma. It may also be difficult to define given more recent challenges presented by COVID-19, and would likely be uneven across school cohorts.

As at January 2020, approximately 85,000 children and young people were eligible for free school meals in Wales, although not all those that are eligible

(around three quarters) took up this support. However, as eligibility for free school meals is dependent on a learner's parent or guardian being in receipt of an income related benefit, for example **Universal Credit**, the numbers eligible are likely to be increasing due to the current economic circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, increasing on-site operations of schools and settings – albeit through a phased approach – supports local arrangements that ensure those eligible for such provision are able to access it. The Minister for Education has committed up to £40 million to enable local authorities to continue free school meal provision (reaching an estimated 60,000 children) until schools and settings re-open to all learners or up to the end of August, if necessary. Ongoing analysis is showing that, as expected, we are seeing an increase in free school meal eligibility as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data Cymru monitoring has confirmed that around 5,000 learners have become eligible since the start of lockdown, and 37% more are being supported than in January.

A further example of prioritised provision arising as a consequence of the pandemic is the additional support for learners to be able to access their learning digitally. The increasing of operations in schools and settings will help education professionals in their review of any outstanding accessibility issues their learners are experiencing, including access to digital tools. Support is already being made available via local authorities, including £3 million additional funding from Welsh Government, to specifically address the issue of access to hardware and/or internet connectivity. We are aware that considerable efforts are being made by local authorities and schools to address these needs but this work remains ongoing. As learners return for 'check in, catch up, prepare' sessions and their needs are directly assessed, we expect any such residual access issues will be quickly resolved and all learners to have full and equitable support for a more blended approach to learning in the autumn. (This is also covered in more detail the **IIA on the initial education response** as part of the **Continuity of Learning** programme).

It is recognised the different experiences learners will have had at home, and

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with their families, will play a large part in how easily they adapt to attending their school or educational setting in a partial return. For all learners this is likely to feel very different to their experience before lockdown. Given this, it is natural that some may require more support than others in making the transition back to a learning environment. The **guidance** for schools and settings published on 10 June highlights these issues, and seeks to support provision based on learner needs.

For those learners with a statement of special educational need (SEN), we have also been clear in the 10 June guidance on the importance of meeting individual needs and the role of individual risks assessments in that process. We will shortly be publishing updated guidance on risk assessing learners which is designed to support local authorities undertake risk assessments for the purposes of:

- determining whether a learner with a statement of SEN is vulnerable and a childcare placement would be appropriate to meet their needs
- supporting learners to attend their school, setting or to continue home learning, as appropriate to their individual needs, as education settings become increasingly operational.

In doing this, local authorities, schools and settings are being asked to consider what should be put in place to ensure schools and settings remain safe places for learners and staff, and that learners are able to access suitable transport.

2.8 Consistency with the Wales Government's framework

In reaching the decision to increase operations in schools and settings from 29 June, advice has drawn from and remained consistent with the Welsh Government's framework for decision making. For example, through the publication of initial guidance on 10 June, we have ensured that guidance is in place to support measures such as distancing, managing attendance and wider

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protective actions in schools and settings. Support for schools and settings also includes sharing information on what a sample group of schools are doing to prepare for 29 June, including communicating with parents and learners. Welsh Government has also published a range of wider guidance and support materials relating to COVID-19 which is being drawn on as necessary; alongside the scientific and health information being drawn on.

As of the middle of June, around 480 local authority 'hubs' across Wales were open, with up to 7,200 children of critical workers or vulnerable children in **attendance**. This represents 1.5% of the overall school population and up to 6.4% of vulnerable children. There are an estimated 24,112 vulnerable children aged 3+ (those with a social worker or a statement of special educational needs or other vulnerable children on the edges of receiving care and support) in Wales.

While the numbers fluctuate and have increased significantly the data suggests a significant proportion of vulnerable learners are not accessing 'hubs' provision and, consequently, some from more harmful environments could have increased exposure to risk which the hubs could help to identify. The 'hubs' also offer an opportunity to speak to other children and adults in a safe environment if they need any additional support.

Generally, however, they cannot provide the same level of support as that offered through education professionals at their normal schools, who are more likely to be known to them and trusted. From 29 June, with 'check in, catch up, prepare' sessions underway we expect greater numbers of vulnerable learners to have increased contact with teachers in their own school or setting allowing learning, safeguarding and well-being needs to be better assessed and provided for in the environment they are more familiar and comfortable with.

