GUIDANCE

School opening times and services: coronavirus

Information about school opening times and their services during the coronavirus pandemic.

Contents

What will the role of schools be during the coronavirus pandemic?

Schools are a cornerstone of communities, providing much more than simply education. In these challenging times, schools have become an essential part of the effort to respond to the huge challenge of COVID-19. Schools and school staff are central to keeping the NHS running as well as other services which are vital to how we live.

Schools are open only to a limited number of children - children who are vulnerable and children whose parents are critical to the Covid-19 response and

cannot be safely cared for at home. School buildings are remaining open for this purpose and headteachers and school staff are continuing to work, having regard to the latest advice on social distancing and self-isolation.

We have published **guidance to support the development of effective, safe, provision for children of critical workers and for vulnerable children** (https://gov.wales/guidance-hubs-and-schools-coronavirus) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The guidance developed jointly with Local Authorities, Trade Unions and Public Health Wales supports provision in schools and in local authority hubs. The guidance sets out key principles, informed by current practice, but gives local authorities, schools and settings the flexibility to develop provision which meets their specific needs and capacity.

For which children should schools be providing care? Who should have access to schools and childcare during this phase of the COVID-19 outbreak?

The scientific advice on how to further limit the spread of COVID-19 is clear. It is imperative that, as far as possible, we minimise social contact and ensure that anyone who is particularly vulnerable to the virus is able to adopt stringent social distancing. This means that if children can stay safely in their home, they should, to limit the chance of the virus spreading.

We also need to ensure children are not be left with anyone who should be following stringent social distancing, such as anyone over 70 or anyone with the specified underlying health conditions.

Schools (and childcare and play settings) are only open for those children that absolutely need to attend. Residential special schools, boarding schools and special settings should continue to care for children wherever possible.

Schools should provide care for as small a number of children as possible - children who are vulnerable and children whose parents are critical to the COVID-19 response and cannot be safely cared for at home.

Further details on parents whose work is critical to the COVID-19 response are outlined **here** (https://gov.wales/coronavirus-key-critical-workers).

Further **guidance on provision for children of critical workers and for vulnerable children** (https://gov.wales/guidance-hubs-and-schools-coronavirus) is available.

When will schools re-open?

The measures to mitigate transmission of COVID-19, including school closures, are being kept under review. Any changes will be based on scientific and medical advice. At this stage, it is too early to say when the measures might be relaxed, or different measures introduced.

How should schools continue to provide learning to children and young people who aren't in school?

In conjunction with key stakeholders we are developing plans, resources and activities to help children and young people maintain learning while their schools are closed. This includes a national Continuity of Learning Plan that will support schools and teachers in guiding the ongoing learning for children and young people across the age range. The Welsh Government published **Stay Safe, Stay Learning: Continuity of Learning Plan policy statement which sets out our priorities** (https://gov.wales/stay-safe-stay-learning) during this time.

This plan will set out how we are working closely with regional consortia and local authorities to support schools through the period of closure to help children and young people keep learning. Our Welsh national learning platform, Hwb, already provides teachers and children with a wide range of tools for learning. We are also working with our Universities, broadcasters, learned societies, educational support and cultural organisations to give children and parents online access to meaningful educational resources. For example, schools with sixth forms, FE Colleges and Universities are developing specific resources to help year 11 and Yyar 13 pupils focus on their next steps, be they academic or vocational.

We are also working with local authorities and the education profession about planning for children and young people's return to school and the support that will be required for all learners.

How should schools communicate with parents during this period?

Communication with parents is critical. Schools should maintain open lines of communication with parents, providing solidarity for the community:

- Ensure school community, including parents, understand guidelines on social distancing and self-isolation. If staff or children have symptoms outlined in the guidance, then they should self-isolate and follow public health guidance.
- Communication with parents and communities should be: visible, calm, clear and factual. The success of the defence against COVID-19 relies on continuing social order. Trust in institutions and our approach is critical to this.
- In working with learners remotely, schools will need to ensure parents understand that learning will continue and how this will work.

Further guidance for schools and for parents is being developed as part of plans to help children and young people 'stay learning'. This will be made available after Easter.

