

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 60
Ymateb gan: Swyddfa Comisiynydd Heddlu a
Throseddu Gwent

COV 60
Response from: Office of the Police and Crime
Commissioner for Gwent

This response is provided by the Office of the Police and Crime
Commissioner for Gwent and Gwent Police.

This is a brief overview of the impact of Covid-19 on children and young
people within the context of policing and criminal justice. While there is
inevitably crossover of service provision between policing and other services
including social care, we will not expand greatly in this response in order to
keep the response brief as has been requested. We would welcome the
opportunity to provide further information and evidence either by email or
further discussion.

There has been a downward trend of some of the usual demands on the
policing and related services since Covid-19. Overall crime reports have
decreased. Crime and demands for service relating to protecting and
safeguarding vulnerable people, in particular children are always the
highest priority for Gwent Police. Gwent Police will always respond to calls
for its service and resourcing in Gwent Police is good at the moment
enabling the force to reasonably meet the demands placed upon it.
However, the effective response to safeguard, protect and support children
must be delivered on a multi-agency basis and is not for the police service
alone. Gwent police and our safeguarding partners are working hard to
identify the most vulnerable and appropriately respond. While there are
inevitable challenges in ensuring that children and adults are able to report
to the police, we are concerned about the limitations of some of the
established multi-agency arrangements that we normally rely on to
effectively take place during Covid-19. We recognise the efforts being made
by agencies to establish contact with children but believe that there are
opportunities for more creative solutions and collaborative work. This could
include a media campaign for the public about safeguarding and
protection of children and young people.

Calls to Gwent police for child protection issues did experience an initial
decrease, however, they have now returned to more normal levels. All calls
to the police service will receive a response. This response will be
proportionate to risks and investigative opportunities. This is very much

'business as usual' for Gwent Police. It was anticipated that the closure of the schools and reduction of social gathering would have an impact on referrals in respect of children at risk and those who may be offenders. However, it is reassuring that referrals are still being made, and that police attendance at incidents prompting such a referral is unchanged, but the drop in referrals that would be prompted by a child presenting with an injury to a professional for example is very noticeable. Therefore, while calls to police to attend domestic related incidents and harm to children have not reduced, referrals from professionals have. As a result multi agency strategy meetings have been impacted. We continue to be concerned about the number of children experiencing abuse and harm and the lack of identification and subsequent response to this. We are discussing this with partners across Gwent including through the Gwent Safeguarding Board.

Gwent Police are the only Welsh force to have implemented Operation Encompass. This entails a report being made to schools regarding children that are in households where a domestic incident has occurred. It enables the school to better respond to the child in their care. Obviously this process cannot be fully utilised at the moment. There is school holiday process and reports are shared with Education Safeguarding and multi-agency partnership teams or social services depending on the local arrangements. We are not confident that the response is effective as that while children are attending schools and this demonstrates further for us the key schools have in provide consistency for children and the opportunities for identification of issues that they are experiencing. A recovery plan will require the considerations for how we can best identify and respond to children who are in need of additional support once schools are reopened. Local authorities social care teams have worked closely with education colleagues to identify children in existing situations that may benefit from those children attending school at the hubs that are servicing the children of keyworkers across the Gwent area. Families with children that are known to services in Gwent are being encouraged to access school provision. Sadly not many families have taken this option up, but this alone does allow their allocated social workers to build that knowledge and contact into their ongoing care plan considerations.

Overall there are less children as subjects of arrests now than pre-Covid averages. Some of this will be positively due to the restrictions of Covid 19. Conversely, some activity is more hidden. Opportunities to identify children involved in criminal exploitation has been reduced. This accompanied by less intelligence being presented about child criminal exploitation particularly relating to the supply of drugs. However, the drug supply chain and related activity including so called 'sex-work' is still prevalent. We are working with regional intelligence services, recognising that this activity is often across police force boundaries, to ensure that intelligence of this nature is fully examined for action as necessary. Arrests

have taken place relating to drugs supply and on some occasions this has included young people aged 18+.

The child exploitation teams within Gwent Police are still engaging with partners and known children directly. Children who are open to social services with existing care plans, care experienced children or children on the child protection register are all having contact from police or social service staff. Where possible this contact is virtual. Much of the on-line exploitation protection and prevention work is unchanged. CEOP and Gwent police's own Paedophile on-line investigation team (POLIT) are identifying children at risk on line and enforcement activity is unchanged. This prompts remedial work to protect families in some cases and the process for doing this has not changed since Covid-19.

There has been an increase in calls relating to the policing of the new Covid 19 related measures. The Office for the Police and Crime Commissioner for Gwent (OPCC) has worked with youth services and youth forums to engage young people in a campaign #StayinforGwent to communicate young people centred messages about the guidance. Some of these relate to incidents involving children and young people. Most of these calls do not relate to urgent risks or cause for concern but we do remain alert to the fact that they may co-occur as a sign of a further issue e.g. children being out and not adhering to restrictions as a result of issues in the home environment. Local Policing Teams are working with local Youth Services to encourage positive engagement with young people in the first instance. There have been joint patrols with police officers and youth workers to diffuse possible issues of non-compliance with the current restrictions and related anti-social behaviour. This has significantly helped to manage situations with young people not adhering to the restrictions and avoid unnecessary punitive approaches.

Gwent Police, as all forces in Wales and in partnership with the Welsh Government, have an active Schools Liaison Programme. In light of the inability for school's liaison officers to deliver the schools programmes and deal with school incidents, and to cater for a predicted spike in police absence, the schools liaison officers have been diverted into alternative roles within the service although they still hold their relevant portfolios and provide assistance to local teams and services.

A significant positive area for learning occurring during this period has developed within the Youth Offending Services. They have been able to develop more innovative working practices that have very much involved the children in the changes and have improved engagement. Staff are maintaining good contact with children and families via various platforms including FaceTime, WhatsApp, Skype, telephone etc. As an unconsidered engagement tool but something that has worked well is children teaching staff how to use these applications and the experience being hugely

positive. This has included some children that staff have struggled to engage with previously. Some children who have been reported as “missing children” previously have engaged via WhatsApp.

The PCC provides significant funding number of projects providing support for children through PCC core funding, the Victim’s Service Grant from the Ministry of Justice and the proceeds of crime ‘Police Community Fund’. These include services for children who have experienced sexual abuse, contributions to Local Authority multi-agency early intervention teams, local diversionary projects across Gwent and support for asylum seeker and refugee children. All of these projects have moved to remote provision and some very localised projects have completely halted delivery. For older children the shifts to digitally based support can work well. This is not the case for younger children and this is gap is most felt when supporting children who have experienced trauma. Early support and intervention is the key to reducing the harm and helping children to recover.

As previously mentioned, the PCC would welcome an opportunity to expand on this evidence and support the work of the Committee.