

P-05-1151 Provide a date for the return of Organised Children's Activities for Babies & Toddlers, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 06.03.21

Thank you very much for giving us the opportunity to submit our further comments on our petition for your consideration.

I set up this petition on behalf of all Baby & Toddler classes in Wales, as well as on behalf of all the Parents, Carers and young children who access our Services.

I have run Tots Play Cardiff North Baby & Toddler Play classes in Cardiff for nearly 7 years, as well as being a Mum to two young children myself.

In Wales, we are so lucky to have such a diverse range of classes on offer for Baby & Toddlers, from Baby & Toddler Sign Language to Sensory Play, from Baby Massage to Swimming classes. These developmental activities are so important to young children's early development, as is the socialisation and learning through play that they benefit from from classes. Babies and Toddlers learn using their whole bodies and all of their senses, so classes provide a range of activities to help develop these. They also learn so much through play.

Not all Babies and Toddlers have a chance outside of classes to socialise, in normal times let alone these times. Not all young children attend private nursery. Classes like ours provide them with a safe, nurturing space where they can explore and play with other young children and enjoy and benefit from all the activities we all offer.

Some lockdown Babies have never seen another Baby in real life, which is just so heart breaking. All children have missed out on so much over the last year, but with Wales now starting to unlock again, we really need to make sure the Babies and Toddler in Wales are not forgotten about.

Its not just the young children who benefit though. Its mainly Mums that come along to classes, although Dads, Grandparents and Carers come along too.

Baby & Toddler classes are so important to Mums in particular for meeting other Mums with children of a similar age, who they can then develop friendships with week on week at classes. This is vital for them to help to build up their social support networks. With so many families living further and further away now, new Mums really need to be able to develop these friendships and support networks so that they have that crucial support in the early days and beyond. This is vital to their well being and mental health.

Being a new Mum can be an extremely isolating time if you dont have the opportunity to get out and build these friendships.

We help support Mums who are finding making friends hard and also Mums who are suffering with PostNatal Depression through various different means. A very big part of what we do is with our Mums at heart.

Many of the services that new Mums would normally be able to access regularly have ceased or been greatly reduced during these times. For example, many of our Parents have never seen their Health Visitor, when this would normally have been a service they could have accessed weekly at Clinics.

We are often thought of as 'playgroups', but we are really very different to these. We are structured, planned and prepared classes delivered in warm and welcoming environments.

Many Classes in Wales have been able to still operate via Online classes, but not all have been able to do this and many have lost their income totally. Our sector is mainly made up of self employed people. Not everyone in our sector has been able to access Grants. Some classes have had to close for good.

Online classes have been a lifeline, to us and to Parents, but they just aren't the same as being in the same room together.

We use a wide range of equipment at face to face classes and most Parents don't have access to this in their homes. We have had to limit the activities we are doing Online to ones they can join in with with items they have to hand at home.

Social interaction Online for both Parents and the young children is also totally different, although as a sector we have tried so very hard to provide opportunities for parents and the children play and chat 'together' online, this is just not the same as at face to face classes.

Support for online classes is dropping massively and we aren't sure how much longer we can survive as a sector online.

Most of us operate in line with School term times and with the Spring/Summer Term now approaching fast most of us are now having to rebook our class spaces. With Parents unsure of what format our classes will be in and with many of them no longer wanting to attend Online classes, bookings are massively down for next term as we don't have a date to be able to return to face to face classes.

Safety wise, as a sector we went above and beyond to make sure our classes were safe last term (we were able to operate indoor classes between September and December 2020).

We operated in freshly cleaned rooms, cleaned and sanitised all kit and contact areas in between uses and we sat Parents at measured 2 meter distances.

Parents queued outside at a Social Distance wearing masks and they didn't take their masks off until they were seated at their spots. If they needed to move around the room, for example to use the baby changing facilities, they put their masks back on. Parents were asked to not chat in the car parks before and after class in groups of more than 4, to stay at a social distance and to keep their masks on, as per the last Guidance for our Sector in December 2020.

Hand sanitiser was used by everyone on entry and exit to the building.

We made safety announcements at the start and end of classes, to remind Parents what we all needed to do to keep each other safe.

