

Kirsty Williams MS, Minister for Education

Vaughan Gething MS, Minister for Health and Social Services

Julie Morgan MS, Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services

Dyddiad | Date: 12 May 2020

Pwnc | Subject: **CYPE Committee scrutiny of the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people**

Dear Ministers,

Thank you for appearing before the Committee on **28 April** and **5 May** to answer our questions about the actions you have taken to date to manage the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people.

The **Annex** to this letter highlights the areas on which we request further detail and/or reassurance at this stage in the pandemic. It is not an exhaustive list of the issues we consider important; rather, our intention is to provide feedback to the Welsh Government, at pace, on the areas we believe require more attention. It is written based on information available in the public domain as at 11 May 2020.

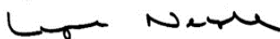
Our work to scrutinise the actions being taken to manage the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people will continue over the weeks ahead. As only a limited number of public meetings are available to us at the moment, we have prioritised the following areas for sessions with stakeholders:

- support for vulnerable children (Monday 18 May);
- support for the physical and mental health of children and young people (Tuesday 9 June);
- support for the higher and further education sector (Tuesday 23 June).

We have also reserved one session (Tuesday 7 July) to explore any clear themes arising from our **rolling call for views**.

While we recognise that children and young people currently appear to be less susceptible to the virus than adults, there is little doubt that the wider effects of Covid-19—and the measures taken to manage it—have impacted their lives significantly. Our aim in undertaking this scrutiny is to explore these impacts and mitigate the risks associated with them as quickly and effectively as possible. We will share with you on a regular basis the findings and views we draw from the evidence we receive.

Kind regards,



**Lynne Neagle MS**  
**Chair**

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg | We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.



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## ANNEX

### 1. Vulnerable children

On 1 May the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services issued a [written statement](#) detailing the steps taken to support children and young people and maintain their safety.

While we welcome the range of steps outlined in the statement to support children and young people, we remain particularly concerned about the visibility of—and support available for—our most vulnerable children. The relatively low number of children considered vulnerable attending hubs and schools currently restricts the education system’s ability to fulfil its normal role as a safeguarding safety net. As such, we welcome the Minister for Education’s reference to the cross-governmental approach adopted to date and believe this is essential if we are to avoid important (and potentially grave) issues being missed.<sup>1</sup>

Responding to our concerns about maintaining contact with and supporting vulnerable children and their families, the Deputy Minister stated:

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“...we've now got 890 vulnerable children attending school settings, and that's the highest number that we've had at all since the opening of the scheme. But it's still only a tiny drop in the ocean. But it's very good, and it is progress that the numbers attending are now going up.

But, of course, there are a lot of children who are not attending school and the social services are not necessarily seeing. There has been a drop in safeguarding referrals to social services. Those numbers are now beginning to go up, but there certainly was a significant drop, which is a great deal of concern. One local authority, in fact, reported a drop of 27 per cent in terms of safeguarding referrals compared to this time last year.”<sup>2</sup>

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**We believe further details need to be provided publicly to demonstrate a robust approach to identifying and supporting our most vulnerable children and young people, particularly during any period in which schools and other education settings remain closed to the majority. This is particularly important in relation to those children who may be vulnerable but not engaged with statutory services. We have prioritised the issue of support for vulnerable children for our first public evidence session with stakeholders on 18 May and will write to you in due course with our findings.**

**We would also welcome an update on the wider, more flexible definition of vulnerable children the Deputy Minister indicated would follow after the session on 5 May.<sup>3</sup>**

### 2. Special educational needs and education otherwise than at school

The challenges of maintaining provision for those with a statement of special educational needs (SEN) as part of widespread school closures was acknowledged by the Minister for Education.<sup>4</sup> **We would welcome further detail of the specific arrangements being put in place for SEN pupils’ continuing learning given that:**

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<sup>1</sup> Record of Proceedings, [para 39](#), 28 April 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Record of Proceedings, [paras 78-79](#), 5 May 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Record of Proceedings, [para 85](#), 5 May 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Record of Proceedings, [paras 41-42](#), 28 April 2020.



