



Annwyl Steve

Further to our meeting with you yesterday we write to express our concerns with regards to the proposed arrangements for schools in the new term which remain the same as proposed at the end of last term.

We are extremely worried that schools will be opening for face to face learning from next Monday, whilst Welsh Government continues to gather information about the nature and impact of the new variant of Covid-19. The Deputy Chief Medical Officer for Wales, Dr Chris Jones stated in media briefings before Christmas that this variant was 70% more infectious (see reference below); there is also a possibility that the new strain has a higher propensity to infect children. Therefore, we are at a complete loss to understand how schools can return as previously advised.

We strongly believe that we need to err on the side of caution and ensure, in advance, that we have the medical 'evidence and information' to ensure that any decisions are the correct ones. This approach was identified and frequently referred to by the Education Minister in her 'five guiding principles which will determine when and how schools will return to providing education for most school pupils'. We are extremely frustrated with the decision to keep to the same proposals as previously planned, despite increasing infection rates and pressure on the NHS.

Welsh Government's response to the current situation is that no change has been decided upon despite the country as a whole moving into very high risk alert Level 4 which is likely to continue past January 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021. Given that all of Wales is in Level 4, we are of the opinion that there should be a centralised, coherent response from Welsh Government regarding all educational settings, rather than leaving decisions at local level. Further to this we need to know if there are any adjustments required at operational level, given that there is agreement that the new virus is more easily transmitted.

A more sensible approach would allow schools to make adjustments in the changing climate to ensure that they have the '*confidence of parents, staff and students*'. It will also allow time for Welsh Government to update operational guidance including the arrangement for

individuals who are shielding and any additional approaches to dealing with the impact of the new variant which will include the updating of risk assessments. We are particularly concerned for the wellbeing of those who are pregnant and the need to ensure that the medical evidence ensures their safety, and that the guidance does not discriminate against them.

We are eager to receive:

- A concise overview of the medical evidence that has guided the latest decision by Welsh Government not to change the arrangements for the first weeks of January;
- A response to the correspondence sent to you on 22/12/2020, regarding Lateral Flow Testing in Schools and Colleges (Copy attached for ease of reference);
- We request there to be further urgent consideration for those working in education establishments to receive higher priority for vaccination after health and social care, as this will alleviate some of the pressures being faced as a result of staff not being able to attend due to isolation requirements. This will result in aligning vaccination policy with the two core themes of Welsh Government policy, that of ensuring access to health and education.
- An outline/update of the initiatives in place to respond to the need to support emotional and mental health in school/college environments.

Thank you for the invitation for trade unions and associations to a meeting next Wednesday. Could you please confirm if this meeting is also for representatives of the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA)?

We look forward to hearing from you as a matter of urgency.

Yn gywir

Eithne Hughes, Director, ASCL Cymru

Nicola Savage, Regional Organiser, GMB

Laura Doel, Director, NAHT Cymru

Neil Butler, National Official for Wales, NASUWT

David Evans, Wales Secretary, NEU Cymru

Dilwyn Roberts-Young, General Secretary, UCAC

Rosie Lewis, Regional Organiser, UNISON

Dave Gunter, Regional Organiser, UNITE

Urtha Felda, Senior Officer, VOICE

"High numbers of incidents continue to be reported, mainly in residential care homes and school settings." (Page 13)

<https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-12/technical-advisory-cell-summary-of-advice-23rd-december-2020.pdf>