

WHAT DOES SCHOOLS OPENING MEAN FOR SCHOOL SUPPORT STAFF?

The Wales Education Minister announced on 3rd June that schools in Wales will re-open on 29th June for the purpose of 'checking in, catching up and preparing for September. She also advised of an extension of one week to the end of this term meaning schools break up on 27th July as opposed to 20th July. In some Authorities, the additional week will not go ahead, you should have received confirmation on whether your school is opening or not.

Will schools be ready to re-open safely on 29th June?

Following UNISON stating our opposition to schools in Wales reopening on 29th June, backed up by our survey which nearly 4000 of you took part in, Welsh Government have engaged further with the trade unions over measures to ensure that preparations for when schools do reopen will be thorough so that schools will be as safe as possible for staff and pupils to return.

As a result of these discussions, Welsh Government will be putting in place further robust processes for risk assessments and monitoring health and safety, and will make additional funding available to ensure sufficient cleaning staff can be engaged to enable schools to be thoroughly cleaned. Unless this is specifically your job, you will not be expected to undertake cleaning duties.

UNISON has continued to meet regularly with Welsh government and has been clear in our message that any decision to widen school provision needs to have at its core, the health safety and wellbeing of all staff, pupils and families. We have insisted on appropriate lead in time to ensure that robust risk assessments are undertaken and plans for test trace and protect are established before pupil engagement can be introduced more widely.

What measures will schools take to safely manage more pupils returning to school?

- There will be a phased approach in each school year with no more than one third of pupils expected at any one time.
- Year groups will be split into cohorts with staggered start times, lessons and breaks.
- Class sizes will be much smaller which supports social distancing and offers more dedicated time with teachers, teaching assistants and friends.
- The same staff will remain with the pupils during the time they are in school.
- Pupils will be offered a mix of online and personalised classroom experience, this will help prepare for the Autumn term when it is likely that this type of approach is going to continue to be necessary.

How can I be sure it is safe to go back to work?

UNISON has continued to meet regularly with Welsh Government and has been clear in our message that any wider opening of schools needs to have at its core, the health safety and wellbeing of all staff, pupils and families. We have insisted on appropriate lead in time to ensure that robust risk assessments are undertaken and plans for test trace and protect are established before more pupils can return to school.

As a result of these discussions, Welsh Government will be putting in place further robust processes for risk assessments and monitoring health and safety, and will make additional funding available to ensure sufficient cleaning staff can be engaged to enable schools to be thoroughly cleaned. Unless this is specifically your job, you will not be expected to undertake cleaning duties.

Here is a 'Back to School Checklist' <https://cymru-wales.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/sites/9/2020/06/Back-to-School-Checklist.pdf> which UNISON Cymru Wales have produced for you to use to make sure that all necessary preparations and risk assessments have been carried out before your school reopens and during the time you're in school. This is to help you and us to identify where there may be risks that compromise our members safety. When you feel these arrangements are not being followed, please contact your rep/branch immediately.

All plans will need to include robust risk assessments which need to be approved by the unions. In some cases there may be the need for individual risk assessments and these too need to be approved by unions.

For any concerns about your return to school, please contact your branch to discuss - details of all branches can be found here. <https://branches.unison.org.uk/>

If my school stays open for the last week of July, will I have to go in to work? And if I do work an extra week, will I be paid?

Many Local Authorities have now decided that schools in their area will **not** remain open for a fourth week from 20th July. The majority of UNISON members working in school are Term-Time-Only staff which means you are not contracted to work for the extra week of term from 20th -27th July. Your employer cannot unilaterally vary your contract to make you work that week, but you may voluntarily agree to do so and if so you should be paid for that week and accrue additional holiday entitlement. We are clear that this week should not be set against an additional week's half-term break in the autumn, as there is no certainty about what will happen in October. In addition, some staff will be due to leave school this summer and would lose out in any such arrangement.

I have been shielding, will I be forced to return to work?

Welsh Government has revised its guidance for clinically vulnerable staff and learners in the 'Schools Increasing Operations' guidance; this now says

In the context of COVID-19, Clinically Vulnerable individuals are at greater than average risk from COVID-19. This category includes people aged over 70, those who are pregnant and those who have a range of chronic health conditions. Pregnant women are specifically advised to work from home after 28 weeks' gestation.

People in this category can go out to work but they should work from home if possible. If staff or learners do attend, extra care must be taken to ensure vulnerable individuals, and those around them adhere to strict social distancing guidelines.'

This is a change from the guidance for Hubs which stated –

'Any member of staff who falls into the shielding category or those who fall into the stringent social distancing categories should not be expected to work in either a school or hub.'

UNISON is clear that clinically vulnerable staff should not be required to return to school at the moment, in line with national guidance agreed between NJC trade unions and the Local Government Association, which covers school support staff. Our advice is that

'If you or someone you live with has an underlying health condition, is pregnant or over 70, you should arrange to work from home. The NJC national unions and Local Government Association employers have issued clear guidance to schools that staff in this position should not be in school during the epidemic. So you should be either working from home, or if that is not possible, be home on full pay for the duration of this emergency. Also, you could temporarily agree to take on other work tasks from home.' Please speak to your branch <https://branches.unison.org.uk/> if you have any concerns.

Will all education staff be eligible for the antibody test?

New information on the Welsh Government website says -

'Education staff working in hub settings are a priority group in the new antibody testing programme. In the first instance we are testing a sample of staff that have worked in the education hubs, supporting the children of key workers and vulnerable children during the pandemic. This is to help us better understand how many people may have had Covid-19 and develop our understanding of the disease further, as the science in relation to immunity is unknown. The sample of staff who have been prioritised for antibody testing will have been/will be contacted by their local health board in relation to this.

Until the scientists learn more, a positive antibody test result only tells you that you've probably had the virus. It will not mean that you're immune, or that you cannot pass on the virus to others. It also does not mean that you are exempt from and are able to ignore the latest Government advice on social distancing and other interventions to control the spread of the virus.'

This falls far short of what was implied by the announcement by the Minister for Education that school staff will be a priority group in the antibody testing programme, and we have conveyed UNISON's disappointment to Welsh Government.

What will happen to the Hub Provision

Children of key workers and vulnerable children will be expected to attend their own school from 29th June.

Will the Hubs operate over the summer holidays?

The provision of childcare over the holiday period is not going to be provided by schools. How this will operate is yet to be determined by Welsh Government, but there is no expectation for you to work in the Hubs during this period.

If I have to go to work, how will my children be cared for?

Childcare providers will also be able to increase the numbers of children in attendance from 29 June. If you are unable to secure childcare, this must be discussed with your employer and options for working from home should be explored.

What about PPE, will this be provided?

The guidance on PPE for schools from Welsh Government refers to UK Government guidance which was published on 2 April 2020, following a rapid review by Public Health England and the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges. The Deputy Chief Medical Officer for Wales was involved in this review.

The new guidance only covers the use of PPE for health and social care workers. The guidance does not recommend PPE for other sectors, including teachers and school staff, who are classed as low or no-risk.

This means government guidance is that hygiene and social distancing measures offer adequate protection for those groups.

Children or staff who are feeling ill or displaying any symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19) should not visit or attend their school or childcare setting. The number of social interactions in the education or childcare environment will be reduced, due to there being fewer children attending. Operating a strict social distancing protocol, encouraging frequent and thorough hand washing by staff and children using soap and water, and encouraging more frequent cleaning and disinfection of hand contact surfaces will further reduce the infection risk.

Headteachers should liaise with their local authority health and safety or infection control leads for schools if they have any concerns over the supply of hygiene products for cleaning and disinfection.'