- they may have a physical condition which, although they are vulnerable and should be entitled to attend school, means they cannot on medical grounds;
- they are likely to find distance learning more difficult than other pupils as they rely more on one-to-one and/or face-to-face teaching.

The [Coronavirus Act 2020](#) gives the Welsh Ministers powers to relax statutory duties on local authorities and schools temporarily. **We would welcome:**

- an outline of the Welsh Government’s view on whether it anticipates a need to use these powers in response to local authorities and schools being unable to continue delivering provision, particularly in relation to arrangements specified in SEN statements, in practice;
- if so, an outline of the checks and balances that would be put in place to ensure that any relaxation of duties to make provision is proportionate and does not detract from the importance of SEN pupils continuing their learning.

Arrangements for the maintenance of provision for those who are educated otherwise than at school (EOTAS) were also mentioned briefly in our session on 28 April.<sup>5</sup> **We would welcome an outline of the arrangements in place across Wales for EOTAS provision, and the steps in place to monitor and address any disparity of provision.**

### 3. Mental health and well-being

The mental health and well-being of our children and young people is a key priority for our committee work. While we have paused our follow-up work on our Mind over Matter report to enable public services to focus efforts on managing the impact of Covid-19, we believe that steps to support our children’s mental health and well-being are more important now than ever.

**To this end, we have prioritised the issue of support for the physical and mental health and well-being of our children and young people for our second public evidence session with stakeholders on 9 June and will write to you in due course with our findings.**

### 4. Children’s Rights Impact Assessments

Our Committee view about the importance of Children’s Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) is well documented, and demonstrated by our recent inquiry into children’s rights. While the publication of our report has been paused to enable public services to focus efforts on managing the impact of Covid-19, we believe that assessing the impact of current measures relating to the management of Covid-19 on children’s rights is essential.

We recognise that the urgent pace at which emergency legislation was passed limited the ability of the Welsh Government to undertake a CRIA at the time it sought the then-Assembly’s legislative consent. However, sufficient time has now passed to enable the Welsh Government to undertake an assessment of the impact on children of *all* measures—not just those decisions relating directly to children’s services—taken to manage Covid-19. **We welcome officials’ confirmation that a “full suite”<sup>6</sup> of impact**

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<sup>5</sup> Record of Proceedings, [para 46](#), 28 April 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Record of Proceedings, [para 114](#), 5 May 2020.



assessments is being prepared and urge the Welsh Government to make these assessments— including CRIs—publicly available as soon as possible.

## 5. Childcare

We welcome the steps taken by the Welsh Government to repurpose the childcare funding offer to support the coronavirus childcare assistance scheme, enabling critical workers and families with vulnerable children to have free access to childcare aged 0 to 5. Nevertheless, the currently complex funding situation for childcare providers, and the risks posed to the viability of the sector by the Covid-19 outbreak and measures taken to manage it, were explored in our session on 5 May. We note the Deputy Minister’s comment that the impact on the sector is “very worrying” and welcome her confirmation that steps are being taken to seek to resolve current challenges.<sup>7</sup>

**We urge the Welsh Government to publish, as a matter of priority, details about how funding arrangements will be managed to avoid certain childcare providers being unable to access support.**

## 6. Higher education

We note the Minister for Education’s [written statement](#) and [press release](#) of 4 May providing more detail on the Welsh Government’s policy in relation to higher education.

**We would welcome further detail about:**

- **student maintenance arrangements for the next academic year (2020/21) for those who have to learn remotely and who, under existing rules, would drop to the level of support provided for students “living with parents”;**
- **any assessment the Welsh Government has made of the impact significant changes to teaching and accommodation made by universities and private accommodation providers has had on students’ consumer and legal rights, and any steps take to support students in understanding their rights.**

We recognise the Minister’s acknowledgment in her statement of 4 May that “the financial impact of the crisis on universities is substantial”. We believe that this has the potential to have a severe and damaging long-term effect on this important sector. We anticipate that further support from government is very likely to be required, but recognise that devolved budgets will require wider support from HM Treasury.