Consideration of these arrangements also looked at how it allows schools and settings to test operations before the autumn term. The proposal for a longer mid-term break in the autumn (where an additional week is added to the

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Summer term) is expected to have well-being benefits for staff and learners given the likelihood of that period being a long and challenging term.

Teachers and teaching assistants will be a priority group in the antibody testing programme. As we keep Wales safe, this approach will be crucial. By the 29 June there would have been one full month of TTP as well as a further formal 21 day review point to ensure health and well-being considerations were in place.

2.9 Guidance

Operational guidance for schools and other education settings: Keep Education Safe (COVID- 19) was published on 10 June. The guidance provides practical support on preparing for, and increasing, operations during a phased return up to the end of the summer term. It includes practical information around Personal Protection Equipment (PPE), shielding, TTP, classroom sizes adhering to the two metre rule, cleaning, catering, risk assessments, transport etc. It recognises the detail of operations will depend on the individual context and capacity. It covers measures which schools and settings can undertake to:

- support the health and well-being of staff and learners; helping to keep people safe
- plan and organise provision: including determining capacity and checklists for taking the next steps
- manage their facilities and logistical arrangements: including buildings, resources, cleaning and transport

Guidance on learning over the summer term: Keep Education Safe (COVID-19) published on 10 June looks at what practitioners do with learners on return to operations until the end of the summer term. It is being reviewed further in preparation for the next academic year. As there is only limited time before the summer break, schools and settings have limited opportunity to engage with their learners. Therefore we are encouraging them to use this time to:

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- support the health and well-being of learners: learner (and staff) well-being should be the foremost priority
- ‘check in’ with learners and support them in their preparedness for learning and consider their next steps for the summer and September as appropriate

Collectively this initial learning and operational guidance has been developed closely with education stakeholder groups (particularly local authorities and trade unions to mitigate against conflicting advice), scientific advisory groups, Welsh Government health colleagues and across Welsh Government education teams working with wider stakeholders on key areas included in the guidance. The guidance has also been considered by Health Protection and the TAC.

As signalled within the documents, they will be kept under ongoing review (as will this IIA) and updated to provide an ongoing source of guidance for education professionals and parents/carers. Updates will need to have regard to inputs from learner, parent and practitioner groups on their experiences of ‘check in, catch up, prepare’ sessions and blended learning more generally.

The guidance sets out the expectation that all learners who are able to, have the opportunity to attend their school or setting for contact time over the remainder of the summer term. For some, this may only be a few days up until the start of the summer holidays. In practice, this means schools or settings accommodating a reduced number of learners each day according to their capacity, while ensuring appropriate social distancing is in place. This will likely continue for the foreseeable future: providing a combination of face to face learning with remote learning – a blended learning approach.

It is advised that some learners and staff do not attend. The operational guidance calls for schools and settings to keep a record of attendance and families should notify their school if their child is unable to attend. This will help local authorities plan for and understand any barriers to learners returning to school or setting and identify any further support needed. Reporting arrangements on learner engagement are being put in place with the support of

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local authorities and regional consortia.

Where earners are not attending, the guidance for schools and settings is clear that provision should be made to ensure that they can continue to learn remotely. This is also supported through the Stay Safe, Stay Learning continuity of learning plan, and will continue through the next phase.

As operations increase, guidance has been provided on the expectation that those attending 'hub' provision for children of critical workers and vulnerable children will move to their own school or setting. This allows for education professionals more familiar with learners' specific needs and circumstances to engage with them in meeting their needs.

3. The next phase

In taking forward our response to the public health crisis, we remain mindful of the social, developmental and well-being impacts of extended periods of educational disruption.

Nevertheless, we are likely to experience disruption in education provision in schools and settings for some time. We are, therefore, moving towards a period of blended learning, where learners will experience a mix of remote learning and face to face sessions in their schools and settings. This is alongside a process of ongoing feedback, research and review.

Also, the emergency nature of the response, the complexity of issues and the timescales within which we have been working, have meant that it has not always been operationally viable to directly involve all delivery partners, or indeed those affected by these decisions to the extent we would have liked. This particularly in respect of learners, parents and carers.

