

P-05-985 Provide key-worker childcare equivalent to what was available prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, Correspondence – Petitioner to Minister for Education, 06.09.20

Kirsty Williams AS/MS
Y Gweinidog Addysg/Minister for Education

Adam Calcutt

6th September 2020

Dear Ms Williams,

Thank you for your response to my petition: P-05-985 to provide childcare equivalent to what was available prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. I am very grateful to the Petitions Committee for taking this matter forward.

Along with, I am sure, the vast majority of parents in Wales, I am very pleased that our children are finally heading back to school to access the education and social interactions they so desperately need.

I would like to take this opportunity, however, to comment on some of the assertions you make in your letter.

I initiated the petition in response to a decision made by Monmouthshire County Council to drastically reduce the operating hours of the school hubs provided for childcare purposes for the children of essential workers at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic with very limited notice. This change made it impossible for many key workers to fulfil their contracted hours of work. I also raised concerns about summer holiday childcare provision and the exclusion of key worker children from the “Check in, Catch up, Prepare” school sessions provided at the end of the summer term.

Unfortunately, by the time my petition reached its hearing at the Petitions Committee session on 17th July 2020, it was too late to influence local authorities to reinstate childcare provision that would cover a full working day. However, I believe this is an issue that is worth taking forward in the unfortunate event that an increase in coronavirus cases should lead to further local or national lockdowns. If schools should be required to close again in the future, key worker childcare provision must be maintained in order to allow essential roles to continue to be performed. This provision needs to cover core working hours. There must be an undertaking by the Welsh Government to insist that local authorities plan ahead for this “worst-case scenario” and ensure plans are put in place ahead of issues arising.

You state that you “believe the pandemic has brought into sharp focus how much social reliance there is on schools beyond the educational role”. Indeed, it must be understood that in this era needs are very different to how they may have been in the past. The vast majority of modern families work; they have to in order to make ends meet. Women are no longer stay-at-home housewives but have careers, aspirations and independence and contribute fully to wider society. The traditional school day and academic year format are no longer fit for purpose and the current situation could be used to make positive changes to bring the school system into the 21st century. Wrap-around care is essential to enable parents to work and families struggle to find childcare for the 13 weeks of school holidays a year (with additional teacher training days) when annual leave allowances come nowhere near meeting this.

Parents base their choices on what kind of family to have and how to manage their families on the availability of childcare. For example, before choosing a primary school for our children we researched the possible local options, deciding on a school that offered both breakfast club and after school club provision. No-one could have foreseen the disruption that would be caused by coronavirus; it is unprecedented for schools to shut in the way that they have over the past few months. It must be accepted, though, that parents cannot work without childcare in place and this has been of particular importance for families where parents are key workers who have been required to continue working while many others have been furloughed or able to work from home. As key workers we have continued to provide essential services, without which the health, safety and well-being of us all would be at risk. We are not asking for anything over-and-above what is usually available – just that in the event of any further school closures there is childcare provision for key workers covering the period of 8.00am–5.00pm, thus enabling us to continue our essential roles. Additionally, this provision needs to continue throughout any school holidays. We have based decisions about our families and work lives on the basis of available childcare facilities; without these in place we simply cannot fulfil our roles, to the detriment of the whole of the population of Wales.

I am disappointed to note that the approach taken to summer holiday childcare provision by various local authorities has been patchy, to say the least. Yet another example of a “postcode lottery” leading to variable services where there has been no coherent nationwide leadership. Looking ahead, should a situation arise in future where key workers require childcare provision over school holiday periods, a comprehensive national solution should be in place.

It would be very interesting to see how, exactly, the £2.6million funding you say was provided by Welsh Government was spent by the various local authorities. Considering just the area covered by the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board (my own employer), two areas provided no childcare whatsoever for key worker families: Blaenau Gwent and Powys. I have no idea how parents in these areas were supposed to manage childcare over such an extended period. Monmouthshire (our local authority) provided five weeks of childcare available to all with no key worker priority booking available. Places were only confirmed a few days before the end of term, making booking leave and planning cover at work incredibly difficult. Parents had to pay £20 per day per child and find alternative provision for the final two or three weeks of the holidays, with the scheme ceasing on 21st August but most schools not returning fully until well into September. Torfaen provided 130 free places per day for key worker children over a five-week period, with families only being able to attend for three weeks during this time – leaving four weeks of no childcare. Caerphilly made even less provision available for key worker families, offering just two weeks of childcare. Newport alone have made a stand, acknowledging the importance of childcare in enabling key workers to continue to provide essential services, and thanking them for doing so during such a difficult period. They provided four weeks of free childcare. The Newport City Council website states:

Councillor Jane Mudd, Leader of Newport City Council, said: “We know how important our childcare provision in schools and Flying Start hubs has been for some parents during the pandemic but that was finishing at the end of term.

“We decided that we would step in and provide childcare during the school holidays even though there was no requirement for us to do so.

“We owe a great debt of gratitude to our key workers and they are still vital as we cautiously move through the recovery period. I am glad that we are able to continue to provide this childcare.”

It is a shame that other local authorities felt unable to emulate this.

You suggest in your response to the Petitions Committee that alternative childcare became available when term finished on 17th July 2020. This may be true in some areas, but certainly not all, with many holiday clubs and other schemes remaining closed or limiting access to protect “bubbles” of children already in place. I would also ask how key workers, while continuing to work, were supposed to research, visit and vet these providers whom they have not previously

accessed? I, for one, would not be happy to leave my young children in circumstances I had not been able to fully check out. You also cite assistance from extended families to help with childcare issues, but fail to acknowledge that not every family has this luxury and also that many grandparents would have fitted into the vulnerable category and so were required to continue shielding until 16th August – a full month after the end of the school term – and so could not help out until after this time.

You mention a “support package” to assist “disadvantaged and vulnerable” learners. Please would you confirm that key worker children could now fit into the category of “disadvantaged” as they have not been able to access home learning in the way that other children have as their parents have been required to work and also because they were denied access, through no choice of their families, to the sessions at the end of term? Our children will have fallen behind educationally as a result of our commitment to our work roles; they will need help to regain lost ground and should not be excluded from this because they would not traditionally be thought of as a vulnerable or disadvantaged group.

I very much hope that the return to school goes without any hitches and that in Wales we manage to continue to keep the pandemic successfully under control. However, we must acknowledge that circumstances may change and local or national lockdowns or other control measures may need to be reimposed. It is clear, from what we have seen in other countries and, indeed, other parts of the United Kingdom, that the pandemic has not gone away. A “second spike” during the autumn and winter months is a very real possibility and must be planned for. Key workers will need to continue their essential roles throughout any such periods, just as they did at the height of the crisis earlier in the year, but must receive support in order to do so. Our children need to receive safe and stimulating care while we are unable to stay at home with them. This care must cover the hours of a full working day to enable us to fulfil our necessary roles. The care must continue over periods of school holidays and our children cannot continue to be educationally disadvantaged as we are not in a position to undertake comprehensive home schooling.

I hope you will consider these points and take them forward to ensure key workers across Wales are able to continue to provide essential services should there, unfortunately, be any further disruption to public life as a result of this unprecedented pandemic.

Yours sincerely,

Adam Calcutt