

Senedd Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

Welsh Parliament
Children, Young People and Education Committee

Ymchwiliad i effaith argyfwng Covid-19 ar blant a phobl ifanc yng Nghymru

Inquiry into the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on children and young people in Wales

COV - 22
Ymateb gan: Sefydliad Bevan

COV - 22
Response from: Bevan Foundation

Bevan Foundation response to the Children, Young People and Education Committee's consultation on Covid-19 and its impact on children and young people (including students in further and higher education)

Introduction

The Bevan Foundation is an independent, charitable think-tank that develops solutions to poverty and inequality. We are grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Children, Young People and Education Committee's call for evidence to support its scrutiny of Covid 19 and its impact on children and young people. Our extensive work on poverty and inequality provides us with some insights into the difficulties faced by children living in low income households at this time. These impacts are likely to be significant and varied. Some children and young people will currently be facing an increased risk of domestic abuse, whilst children and young people's mental health is also likely to be affected by Covid 19. Given our experience and expertise however, our response will focus on the impact of Covid 19 on child poverty in Wales. Our is divided into two primary sections.

- The first section will look at the impact of lockdown on poverty in Wales and on children growing up in poverty.
- The second section will consider the effectiveness of the some of the steps that have already been taken by the Welsh Government and Welsh local authorities to assist families living in poverty at this time, and will explore what further steps could be taken.

Child Poverty and Covid 19

The most recent data on poverty in Wales was published on the 26th of March, as the nation was beginning to come to terms with the new lockdown measures introduced to control the spread of Covid 19. The newly released data was for the 2016/17 to 2018/19 period, providing a snapshot of poverty in Wales at the eve of the Covid 19 outbreak.

The data showed that for the three year period to 2019, 28% of children in Wales lived in poverty.¹ That's approximately 180,000 children.² Even before the Covid 19 outbreak these children were at a higher risk of being in ill health and were less likely to achieve the top grades in school than their peers from higher income households. These issues are likely to have become even greater as a result of the lockdown measures put in place to stop the spread of Covid 19. Not only do the lockdown measures mean that thousands of children who are already trapped in poverty face deepening hardship, many more risk being pulled into poverty alongside them.

16% of Wales' employees work in business that have been ordered to close as a result of the lockdown.³ The economic consequences of Covid 19 mean that many thousands of other workers, working in sectors that have not been directly impacted by social distancing measures have also been affected. Whilst many workers will have had their jobs protected through the UK Government's furlough scheme, many will have seen their wages reduced as a result. Thousands of other workers have lost their jobs despite the scheme, whilst some workers have seen their hours reduced, and others, such as the newly self-employed have been required to turn to the social security system for support. Even some workers whose employers are still operating as normal have faced significant challenges. As many as 10% of Welsh employees don't earn enough to qualify for sick pay, with this being the case for a higher proportion of disabled people and women, leading to a significant cut in income for many faced with having to self-isolate.⁴

These pressures have been especially pronounced for families with children, with research from Turn2Us showing that families with children are much more likely to have lost income as a result of Covid 19, with 71% of children living in families where at least one parent has had their employment affected.⁵ An additional risk factor for families with children is childcare. Often reliant on schools and grandparents for childcare previously, parents, who would have the option of continuing in work fulltime, are having to

¹ Stats Wales, 'Percentage of all individuals, children, working-age adults and pensioners living in relative income poverty for the UK, UK countries and regions of England between 1994-95 to 1996-97 and 2016-17 to 2018-19 (3 year averages of financial years)' available at -

<https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Community-Safety-and-Social-Inclusion/Poverty/householdbelowaverageincome-by-year>

² Stats Wales, 'Children living in poverty by tenure type' available at -

<https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Community-Safety-and-Social-Inclusion/Poverty/childreninrelativepoverty-by-tenuretype>

³ Bevan Foundation, 'State of Wales Briefing: Risks and Impact of Coronavirus' (March 27, 2020)

⁴ ibid

⁵ Turn2us 'Coronavirus pandemic leaves children facing financial crisis' (22 April 2020) available at -

<https://www.turn2us.org.uk/About-Us/Media-Centre/Press-releases-and-comments/Coronavirus-pandemic-leaves-children-facing-financ>

reduce hours or be furloughed, and some are even having to take unpaid leave or are losing their jobs.

At the same time that many families have seen their income reduce, their living costs have increased. Restricted to their homes, without school, access to libraries and often limited access to parks, families are faced with increased bills, as they try to home educate children, as well as keep them entertained.