A range of actions have, therefore, been put in place to monitor the impacts

associated with the ongoing disruption to learning and to inform decision making going forward.

Research is being commissioned to understand the longer term implications and how we can address them, with consideration of how learners can be engaged in the process. We are working with stakeholders such as Estyn, local authorities, education consortia and trade unions to understand the implications of the blended learning approaches. We are also drawing on experience from outside of Wales to inform our approaches.

Multi-channel communications approaches are being employed to ensure, as far as is possible, those involved or affected by increasing operations in schools and settings have access to the right information, and expectations are clear.

A range of real time engagement arrangements are in place or being considered to gather feedback on the impact of these policies. These include daily social media listening reports and daily summaries of key issues coming through via correspondence and enquiries to our first point of contact centre. As well as further parental and learner surveys.

It is also worth noting that the Senedd's Children, Young People and Education Committee is scrutinising the Welsh Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and has issued an open [call for evidence](#). The ongoing publication of this resulting information is also providing a rich source of inputs to help inform forward decision making and actions.

Support remains in train under the Stay Safe Stay Learning programme, and that will evolve alongside the development of learning guidance which both supports schools and settings in meeting the immediate needs of their learners, as well as their longer term approaches to curriculum design and implementation. Alongside guidance, we are considering how the system can best be supported in taking this work forward, including the role of wider education stakeholders. An example of this can be seen in recent collaboration

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with Natural Resources Wales (NRW) and the work of the Wales Council for Outdoor Learning in the support for schools and settings to take forward the approach to outdoor learning set out in the learning guidance published on 10 June.

Regarding changes being made to statutory education requirements using emergency powers within the Coronavirus Act 2020, or other legislation, the detail will be set out in an update to this and the initial response IIAs. These include continuing to remove or relax duties that cannot be met, or would cause a disproportionate administrative burden during this period of disruption.

It is intended that the initial learning and operational guidance published on 10 June will help reduce risk of transmission, supporting greater consistency and adherence to social distancing requirements and hygiene guidance for the safety of learners and staff. They will be kept under ongoing review, with the intention that the guidance evolves over the summer term and as the medical/scientific advice evolves.

In parallel, this IIA is being kept under review and will be updated periodically, particularly as the impact of policy decisions becomes clearer, new evidence becomes available, or policies are reviewed and adapted. While the impact of decisions has been assessed as far as possible, the situation and associated decisions remain unprecedented. There may be unintended consequences which are identified later.

Conclusion

How have people most likely to be affected by the proposal been involved in developing it?

The safety and mental, emotional and physical well-being of learners and staff

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has been set out at the first key principle for decisions regarding this next phase of the education response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Increasing operations in schools and settings includes, therefore, a process of ongoing engagement with practitioners and learners, as well as a wide range of interested parties. Schools and settings, by their very nature, impact widely in society. This process includes engagement with:

- children and young people: directly through the '**coronavirus and me**' survey, but also indirectly through engagement with parent or carer and practitioner groups who are able to speak to learner experiences
- education practitioners: directly through stakeholder reference advisory groups and informal networks developed through the process of education reforms over recent years, but also indirectly through engagement with local authorities, Estyn, Regional Consortia and trade unions who are able to speak to practitioner experiences
- parents or carers: directly through the establishment and active use of the Parent Advisory Group (including analysis of the group's survey findings regarding the decision framework), and well as more indirect analysis of wider parental surveys (such as that undertaken by ParentKind) and correspondence / enquiries submitted to the first point of contact centre.
- education stakeholders, such as local authorities, Estyn, regional consortia, trade unions and others.

It is important that this direct engagement, particularly with learners and parents or carers is built on and continues over the coming months, with mechanisms being in place to test thinking and capture their experiences of the 'check in, catch up, prepare' sessions as we move into the autumn.

2. What are the most significant impacts, positive and negative?

Assessment of the impacts arising from the initial education response to the

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COVID-19 pandemic is covered in detail in the related [IIA](#). That provides the context against which decisions to increase operations in schools and settings have been made.

