

CABINET STATEMENT

# Written Statement: Flexible return to education – next steps

**Kirsty Williams MS, Minister for Education**

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We have always said as a Government that the premises of schools and colleges would be the last to close and first to open.

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I was delighted to see pictures of some of our youngest learners in our national costume celebrating St David's Day in schools across Wales. And I know how welcome the return was to older students undertaking practical assessments in our colleges.

The public health situation is continuing to improve;

- Overall, the seven-day rate has fallen to 60 cases per 100,000 people.
- In every part of Wales, the rate is below 100 cases per 100,000 people and in six local authority areas, it is lower than 50 cases.
- The R number remains below 1 in Wales.
- The total number of coronavirus-related patients in hospital has fallen below 1,500 for the first time since early November.
- And over one million vaccinations have been provided to people in Wales.

We have already announced that from 15 March 2021, all remaining primary school children will be able to be back learning onsite. From that date, we will also enable learners in exam years to return, we will also provide flexibility for schools to bring in learners in years 10 and 12. We will enable more learners in FE colleges and training to return to onsite learning. This is of course, subject to Covid data continuing to move in the right direction.

This pandemic has been difficult for us all, but especially for children and young people, who have lost out on important learning and development, social interaction with the resultant impact of their well-being.

I have said that it's my intention to enable all pupils, FE students, work-based and adult learners to be back onsite after Easter. But I and school leaders are very concerned that some learners will have been away from school since early December.

This is why from 15 March all secondary settings will now have the flexibility to provide learners in years 7, 8 and 9 with the opportunity of a check-in focussed on support for wellbeing and readiness for a return to their onsite learning after Easter.

There are certain principles underpinning the return to onsite learning in secondary settings from 15 March.

- The majority of time and resources should be allocated to learners in Years 11 and 13.
- The time that is allocated to face to face learning should focus on activity that is more difficult to achieve remotely.
- Remote learning will continue during this period when learners are not on site.

My officials are working with colleges to agree the approach to expanding learner attendance before Easter, so that those who most need to attend for learning and to prepare for assessments can do so. Learners who have particular wellbeing concerns can already attend college for check-ins if they need to do so.

We take the safety and welfare of our learners and workforce seriously. There is no evidence to suggest widespread transmission in schools and colleges. Transmission in schools reflect the levels of transmission in the community.

Updated operational guidance for schools and settings will be published this morning, and I will be writing to all schools to inform them of my decision.

We will publish guidance for colleges and other post-16 providers shortly.

The control measures continue to be important in reducing transmission and schools and settings should continue to ensure these are clearly communicated.

- Hands, face, space are still the most important measures to prevent infection.
- Staggered start and finish times should be maximised.
- Twice weekly testing is now available for all teaching and non-teaching staff in all schools and colleges. We are also working with our local authorities to set up ways to supply tests to school and college transport drivers, supply teachers and peripatetic staff working across different schools.
- Twice weekly testing will also be available for year 10 learners and above in schools and colleges.
- In secondary settings and colleges face coverings should be worn in all communal areas and in the classroom where it's not possible to socially distance.
- By now staff whose role is to provide intimate personal care for some of our most vulnerable children with complex medical needs have been offered their first vaccination. And we remain on track to offer a vaccine to all those over 50 by mid April.
- We will also be writing jointly with the WLGA to all school leaders reminding them of the importance of updating risk assessments for their school.

Thank you very much to you all those that make up the education community – for supporting our children and young people. Thanks as well to local authorities and unions for a constructive partnership.

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