One living cost that has increased for families is the cost of food. Over 60,000 children in Wales lost access to Free School Meals when schools were shut.⁶ Given that some families in receipt of Free School Meals are faced with spending an additional £30 to £40 a week, on food during school holidays, this is a significant benefit families are missing out on.⁷ At the time that families lost access to Free School Meals, many found it increasingly difficult to purchase food, with families living in poverty being less able to stockpile.

Another concern we have picked up anecdotally from parents is that whilst childcare providers are shut, parents are still being asked to contribute towards their childcare costs or risk losing their child's place when the provider reopens. This may be a particularly pressing concern for parents who have seen their incomes reduced, owing to them having to take on more childcare commitments following the closure of their provider.

The increasing pressures felt by many families is likely to have an impact on their children's wellbeing. Children from low-income backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to economic shocks, with the long-term impact on their health, education and economic outcomes well documented.

Many families don't have sufficient digital access for home learning and to stay connected, or even have access to basic materials such as colouring pencils, paper and books. Recent research by the Sutton Trust highlights the impact this is having on children's education during lockdown. For example, whilst 50% of teachers in private schools report they're receiving more than three quarters of work set for their pupils during this period back, only 27% report the same in the most advantaged state schools, with this dropping to just 8% in the least advantaged state schools.⁸

Families struggling to provide healthy meals for their children are also likely to see an impact on their child's wellbeing. There is a wealth of evidence that highlights a link between poverty and food insecurity on the one hand,

⁶ Bevan Foundation, *'State of Wales: Free School Meals and Coronavirus'* (29 April 2020)

⁷ Andrew Forsey, *Hungry Holidays – Report of the APPG on Hunger* (2017) UK Parliament All Party Group on Holiday Hunger

⁸ Sutton Trust, *'Covid 19 Impacts: School Shutdowns'* (20 April 2020) <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-and-social-mobility-impact-brief/>

and a range of issues such as obesity and low educational attainment on the other.⁹ We know that an increased number of families struggle to afford to buy nutritious food for their children over the school holidays.¹⁰ Many of the factors that contribute to holiday hunger are present during this crisis. Parents are seeing their living costs increase on the one hand due to the closure of schools, whilst on the other, many are seeing their incomes fall.¹¹ There is already a body of evidence that children who have a poor or inadequate diet over the holidays suffer greater “learning loss” than children who don’t face the same challenges.¹² These challenges are likely to be even greater by the time children return to schools given the length of time that schools may be shut for.

The Actions taken by the Welsh Government and local authorities

The Welsh Government and local authorities have taken a number of welcome steps to mitigate the impact of Covid 19 on families who are trapped in poverty.

Perhaps the area where most significant action has been taken is with regards to Free School Meals. The fact that the Welsh Government has made an additional £40 million available to help local authorities deliver support in lieu of Free School Meals, including over school holidays is a hugely positive step.¹³ We do have some concerns however, about the discrepancy in how individual local authorities are using these funds to support families.

Immediately following the announcement that schools across Wales would be shut, local authorities sought to put in place emergency measures to ensure that families in receipt of Free School Meals continued to receive some support. This primarily took the form of “grab and go” food bags, with parents encouraged to attend schools to collect lunch that would be provided for their children in lieu of Free School Meals. The shortcomings of this approach became immediately apparent with anecdotal evidence from a range of local authorities suggesting that only a small proportion of parents were attending schools to collect these meals, due to stigma, a lack of access to public transport following the lock down, and concerns about

⁹ Bevan Foundation, ‘*Kids on the Breadline, Solutions for Holiday Hunger*’ (7 May 2020) available at - <https://www.bevanfoundation.org/publications/kids-on-the-breadline-solutions-to-holiday-hunger/>

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ ibid

¹² ibid

¹³ Welsh Government, ‘Wales has become the first country in the UK to guarantee ongoing funding for children to continue to receive free school meals during the coronavirus pandemic’ (22 April 2020) available at - <https://gov.wales/wales-has-become-first-country-uk-guarantee-ongoing-funding-children-continue-receive-free-school>

social distancing. Many local authorities sought to find alternative ways of providing families with support.

Local authorities have developed three primary models for providing support in lieu of Free School Meals in line with Welsh Government guidance:

- Direct cash transfers to families
- Food vouchers that parents can redeem at supermarkets
- The delivery of food parcels

Initially, it appeared that the Welsh Government's preference was for families to be provided with vouchers in lieu of Free School Meals, with the Welsh Government seeking to develop a national voucher scheme, in line with the one in place in England. Local authorities would then be able to opt into this system. The Welsh Government have now abandoned these proposals, a step welcomed by the Bevan Foundation. Early feedback from England suggests that the scheme has been difficult to administer. Not all supermarkets have signed up to the scheme meaning parents have to travel considerable distances to shop or visit more expensive stores than they would otherwise do, whilst stigma issues have not been fully removed.

