

Dear parents and carers

I write to update you on the plans that Monmouthshire County Council has been making to facilitate the return to face-to-face learning for our youngest pupils in the week commencing the 22nd February.

Wales remains at alert level four meaning the highest level restrictions remain in situ. However, at the three weekly review of these controls on the 29th January the First Minister announced that if there was sufficient improvement in COVID related indicators then some children could start to return to school from the 22nd February. The Education Minister announced on the 5th February that our youngest pupils, the Foundation Phase (those children in years nursery- to year 2) would be the group that returned after half term.

In the period since that announcement a great deal of work has taken place with schools and Monmouthshire staff to ensure that the plans for the return to school are as safe as possible for all learners and school staff. Our schools have been providing remote learning for the majority of pupils this term and face-to-face provision for the children of critical workers and vulnerable learners. The step back to providing face-to-face provision for a full phase is one that requires careful planning.

The Welsh Government has today published its operational guidance to allow schools to plan for the return. Clearly, this does not allow a great deal of time between publication and anticipated return on the 22nd February given that next week is half term. Alongside the return to school of the Foundation Phase, additional measures are being introduced to further mitigate risks and provide reassurance to all stakeholders. These include teachers wearing three-ply masks in all areas of the school, including the classroom and the provision of lateral flow testing to all school based staff, including our teams who work so closely to support our teachers and teaching assistants. This has had an impact on our planning timeline.

We know that this time away from school for our youngest learners is a challenge; time away from friends and the school setting could affect their social, emotional and educational development. We also know that the youngest children find it harder to access remote learning and the aspirations of the Foundation Phase teaching methods are not necessarily conducive to remote learning.

Mae'r Cyngor yn croesawu gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg, Saesneg neu yn y ddwy iaith. Byddwn yn cyfathrebu â chi yn ôl eich dewis.

Ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

The Council welcomes correspondence in English or Welsh or both, and will respond to you according to your preference.

Corresponding in Welsh will not lead to delay.

It is our intention that across Monmouthshire our schools will return to face-to-face teaching of the Foundation Phase on Wednesday 24th February. On Monday 22nd and Tuesday 23rd February the existing provision for critical workers' children and vulnerable learners will continue. We have tried to balance the competing perspectives I set out above and believe that this solution provides a definitive return date whilst affording schools the necessary time to prepare.

The actions that our schools will put in place in the coming days are designed to ensure that this return to school can be a permanent arrangement (one that will be supplemented by our older children returning in the near future). I know that they will implement these measures in a rigorous and robust way that will ensure your children's safety in school. However, I also know that the actions in school will be rendered ineffectual if we do not continue to observe the Alert Level 4 restrictions in our communities. I know how hard maintaining this discipline is but mixing of bubbles outside of school for parties and sleepovers, congregating at the school gate, not observing social distancing and taking groups of children to the park all risk cases in school and more days lost through isolation requirements or even a reversal of the Foundation Phase returning to school. This is a difficult message but it is a vital one if this is to be successful.

I want to extend my thanks to all of our schools for the work they have been undertaking but also to you for your support of your children during these incredibly challenging times.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'W. McLean', followed by a horizontal line.

WILL MCLEAN
CHIEF OFFICER, CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE