



To: Headteachers - all schools and settings

16 December 2021

Dear Headteacher

I want to thank you for your continued hard work and commitment during what I know has been an extremely challenging term.

Our collective priority continues to be to minimise the disruption to education, and ensure where possible learners continue to receive in person learning, as well as protecting school staff and learners.

We know that during this school term, there has been disruption due to staff absence which has resulted in some schools having to make the difficult decision to move certain classes/year groups to remote learning for short periods. In recognition of this, and the current levels of uncertainty regarding the impact of Omicron, I want to provide schools with as much clarity now as I can to enable you to plan and prepare for the return in January.

Therefore, I am providing all schools with two planning days at the start of the new spring term, this will allow you time to assess staffing capacity and put the necessary measures in place to support the return of learners.

I am also conscious that what we learn over the coming weeks about Omicron may require interventions for the higher risk levels as set out in our Local Decision Framework. Therefore as a precautionary approach, it would be prudent for you to plan your mitigations for the return based on the 'very high' risk level. As part of this preparation, I am issuing a Coronavirus Act 2020 Notice to allow schools to operate staggered start and finish times from the start of the new term as an additional mitigation should schools determine this is appropriate as part of their risk assessment process.

The planning days will also allow secondary school leaders to plan for learners to safely sit their January exams. Attached are further details about an additional package of support for learners I will be announcing today.

Please also make use of the planning days to ensure that you have robust plans in place to move to remote learning. This could be for individual classes/year groups or possibly for the whole school, depending on your staffing pressures.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

Schools should also revisit their contingency plans to ensure exam years are prioritised for onsite provision should there be a need to restrict in person learning at any time. In revisiting your contingency plans, you should also consider what arrangements might need to be in place for vulnerable learners and the children of critical workers during any periods of disruption. Please find attached some further guidance to support you with your planning days.

We will also ensure that if there are any further updates over the holiday period, we will share this in advance of your planning days. We will also continue to work closely with your Directors of Education and with the Trade Unions over the coming weeks.

I am rolling forward our advice on face coverings in to the new term. In addition, it is very important that staff and learners continue regular Lateral Flow Testing in term time so we can find and isolate those who are potentially infectious to others without knowing. It is particularly important, now and in the new term, while we gather evidence and build our understanding of the Omicron variant. Moving forward, our strong expectation is that all staff and learners of secondary age and above should test **three** times a week using LFDs (on Monday, Wednesday and Friday) in the week before returning to school and to then continue testing regularly **three** times a week after the start of term in January. We will be increasing our communications to remind staff and learners of the importance of testing on this basis. Our arrangements for staff in special educational provision remain in place. However, the 'test to safeguard' approach for these staff will continue to be considered alongside social care staff and where appropriate any changes in approach for social care staff will be reflected for special school staff.

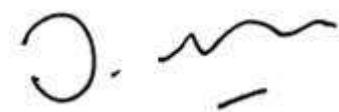
Booster dose vaccination of all staff and eligible children and young people, remains a mainstay of combating virus harm, along with the customary NPIs and testing regimens. Everyone should prioritise getting their booster when offered and I would ask schools to allow for that in their planning.

It will continue to be important that no one with COVID-19 symptoms attends school at the start of term and they should book a PCR test.

This is a fast evolving situation and we continue to monitor the latest data, there may be a need to issue further updates in the event of any significant developments during the Christmas holiday period. In these circumstances, we will work closely with your Directors of Education to consider how best to provide you with the time required to make any necessary adjustments to mitigations at the start of term.

I would like to end by repeating my thanks to you for your immense hard work over the most challenging of times. I hope you and all your school staff have a well-earned Christmas break.

Diolch o galon

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'J. Miles', with a stylized flourish underneath.

Jeremy Miles AS/MS
Gweinidog y Gymraeg ac Addysg
Minister for Education and Welsh Language