Will schools need to continue to provide written reports to parents and carers for the rest of this academic year?

Whilst we appreciate some usual pupil information will be unavailable, it is anticipated that headteachers will still be required to provide reports to parents (and adult pupils) for this year. The intention is to modify reporting requirements to give flexibility to the format, content and timing of reports. Providing a school leaver's report is likely to remain a requirement to ensure pupils are not disadvantaged.

What is the position with independent schools?

The final decision on whether to keep independent schools closed, for all but children of key workers following the Easter break, is ultimately a matter for the proprietor. Although the Welsh Government cannot direct independent schools to follow the advice given to maintained education settings in Wales, we would encourage them to do so.

However, the Welsh Government recognises that some independent special schools and residential settings will need to continue to look after their pupils.

Does the Welsh Government have guidance on the ratios of staff to child for social distancing?

Guidance on **staff to child ratios and social distancing within settings** (https://gov.wales/guidance-hubs-and-schools-coronavirus) has been published.

More information is available **here** (https://gov.wales/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-national-minimum-standards-regulated-childcare).

What is the positon with children and young people who are currently excluded or suspended, but who may have been due to return to school during the next weeks?

Children who have been excluded and who are due to return to school should, from their expected return date, be treated in the same way as other learners at the school. This includes for example, being subject to the same arrangements for children of critical workers and arrangements for children who are eligible for free school meals.

Will the published list of critical workers be final, open to interpretation, and will it be reviewed?

The guidance on **eligibility for ongoing provision for children whose parents are critical** (https://gov.wales/coronavirus-key-critical-workers) to the COVID-19

response was published on 20 March 2020.

We have set out, on a consistent basis with the UK Government, broad categories of people whose work is critical to the COVID-19 response. The list, like every other aspect of the response to COVID-19 will be kept under review.

Further **guidance on provision for children of critical workers and for vulnerable children** (https://gov.wales/guidance-hubs-and-schools-coronavirus) is available here.

Does allowing some schools to remain open to support vulnerable learners and children of critical workers compromise or reduce the benefits of closing schools?

Our primary objective is to minimise the risk of harm both directly from COVID-19 but also indirectly by ensuring provision for vulnerable people and maximising capacity in the NHS and in other work areas with an important role in the response to the outbreak.

The scientific advice on how to further limit the spread of COVID-19 is clear. It is imperative that, as far as possible, we minimise social contact. This means if children can stay safely in their home, they should, to limit the chance of the virus spreading.

Every child who can be safely cared for at home should be cared for at home, even children of critical workers.

But, where there is no safe alternative, hub provision is available in schools or other settings for children of critical workers, as well as for vulnerable learners, to ensure that the NHS and other critical sectors are as well-resourced as possible. This is in line with the approach taken in other countries, **including France and South Korea** (https://gemreportunesco.wordpress.com/2020/03/24/how-are-countries-addressing-the-covid-19-challenges-in-education-a-snapshot-of-policy-measures/). We are hugely grateful for the contribution that school staff are making to the fight against COVID-19 through this role.

The number of children attending hubs in schools and other settings is substantially smaller than the number who would be in school or other settings normally. This reduces social mixing and contributes to slowing transmission of the disease. In settings that remain open, Public Health Wales guidance is being followed, encouraging frequent and thorough hand washing by staff and children using soap and water, and frequent cleaning and disinfection of hand contact surfaces.

Further **guidance on provision for children of critical workers and for vulnerable children** (https://gov.wales/guidance-hubs-and-schools-coronavirus)is available.

Issues at a local level?

Local authorities are doing everything they can to deal with the coronavirus pandemic. They made and communicated plans based as part of an initial contingency to deal with the spread of coronavirus. Those plans are adapting and change as local authorities respond to the latest guidance available to the Welsh Government. For the very latest advice, please **check your local authority's website** (https://gov.wales/find-your-local-authority) and **gov.wales/coronavirus** (https://gov.wales/coronavirus)

I am not deemed to be a critical worker, but I am still required to work. What does that mean for me?

