

UNISON Cymru/Wales

UNISON in SCHOOLS

Dear UNISON member,

While schools in Wales are now closed other than for vulnerable and keyworkers' children, it is UNISON's view that schools should not reopen for face-to-face lessons until after the half-term break.

UNISON had been calling for a delay in the return to schools in the New Year since well before Christmas in both regular meetings and urgent correspondence with Welsh Government.

With public safety at risk from spiralling infection rates and the new variant of COVID-19, UNISON does not believe it will be possible to ensure schools are safe before February. Education Minister Kirsty Williams has said schools will not open before 18th January, but much longer is needed to review medical and scientific evidence and put in place necessary measures.

Welsh Government should decide now that all schools throughout Wales will remain closed until after half-term; this would give time for preparations to ensure it is safe to reopen schools and avoid the uncertainty and anxiety of last-minute decisions and the confusion of differing situations in various parts of Wales; we need an all-Wales approach rather than leaving decisions to local authorities.

UNISON is calling for the following measures to be in place before schools return to face-to-face lessons:

- Medical and scientific evidence regarding the impact of the new covid-19 variant must be made available to trade unions and social partners
- All risk assessments for school premises and individual school staff must be reviewed with reference to the evidence on the new variant of COVID-19
- A comprehensive plan for the Lateral Flow testing in schools must be implemented
- Clear guidance on protecting clinically vulnerable workers must be provided, with working from home being the default position.
- Prioritising all school staff for covid-19 vaccinations

The administration of lateral flow tests must be undertaken only by experienced personnel and schools should be provided with additional resources for this provision. Volunteers from the existing workforce can be sought but must be suitably trained and graded appropriately.

While schools remain closed other than for vulnerable and keyworkers' children, it is less likely that you will need to decide to issue the 'Section 44' letter circulated earlier this week; however all workers are entitled to a safe workplace and if you genuinely feel you are being asked to attend work in an unsafe environment you have the right to issue the letter. You should speak to your branch before submitting the letter and if

you lose pay, because of your in good faith action, you should contact your branch as a CASE form will need to be completed to obtain legal representation.

UNISON is clear that staffing the provision for vulnerable and keyworkers' children should be a shared responsibility for all school staff on a rota basis; it is not acceptable for only support staff to be required to attend school for this provision while other staff are permitted to work entirely from home. Equally, the message from Welsh Government is clear – 'everyone must stay at home' – you should not be asked to attend school to do tasks unless they are related directly to supporting vulnerable or critical workers children. If you have concerns about what you are being asked to do, please contact your branch to discuss.

Although special schools, PRUs and early years settings, including nurseries, are remaining open, staff in these settings have the same right to a safe working environment as all workers. UNISON believes that all special schools, PRUs and early years settings will need to review their risk assessments because of the increased transmissibility of the new variant of COVID-19 and the increased risk to staff. We are calling for a review of the size of so called 'bubbles' and restricting further the number of children in these groups. Settings will also need to re-assess the risk to vulnerable staff and allow home working where possible. In addition, individuals shouldn't have to work where they believe that they (or others) face serious and imminent danger. If you have any concerns, please contact [your local UNISON branch](#) for further advice and support.

From December 23rd shielding has been re-introduced for those people who are Clinically Extremely Vulnerable - <https://gov.wales/shielding-extremely-vulnerable-people>

'The advice to those who are Clinically Extremely Vulnerable has changed. You are advised that you should no longer attend work or school outside the home. We will be sending a letter out in the New Year to confirm this advice to you.'

You can refer your employer to this advice if you need to before you have received your new letter.

For clinically vulnerable staff, you should ask for your individual risk assessment to be reviewed. The Local Government Association (LGA) has advised employers to follow the same guidance they circulated during the March lockdown for clinically vulnerable staff.

[NJC 17 March circular – Coronavirus and working at home](#)

[NJC 23 March circular – COVID-19: critical workers](#)

UNISON believes that working from home will also be the safest option for other employees with underlying vulnerabilities or who live with people who are clinically vulnerable.

For further information please visit:

Our dedicated schools page on the UNISON Cymru Wales website which has lots of information for school support staff <https://cymru-wales.unison.org.uk/campaigns/school-support-staff-cymru-wales-corona-virus/>

You can get all the latest information for schools' members by following the UNISON Cymru Wales school support staff Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/walessupportstaff>

For any specific enquiries, please contact your branch – details can be found by clicking the link <https://branches.unison.org.uk/>

Best wishes and please be assured of our continued support.

Jonathan Lewis

Chair – UNISON Cymru Wales Regional Schools Forum

Rosie Lewis

UNISON Cymru Wales Regional Schools Lead