# WRITTEN STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE**  | **Return to schools and colleges** |
| **DATE**  | **05 January 2022** |
| **BY** | **Jeremy Miles MS, Minister for Education and Welsh Language** |

As learning resumes following the Christmas break, I want to provide an update on the latest position with our national guidance on the operational arrangements for schools and colleges. Our top priority remains to maximise in-person learning and minimise disruption to learners.

The current wave of the Covid-19 pandemic appears to be unfolding as projected in the modelling. Case numbers are increasing, and there are high levels of community transmission. This, alongside staff absences due to other illness, will continue to impact education provision over coming weeks. While data from Public Health Wales published just before Christmas showed that cases of coronavirus amongst children and young people aged 5-16 reduced in the weeks leading up to the Christmas break, this information must be treated with care, as should data over the holiday period. We will continue to monitor the data carefully as learners return to school.

Before Christmas I set out that that all schools would be provided with two planning days at the start of this term, with colleges provided with support to allow for individual decisions. This recognised the level of uncertainty and the pace at which we have had to adapt national policy. Having worked together with our partners in the education sector over the Christmas break, our national guidance was further updated in advance of these planning days to help schools and colleges ensure robust plans are in place prior to the return of learners over the coming days. The guidance requiring staff and secondary school learners to wear face coverings in school, including in classrooms, has been continued into the new term and schools and colleges have been asked to plan for the most protective measures in accordance with the framework in use in schools and colleges. These could include:

* the use of one-way systems;
* consistent seating plans where practicable;
* using suitable outdoor spaces;
* the use of contact groups where practicable;
* not holding large group gatherings such as assemblies.

We are providing schools with the option to operate staggered start and finish times as an additional mitigation should their risk assessment support this.

In addition, we are announcing today further funding of over £100m to support schools and colleges. This funding package includes:

* £50m to be provided via local authorities through the Sustainable Communities for Learning programme. This funding will help schools carry out capital repair and improvement work, with a focus on health and safety measures, such as improving ventilation;
* £45m of revenue funding to help support school budgets, assisting schools as they continue to deal with the ongoing impacts of the pandemic and to prepare for the requirements of the new curriculum; and
* An additional £8m to be provided to further education colleges, to ensure learning can continue safely and ensure the most disadvantaged learners are not further impacted by the pandemic.

While we anticipate periods of disruption to face-to-face learning for some over the next few weeks, we have reiterated to schools and colleges that any periods of remote learning should be kept to a minimum. Schools will also place a particular focus on supporting learners in exam years, children of critical workers and vulnerable children when reviewing and revising their contingency plans.

Colleges will continue working with a blended learning approach to ensure all students are able to access face-to-face learning, recognising the different learner needs and diversity of courses, assessments and qualifications being taken in college, including vocational qualifications and vulnerable learners. I have approved an additional £1m to support colleges with staff recruitment and to help attract practitioners to work in our colleges.

We continue to work closely with local authorities and supply agencies to help alleviate some of the staffing pressures schools have experienced. The new initiative that placed 400 newly qualified teachers in to paid posts in schools during the autumn term has also created capacity in schools and enabled these individuals to gain further experience. We have extended the scheme and these teachers will continue in their posts for the forthcoming term. We will continue to work with stakeholders to seek to identify practitioners who may be prepared to support schools facing acute pressures.

A number of changes have been made to regular testing, contact tracing and self-isolation arrangements over recent weeks which will help support learning in schools and colleges.

* All staff and secondary age learners and above are now strongly advised to use (and to report the results of) Lateral Flow Tests (LFTs) three times a week as a method of identifying asymptomatic cases. It is also important for staff and learners to do so prior to their return to school or college this week.
* Children and young people aged 5-17 and fully vaccinated adults are now asked to take LFTs every day for seven days if they are identified as a contact of a positive COVID-19 case. This is known as ‘Daily Contact Testing’. We have made additional LFT kits available to primary schools across Wales this week to help support this change.
* Those who test positive must self-isolate for seven days. On day six of isolation, they should take a lateral flow test and another test 24 hours later. If both results are negative, it is likely they are not infectious.
* Schools and colleges are able to order and distribute one pack of 7 LFTs to each member of staff and secondary aged learner and above on a weekly basis so these individuals should not struggle to access tests.
* This term we have moved to a nasal only LFT for use in schools. We have also reduced the bureaucracy and administration associated with the distribution of tests to make is easier for individuals to access tests and for schools and colleges to administer them.

Although these revised arrangements may require greater use of LFTs by some individuals, these changes further reduce the risk of transmission of coronavirus with the aim of keeping Covid out of our schools and colleges and minimising disruption to learning.

Our ongoing discussions continue to highlight the extreme pressures schools and colleges are facing and the need for us and other partners to create space and reduce bureaucracy wherever possible. We have already taken action to suspend performance measures, pause school categorisation, delay Estyn inspections and adapt the timeline for ALN implementation in the first year. We also took the decision to provide secondary schools with flexibility to introduce the new curriculum in 2023 if that is what is best for their pupils.

My officials continue to engage with stakeholders through the Managing Workload & Reducing Bureaucracy Group meetings, to discuss and prioritise issues relating to workload and bureaucracy across the schools system in Wales. There are a range of non Covid related issues that the Group plan to consider in further detail including lesson planning, data collection, lesson observations, PPA time etc. Alongside this work, as a government we are also looking carefully at planned consultations during 2022, prioritising only those that are absolutely necessary and considering light touch ways of engaging and consulting.

In addition, where practical challenges arise such as changes to utilise Google Meets as part of the Hwb deployment of ‘[Google Workspace for Education](https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fedu.google.com%2Fintl%2FALL_uk%2Fproducts%2Fworkspace-for-education%2Feducation-fundamentals%2F&data=04%7C01%7COwain.Lloyd001%40gov.wales%7C30c3855fff4f49d91bc908d9cfce6a65%7Ca2cc36c592804ae78887d06dab89216b%7C0%7C0%7C637769307712111307%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=NbLQFqcknGhF%2BC34t%2Foh2ADR9j4wXCQ9Bi1RIiGKMkY%3D&reserved=0)’, we have worked rapidly to secure potential solutions with Google which should enable any maintained school to access Google Meet recordings as required.

Finally, we have made it clear to organisations that we expect them to be flexible and responsive to the challenges facing schools, seeking out opportunities to create space and ease pressure whilst continuing to support our shared commitment to improvement. For example, in light of the current wave Estyn will be delaying their planned piloting of new inspection arrangements with schools and PRUs which were due to start with volunteer schools during January.

We are fortunate in Wales to have an education workforce of such professionalism and dedication and I want to thank them in advance for all they will do over the coming weeks to ensure our collective priority of minimising the disruption to education, and ensure where possible learners continue to receive in person learning.

This statement is being issued during recess in order to keep members informed. Should members wish me to make a further statement or to answer questions on this when the Senedd returns I would be happy to do so.