We recognise how disruptive these arrangements are for parents and carers but the most recent scientific advice on how to further limit the spread of COVID-19 is clear. It is imperative that, as far as possible, we minimise social contact. This means if children can stay safely in their home, they should, to limit the chance of the virus spreading.

To reduce mixing between different groups or settings we need to minimise the number of children making the journey to school or a childcare setting, and keep to the minimum possible the number of children in educational or childcare and play settings.

The smaller the numbers, the more we can lower the risk that the virus can spread and infect vulnerable people across our communities.

Quite simply the fewer people having social contact, the more effective the overall impact of the current measures will be.

Does the Welsh Government have a view on at what age, and in consideration of what other criteria, could it be appropriate to leave children unattended?

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) says:

- children under 12 are rarely mature enough to be left alone for a long period of time
- children under 16 shouldn't be left alone overnight
- babies, toddlers and very young children should never be left alone

Parents can be prosecuted if they leave a child unsupervised 'in a manner likely to cause unnecessary suffering or injury to health'.

What if children and young people don't have access to a laptop or tablet at home?

The Hwb digital learning platform provides access to a wide range of digital tools and content that can support distance learning. Hwb is designed to be accessed from a wide range of internet connected devices, including smart phones. So for those pupils who do not have access to a laptop or tablet, they can access it using mobile phones. However, we are keeping this issue under review.

Are there any plans to close nurseries?

We have advised the childcare settings should be open only to vulnerable children

and children of critical workers who cannot be cared for safely at home. Please see our **childcare FAQ** (https://gov.wales/coronavirus-and-childcare-provision)**s** (https://gov.wales/coronavirus-childcare-under-five-year-olds-providers-guidance) for more information.

Support for vulnerable learners in the home if they cannot access school?

To slow the spread of coronavirus it is very important that we minimise social contact, so if children can stay safely at home, they should. Where there is no safe alternative, provision is being made in schools or other settings to enable children of critical workers and pupils with statements of special educational needs to follow their own school's learning remotely, as they would if they were at home.

Schools will be making lots of resources available online to support all children with their learning whether they are at a school or at home. This will include resources for children with additional learning needs. There are a range of digital tools and approaches available across the school system to help ensure continuity of learning for children, young people, teachers and leaders.   This includes resources available through Wales' learning platform, HWB, which has an extensive suite of tools that teachers can use to support remote learning.

If parents feel they need further help they should contact their local authority to find out what support, guidance and advice is available in their area.

Local health boards are developing and providing information too, and we are collecting and sharing good practice wider wherever possible. The Children's Commissioner for Wales has agreed to provide a hub for information on COVID-19 and we are working closely to ensure as much information is made available in formats suitable for young people across Wales.

I am a critical worker and my child will have to attend a school setting while I work – will my child's usual transport to school still be available?

Welsh Government is working closely with local authorities and the bus industry to

ensure continuity of services where these are required, as well as planning a return to normal operations once we are over the pandemic. Impact on services differs across Wales. It is therefore important you check with your local authority to determine what services are in place.

What financial support is being made available to local authorities and schools, given the demands currently being placed upon them?

Given the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on our education system, we accept there will be financial implications. Welsh Government is looking at this as a matter of urgency, including considering what can be made available from existing budgets to support the response to the pandemic.

We have established a single emergency funding stream for local authorities to meet the pressures arising from COVID-19. This will enable authorities to meet the additional costs of delivering existing essential services and the additional demands placed on them, including the new responsibilities arising from the UK Government's Coronavirus Act 2020, which became law on 26 March.

We are making £30m available for this in the first instance, which can be used to support the purchase of hygiene products. The funding support will also include up to £7m to support local authorities to urgently provide financial assistance to families of children who rely on free school meals, but are unable to receive them due to school closures, including during the Easter period.

How can we ensure that the hub school model is safe?

Detailed **guidance for schools and hubs to operate effectively and safely** (https://gov.wales/guidance-hubs-and-schools-coronavirus) has been published.

We are working closely with Local Authorities to ensure that all settings are properly supported and that appropriate measures around social distancing and hygiene are in place.

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