In respect of applying a rights-based approach to equity in making available, the opportunity for 'check in, catch up, prepare' sessions for all learners (who are able), the direct impacts are as yet unknown as such provision starts from 29 June. However, certain judgements have been made, informed by evidence from a range of sources:

Some learners have expressed positive experiences from ongoing education restrictions (such as spending more time with families, time outdoors and learning new skills) which will continue in part through a period of blended learning. Generally, however, we anticipate some learner and staff experiences will not be great when compared with normal schooling pre-pandemic. There will be an ongoing period of less face-to-face support, restricted peer to peer engagement, issues with access for some with specific needs or shielding, a more limited (though increasing weekly) range of learning resources. This in itself will likely present challenges through the autumn term, particularly as learner motivation fluctuates. It is recognised the different experiences learners will have had at home, and with their families, will play a large part in how easily they adapt to attending their school or setting in a partial return.

The rights-based approach of equity being applied is important as all learners need ongoing direct support from their schools and settings. Not having that could mean significant learning loss for some. However, with social distancing, providing direct support for all means that time with those most in need is restricted. At least initially, not all learners will necessarily get what they need from contact time available, this may take time to address in specific circumstances. However, the approach is a step in right direction, and helpful in continuing to address children's rights. It must be recognised, however, that the learning experience will not be as positive as pre-COVID-19 education provision for some time. It is also recognised that a principle of equity doesn't equate to

equality of opportunity or equality of provision without additional measures and considerations for specific needs and learners.

The emphasis being placed on learner and staff health and well-being is essential in addressing children's rights. 'Check in, catch up, prepare' sessions will facilitate better analysis of need with, for example, resulting benefits for those with SEN, safeguarding issues, or ongoing digital access issues. Some improvements to learner motivation to engage in learning is expected from facing school staff again, though there will be challenges to maintain this throughout the autumn period. The policy approach also responds to the desire to engage with staff and peers again expressed by children and young people through surveys. Access for those with SEN requires specific considerations, and while more challenging to address during a period of ongoing restrictions, it is essential that individual needs are identified and addressed.

The approaches to and engagement with learning will have varied considerably across Wales over recent months. Including more contact time before the summer break provides more space for education professionals to assess needs and start to address them through preparatory activity and homework for September. Evidence suggests that under certain conditions blended learning can be as effective as full-time class-based provision, however it will take time for blended learning approaches to be developed to that level. It must be recognised that for some learners it never will be effective. Maintaining momentum, wide-ranging support, and ongoing analysis of progress will be essential.

We anticipate greater impacts on disadvantaged learners arising from the period of lockdown, including learning loss. This will likely continue through a period of blended learning. This particularly so given the notable increase in eFSM support in recent months (37% more than January). A rights-based approach to equity of opportunity to access contact time is essential to assess learning and support needs, but looking at the autumn greater emphasis should be considered regarding the flexibility available to schools and settings within

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guidance so they can better align specific provision to meet the needs of their learners. It should be recognised that some may need more contact time than others through the autumn.

Impacts on Welsh language development will become clearer as schools and settings are better able to assess learner progress. Potential impacts on Welsh language immersion provision in the early years, as well as access to wider learning through the medium of Welsh are being highlighted through impact assessments. One area that will need to be considered as part of this will be increased support for parents, including those who do not speak Welsh. There may also be particular issues relating to travel for those attending Welsh medium provision, impacting their ability to attend their school before the summer. The situation regarding Welsh language learning and, separately, learning through the medium of Welsh requires further guidance to schools and settings for the autumn.

The ongoing disruption to schools and settings will continue to have moderate to significant impact on parents' ability to work and/or engage in their communities. This will depend on individual circumstances, as many are trying to fit employment around their caring responsibilities, and will have different demands from employers. This is particularly so where access to informal care networks remains restricted by social- distancing measures. Blended learning with time at home and at schools or settings will likely prove difficult for some families to manage.

Communications with learners, as well as parents or carers, both directly and indirectly (via schools, settings and other education stakeholders) need to remain ongoing and two-way. Many learners are sufficiently competent to make informed judgements about their learning and/or influence parental decision making. They should have the opportunity to directly inform thinking about the next phase of operations, not just respond to decisions.

All need to be informed about the importance of staying safe and engaging in

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their learning approaches. There also needs to be a broader understanding of expectations, and that education will not return to normal for some time.