**We would welcome:**

- **an update on the work undertaken to date, and planned to be undertaken, both within the Welsh Government and between the Welsh and UK Governments, to identify options for financial support for the sector;**
- **an indication of when the Welsh Government anticipates being able to provide clarity about outcomes for post-16 education and HEFCW funding allocations for 2020-21.**

This information will be used to inform our third public evidence session with stakeholders on 23 June which we have set aside to give priority consideration to the impact of Covid-19 on higher and further education.

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<sup>7</sup> Record of Proceedings, [para 137](#), 5 May 2020.



## 7. Continuity of learning

We welcome the steps taken to date by schools to maintain continuity of learning for their pupils. Nevertheless, the challenges posed by the measures necessary to manage Covid-19 have inevitably impacted on our children and young people's learning. **We would be particularly grateful for an outline of the steps the Welsh Government has taken to monitor/address the following:**

- **the arrangements in place to support parents/guardians in undertaking home schooling, including steps taken to ensure that all separated parents are fully informed/supported;**
- **steps taken to ensure that children do not fall through the net in terms of engagement with education, and that schools are checking on their pupils;**
- **the arrangements in place to monitor any difficulties or inconsistencies emerging in how the key worker criteria is applied in accepting children into schools (including how many cases have there been where children have not been accepted despite parents wanting to send them to school);**
- **the extent to which support for home learning can be – and is being – tailored to account for learners' different needs, aptitudes and circumstances.**

### 7.1 Digital provision and inequalities

We recognise that digital exclusion poses a significant risk of exacerbating existing inequalities. As such, we welcome the Minister for Education's [announcement](#) on 29 April 2020 of funding to help local authorities to support digitally excluded learners during the current pandemic. **We would welcome an outline of the steps the Welsh Government is taking to:**

- **monitor and address any inconsistencies in approaches across local authorities to providing support for the digitally excluded;**
- **explore the other non-digital risks (for example housing, other resources, and parental capacity) that could exacerbate inequalities during this pandemic.**

### 7.2 Phased return to school and the five principles

We note the Minister for Education's clear [statement](#) on 7 May that schools will not return to normal provision on 1 June 2020, and that the [five principles set out on 28 April](#) will guide the Welsh Government's approach to a phased return. We believe that it is essential that messaging relating to the return of our children and young people to school is clear and that the sector itself is consulted in advance of any plans being published. **We request that the Committee is kept informed with regular updates on the Welsh Government's thinking and proposed approach to any phased return to school, and assessments undertaken against the five principles.**

We also believe that the availability of testing is key to plans for a safe phased return to school, and note the low number of teachers (15) who had been tested by 28 April 2020.<sup>8</sup> **We would welcome an update on the Welsh Government's approach to testing of school staff as part of any phased return to school.**

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<sup>8</sup> Record of Proceedings, [para 34](#), 28 April 2020.



## 8. Vocational qualifications

Vocational qualifications were raised briefly in our session on 28 April.<sup>9</sup>

We recognise that the situation in relation to vocational qualifications is complex due to the fact that they are awarded by over 100 bodies working across the UK. We also note that Qualifications Wales has stated that, to ensure consistency for learners taking these qualifications, the same approach will be taken for learners in Wales as that set out by Ofqual for England.

We are aware that Ofqual's consultation on arrangements for vocational qualifications has recently closed. **We would welcome an update from the Welsh Government on the approach for Wales once Ofqual has set out the common approach, and are keen to see a similar level of clarity for vocational learners as those sitting general education qualifications.**

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<sup>9</sup> Record of Proceedings, paras 84-86, 28 April 2020.

