

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 51
Ymateb gan : Grŵp y Prif Swyddogion
Ieuenctid yng Nghymru

COV 51
Response from: Wales Principal Youth Officers'
Group

*Ref. Inquiry into the Covid-19 outbreak on children & young people in
Wales*

I write on behalf of the *Wales Principal Youth Officers' Group (PYOG)* in my capacity as Chair and on behalf of youth work in local authorities in Wales. The PYOG is a network of strategic leads for the Youth Service in Wales and a sub-group of the Association of Directors of Education for Wales, ADEW.

The PYOG, as all other networks, groups and organisations working with children and young people at this challenging time, is extremely concerned regarding the impact of the current crisis. Prior to the pandemic, Youth Work was identified in the Committee's *Mind Over Matter* report (April, 2018) as having a key role in the prevention and early intervention of any potential deterioration of well-being in young people aged 11-25 via its educational approach based on a trusting relationship entered into voluntarily by a young person.

Although the sector has been under immense pressure in recent times, facing and adapting to huge change as it has coped with its share of heavy cuts to public services, it is responding positively yet again with a level of resilience recognised recently by Estyn Youth Support Services in Wales: *The Value of Youth Work* (January 2018, p. 12) "*Youth work is still flourishing in a variety of different settings due mainly to the work and dedication of youth workers.*"

In recognition of the positive impact of Youth Work on the fortunes of young people in Wales, the sector has been granted - and is grateful for - an extra £6.2m of funding from the Welsh Government via the Youth Support Grant (£3.7m for youth homelessness and £2.5m for well-being) taking the total in the grant to £10m, which has increased capacity and supports continued partnership working and innovation. A renewed focus on Youth

Work by central government with the appointment of an Interim Youth Work Board and new national strategy is welcome, has provided an injection of positive morale and is due in no small part to the efforts of the NAFW CYPE Committee's hard work and subsequent recommendations.

Given this recognition of youth work as such an important front-line service (as described below), it is surprising and disappointing that the profession does not figure as an essential service and youth workers as key workers on the UK Government's list.

This said, the most important element of the current crisis is supporting young people who will be in a variety of circumstances and accessing services, for many, in ways not done before (providing they have the necessary equipment and technology to do so, which is something certainly not taken for granted). Although some youth centres and projects have since reopened to some young people (whilst observing social distancing rules and primarily for the most vulnerable e.g. homeless young people who are able to shower have their clothes washed, spend some time talking with a youth worker and discussing options to move out of homeless status. Deep cleaning is also taking place in these facilities), all local authority youth clubs/centres closed, in line with schools, by the end of March but this did not mean that Youth Workers were left with little to do – far from it:

Although many local authorities have since moved to Bacs payments, Youth Workers have been integral to free school meals efforts in the first few weeks of lockdown, both delivering food and helping at schools and hubs where meals were being picked up. This has seen a new understanding and respect developing between the teaching profession and the youth work profession. Youth workers are also providing support in social care, youth justice, police, housing and health settings.

Where Youth Work has had to make its most fundamental adjustment is engaging with and keeping in touch with young people online as routine, as opposed to traditional face-to-face methods. Whilst maintaining Youth Work principles and ensuring the highest levels of safeguarding are practiced in environments which are new to many (both young people and Youth Workers) and with unprecedented access to young people's homes via virtual means, service managers and practitioners are carrying out risk assessments of social media platforms and video conferencing tools on a regular basis, with some deemed 'safer' than others, whilst ensuring staff and young people are aware of safe protocol for engaging in such meetings/discussions.

This new way of working is also starting to show some really positive (unintended) outcomes, such as contact with parents. This is particularly relevant for under 18's, where parental consent is sought prior to online conversations. Parents have taken a keen interest in the relationship with their child's youth worker and have gained a better understanding of this as a result. Many have been pleasantly surprised and proud of the progress their son/daughter has made as a result of their involvement with the service.

As well as the usual acceptable behaviour requirements (which apply in virtual space as well as reality), young people and workers are required to be aware of dressing appropriately, having appropriate surroundings which may show up on the camera/s range, having two Youth Workers present and obtaining relevant parental consent (as already mentioned) before engaging with young people under the age of 18. Child protection guidelines are also being followed regarding any concerning behaviour, observations and/or disclosures.

Given the haste with which we have all had to adjust to these new methods of engagement, somewhat ironically the recent NAFW *Health, Social Care and Sport Committee's* inquiry (February, 2018) takes on greater emphasis. In the report young people were identified as a group "...who are more likely to express feelings of loneliness..." The report also cited a piece of work carried out by The Samaritans, which said "...social media increases the risk of depression, anxiety and loneliness in young people...". Whilst we yearn for a time when a mixed/bespoke approach can return, for many digital access is currently the only way of keeping in touch with the outside world.

This is all so relevant and important as the structures to support young people need to be there for them to access in the first place but what must remain uppermost in all our minds is how we can counter the negative impact of lockdown – by exercising and communicating yes but also by retaining a sense of fun. This is another area where Youth Workers have been at the forefront, whether it be by running quizzes, music and singing workshops and sessions, exercise routines, arts and crafts sessions, creating videos, drama and leisure sessions. All these things and more are critical to our well-being.

Young people's voice is also so important. Many have spoken about how crucial youth work support is to them and that they are concerned that this support is not going to be available. The Guardian Newspaper published a story on 29th April, 2020 -

<https://amp.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/29/youth-worker-coronavirus-youth-services-young-people->

[pandemic?CMP=share_btn_tw&__twitter_impression=true](#) - carried the headline “Meeting my Youth Worker is the only time I eat a meal with another person” and referenced efforts in Torfaen as an example, making the point that there are a further 2 million young people in need of help now than before the lockdown and asks “Where do they go when youth clubs are shut?”.

Whilst capacity is stretched to the limit, the Youth Service in Wales is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry and the PYOG would like to take the opportunity to thank all those front-line Youth Workers and other professionals and volunteers supporting our children and young people at this really challenging time.