Class Leaders wore masks to greet and wave off everyone plus when we moved around the room, for example with a bubble machine.

We sanitised toilets and light switches in between classes and windows were kept open to allow for ventilation.

We used microphones so we didn't project our voices and we stopped singing to prevent droplets.

The Guidance was ever changing, but we adapted and kept pushing to ensure the safety of our parents and children, as well as for our own families at home.

I can't explain to you how much extra work this was and how exhausted our Class Leaders were, but we will continue to do all this and more to ensure our classes are safe.

England have a date of 12th April to be able to reopen Baby & Toddler classes, but we have so far been overlooked as a sector for being able to reopen by Welsh Government.

There is so much confusion within our sector over when we are able to return to face to face classes. Now we have been named in Legislation as Organised Children's activities (which happened only very recently in November/December 2020), it states that we are unable to operate face to face classes in Tier 4. In Tier 3 we are able to return back to our classrooms.

Unless we are named as a sector which can reopen before then, we are very concerned that it will be a long time before we are able to return to face to face classes. We really need a clear indication of when we can expect to be able to resume our classes.

So much planning and preparation goes into every single class, we also really need to be given notice in advance of when we can go back, like other sectors are being given.

I asked my Mums last week why they feel they & their children need to go back to face to face classes and I was overwhelmed by the number of responses as well as the content of that they said. This was what prompted me to set up this petition and to then spend a massive amount of time (as well as home schooling and working) to try and get word out more widely in Wales.

I'd like to share a few of their comments with you please...

"Having a baby is fun & exciting but also scary, daunting & a complete minefield, even if you have done it before! Having a baby in the middle of a pandemic is a whole different level of scary, with new worries & anxieties thrown in. Having barely seen anyone for months, starting face to face Tots Play classes was amazing. Not only did my baby actually get to see other real life babies, it also gave me some adult conversation, support & encouragement from other parents, going through similar things.

The end of the face to face classes has been really sad. Kate has done such a good job at keeping us busy & entertained with online classes & they are so appreciated, but nothing can compare to watching your baby interact with & smile at other babies & get excited when you enter the class because she knows she is going to have fun! We always felt really safe at class & there were lots of measures in place to keep us protected & remind us to be careful. I'm back in work in a few months but really hope we can attend some face to face classes before this time as the experience is invaluable to both myself & my daughter."

"Face to face classes have always been an essential part of mine and my daughter's routines. We went into lockdown when she was 1 and for the past year she has missed out on key opportunities to socially engage and interact with her fellow peers. Tots Play has done an amazing job transferring classes online but obviously does not provide the same interaction you would get when other children are present and able to engage together. I feel so sad she has missed out on this and very much look forward to when face to face classes can resume once more. During the easing of lockdown when face to face could resume for a period, I felt very safe entering into the space with my daughter. All covid procedure's were strictly adhered to and felt relaxed for my daughter and I to come and participate in the classes. I feel this sector has been massively overlooked and should be considered highly as a key part of a preschool child's development. I very much hope that with spaces as safe and secure as they have always been, that face to face classes can resume very shortly and once again our little people can flourish together."

"Where to begin with how important these classes are?!?! Not just for the social interaction for babies (which for most will be their first) but for the support as new mums too!! If you could see all the little faces just light up seeing other babies, discovering new sensory toys, music, singing... you would see how priceless this is. Zoom classes are better than nothing but babies just don't respond to a screen like the real thing! I feel so sad that soon I will be back working full time and have barely had any opportunity to give my baby these invaluable experiences...

For us new Mums, the support from Health Visitors has been significantly reduced due to the pandemic, so just having the opportunity to talk to other mums who are going through it as

well makes you feel like you are not alone, and we actually learn a lot from each others experiences!

The few classes we went to before this lockdown were very well managed in terms of social distancing so there is no reason why they can't start up again asap in my opinion. I would have zero concerns about the safety of myself or my baby."

Having a date to be able to return to face to face classes would mean that our sector is able to continue to provide these much needed services in the future and to ensure that our Parents, babies and toddlers in Wales are no longer missing out on our important Services.

Thank you very much for reading

Kate Worgan
Class Leader and Franchisee Tots Play Cardiff North