3. In light of the impacts identified, how will the proposal:

- **maximise contribution to our wellbeing objectives and the seven wellbeing goals?**
- **avoid, reduce or mitigate any negative impacts?**

The approach to increasing operations in schools and settings from 29 June is a step towards addressing impacts arising from the disruption to education arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. However, further ongoing disruption inevitable as we continue to live with the virus. The **decision framework** set out earlier highlights the emphasis being placed on the 5 key principles for this next phase of operations; each of which relate to the wellbeing goals.

- The safety and mental, emotional and physical well-being of learners and staff in schools and settings has been set out as one of the key principles behind any decisions regarding increasing operations in schools and settings. Detailed guidance has been provided to schools and settings regarding operational means through which we can keep education safe. Guidance has also emphasised the need for learner well-being to be prioritised as a pre-requisite to learning. This guidance is being kept under review and will be updated.
- The nature of applying a rights-based approach to equity in increasing activity in schools and settings for all learners (who are able to attend) is such that it is designed to mitigate some of the negative impacts associated with lockdown. It should enhance the support available to learners of all ages

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in terms of both their well-being and learning needs. This via the 'check in, catch up, prepare' sessions from 29 June with accompanying distance learning. Guidance for schools and settings on 10 June notes that particular regard should be given to meeting the needs of those who are not able to attend for whatever reason.

- Schools and settings can act as a focal point in communities. While social distancing remains, impacting on the timing of contact sessions, this can be limited. However, it is expected that increasing operations from 29 June will incrementally support community cohesion as more people are able to meet around the school or setting (while respecting social distancing rules) and catch up, offer advice and support.
- Impacts on cultural well-being arising from restrictions on people, businesses and communities during lockdown (which prevented participation in some cultural activities, arts, sports and recreation) is expected to start to be mitigated incrementally as learners increase their time accessing learning and support in schools and settings from 29 June. However, as noted above, there remains the potential for significant impact on the Welsh language as a consequence of ongoing educational disruption. The initial guidance on learning published on 10 June signals that further guidance is being developed to help support learning from September. This will need to have specific regard to supporting the development of both the Welsh language and Welsh-medium provision.

The close working relationships with and between Wales' education stakeholders, which have developed further through work taking forward **Our National Mission** education reforms, have provided a firm foundation for the rapid action that has been necessary over recent months.

They will remain essential as we move into this next phase of increasing operations in schools and settings.

The overwhelmingly positive response from practitioners across Wales in supporting the needs of our children and young people has been fully

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recognised; as has the demands of sustaining rapid collaborative arrangements with key agencies and interest groups.

Going forward, we will need to remain mindful of how we can support the capacity of the education sector to respond to the ongoing demands arising from this health crisis.

4. How will the impact of the proposal be monitored and evaluated as it progresses and when it concludes?

The IIA covering the **initial education response** to COVID-19 published on 28 September contains detailed information on arrangements in place regarding the monitoring and evaluation of the education response to the pandemic. Welsh Government also continues to capture, analyse and make available information on the health and wider impacts arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to those wide ranging approaches, specific information, feedback and ongoing review will be needed with regard to:

- learners' experiences of 'check in, catch up, prepare' sessions and their views regarding taking forward blended learning approaches in the autumn
- the views of parents / carers regarding the arrangements for increasing operations in schools and settings (including well-being, learning and logistical / transport issues)
- evidence on the impacts of COVID-19 on those BAME, and how guidance for schools and settings should be revised accordingly
- lessons learnt from the provision of learning remotely over recent months, and how that can be built on through a blended approach into the autumn
- the engagement and challenges in taking forward both Welsh language learning, and learning through the medium of Welsh
- engagement at 'check in, catch up, prepare' sessions, with particular regard to meeting the needs of disadvantaged learners, and those vulnerable to

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COVID-19 who are unable to attend contact sessions

- how the specific needs of those with SEN are being identified and addressed during a period of ongoing educational disruption

In conjunction with that set out in the IIA on the initial education response, the evidence base is supplemented by information from regular contact with the other UK education departments, as well as regular information and analysis on approaches being taken in response to COVID-19 in other education jurisdictions internationally.

Collectively, this evidence base will allow us to review and revise policies, to identify further evidence gaps and to consider further mitigating action that is necessary for those who have been most adversely affected. This IIA will, therefore, remain a 'live' document with ongoing review and periodic updates as the impact of thinking and decision making on increasing operations in schools and settings is assessed through into the autumn.

We are planning more impact assessment review points in August and October.

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