To counter some of these shortcomings the Bevan Foundation has consistently argued that the Welsh Government and Welsh local authorities should provide cash to families in lieu of Free School Meals. We believe that providing cash to families is the most effective way of supporting social distancing, providing families with flexibility and choice, improving convenience for families by allowing them to shop local, reducing stigma and allowing families to prioritise their spending needs.¹⁴ Whilst it is important that the Welsh Government and local authorities continue to provide additional support to families that may fall through the cracks in any cash based system, for example, by supporting local foodbanks, we believe that all local authorities should be providing families with the option of receiving cash in lieu of Free School Meals.

17 local authorities either now do so or have announced plans to introduce such a system soon.¹⁵ Whilst we welcome the moves made by these local authorities, we are concerned that families trapped in poverty in Bridgend, Caerphilly, Merthyr Tydfil, Newport and the Vale of Glamorgan, may be missing out on support they vitally need, due to the fact that their local authorities do not provide them with the option of receiving a cash payment.¹⁶ We believe that the Welsh Government should give a clear steer to these five local authorities that they should provide cash, to ensure parity

¹⁴ Bevan Foundation n(6)

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ *ibid*

of support across Wales. In conjunction to this, we believe that it is important that the Welsh Government regularly ask for updates from local authorities about how many children have taken advantage of alternative Free School Meals support. This would allow the Welsh Government to share best practice across authorities and would enable it to identify whether any additional funding will be needed to maximise support.

Other measures taken by the Welsh Government which we welcome include the decision to temporarily remove attendance requirements for young people in receipt of EMA, and the announcement that £3 million will be made available to support children from digitally excluded families.¹⁷ Whilst we welcome the announcement of extra support for digitally excluded children, we believe that it is important that the Welsh Government recognises that many children will still continue to struggle to get access to learning materials online and that there is likely to be significant learning loss amongst children from low income households when schools finally reconvene.

In addition to considering some of the direct impacts of school closures on children from low income households, we believe that it is important that the committee also recognises the effect that other factors on children and their wellbeing. As already discussed, the economic implications of Covid 19 is likely to hit many of the poorest children hardest and it is important to consider the broader steps taken by the Welsh Government to support families through this period. One example is housing.

Action taken by the UK and Welsh Governments have provided vital short-term support for households across Wales. It is welcome that families are safe in the knowledge that landlords are not permitted to evict them whilst lockdown measures remain in place. Many households, however, are likely to be falling significantly behind on their rent, building arrears that might lead to their eviction once lockdown protections are lifted. Such uncertainty causes significant stress for families and may lead to some households prioritising spending their money on rent, rather than on other essential items such as food. These pressures are likely to be most pronounced for households living in poverty and given that children are at heightened risk of living in poverty, they are a group that are likely to be especially affected. It is therefore vital that the Welsh Government provides greater clarity to both private sector and social housing tenants of their rights, and of the support that will be available for them once lockdown is eased.

Another area where we believe steps could be taken by the Welsh Government to help families more generally is through the promotion the

¹⁷ Welsh Government 'Extra £3 million to support digitally excluded learners' (30 April 2020), available at - <https://gov.wales/extra-3-million-pounds-support-digitally-excluded-learners-wales>

support schemes that are available to low income families in Wales. Schemes such as the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and the Discretionary Assistance Fund already provide vital support to thousands of families across Wales. Many more families are likely to now be in need of this support. Whilst the Welsh Government has increased promotion of these schemes, we believe more needs to be done promote these amongst the wider public, given that some of the families who are currently struggling may have little experience of engaging with the welfare system or with support agencies.

We also believe that there is a role for the Welsh Government to play in putting pressure on the UK Government to make changes to the UK wide social security system. As the number of families dependent on the safety net it affords has increased, it is more vital than ever that the social security system provides sufficient support. We welcome some of the steps that have already been taken by the UK Government on this but believe that significantly more can be done. One reform in particular could be especially beneficial for children trapped in poverty. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has recently called for the child element of Universal Credit and Child Tax Credits to increase by at least £20 per week.¹⁸ Such an increase would provide a significant uplift in support to families who are struggling, and would benefit children all over Wales.

¹⁸ Joseph Wilkes, *'Coronavirus crisis puts 8.5m children in UK a pay cheque away from going without food'* (Daily Mirror, 23 April 2020) available at - <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/coronavirus-crisis-puts-85m-children-21908857>