

CYPE(5)-20-20 - Paper to note 12

Senedd Cymru

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

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Welsh Parliament

Children, Young People and Education Committee

Kirsty Williams MS, Minister for Education

Dyddiad | Date: 03 August 2020

Pwnc | Subject: **Impact of Covid-19 on children and young people, including students in further and higher education**


Dear Kirsty,

Thank you for attending committee on 7 July to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on education, and for responding to our Plenary debate on 15 July on the pandemic's impact on children and young people.

In accordance with the Committee's agreed approach to its scrutiny of COVID-19, Annex A to this letter highlights points 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, and to provide effective and timely oversight of the issues that are emerging. Annex B includes questions that, due to time constraints, were unasked during the session on 7 July.

Over the summer recess and into the autumn term, we request regular updates on any developments in the Welsh Government's response to the public health emergency as they relate to children and young people. As a Committee, we are committed to keeping a very close eye on progress and decisions in this area. Where necessary—and alongside our ongoing scrutiny of the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Bill—we will seek further evidence from the public, stakeholders, public bodies and the Welsh Government about the continued impact of COVID-19 on our children and young people.

Kind regards,



Lynne Neagle MS

Chair

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



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ANNEX A – Issues arising from the session on 7 July

A children's rights approach

We believe that children's rights should be at the forefront of the Welsh Government's thinking when making decisions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The First Minister's recently committed to giving consideration to how best to present assessments of "the potential impacts of maintaining or easing restrictions on equalities and the rights of children and meeting other statutory duties". We intend to monitor this closely.

A child's right to education and right to play under the UNCRC should be at the centre of all decisions relating to schools and wider education provision during this public health emergency. We recognise that this needs to be balanced alongside consideration of public health needs, the education sector's capacity, and the physical and emotional health, safety and wellbeing of children, young people and their families.

We believe that, when developing its response to the pandemic, more evidence of the systemic consideration of children's rights within government would have been beneficial. **For future decisions relating to the management of COVID-19 – particularly those relating to the provision of statutory education and children's services – we request a more public and transparent outline of the way in which children's rights have been explicitly and rigorously considered and applied.**

Schools in Wales

Following our session on 7 July you announced your intention, based on scientific advice and subject to a continued decline in community rates of infection, to allow all children to return to school in September. During our Plenary debate on 15 July, the Committee welcomed this decision.

Further to your announcement, we would welcome **further detail on the factors you anticipate taking into account if you have to decide whether schools should reduce operations or close again in future, due to any increases in the virus's presence in the community. We would be particularly grateful if you could:**

- confirm whether the five principles you set out in April, and the decision framework you published in May, would still apply;
- outline how these documents have changed, if at all, in light of **learning about the virus** to date (e.g. to what extent is the conclusion that there is little transmission by children of the virus¹ reflected?)

¹ TAC report, paras 3-5

- provide details of the **contingency plans** you are putting in place should the COVID-19 situation deteriorate and schools need to reduce operations or close again —if there is a continued need for blended learning, what lessons have been learned from the past four months and how will you ensure that blended learning will be delivered effectively and consistently, addressing the unequal impacts on different learners which we have highlighted in earlier correspondence?

In relation to the curriculum, we would also be grateful if you could confirm:

- whether the temporary disapplication of the curriculum requirements will be lifted as schools resume in September; and
- if the disapplication is not being lifted in September, what the rationale for retaining it is and how long you foresee it being necessary.

EOTAS

During our session on 7 July we asked what is being done to ensure that pupils educated other than at school understand what is happening now and how their needs will be met, and how is this being communicated to children and their parents. You responded:

“[...] we will have to have an equitable return to schools in September, regardless of the setting in which education is delivered, including our mainstream schools, our special schools, and those students that receive education in education other than at school. And we will look to be able to provide specific guidance to those providers, and to communicate that with both parents and children.”²

We would be grateful if you could provide:

- assurances that the interests of EOTAS pupils will be fully taken into account in the way that local authorities and schools operationalise decisions about September;
- further detail about when the specific guidance you referred to in our session on 7 July will be available and how it will address the interests of EOTAS pupils.

Test, Trace, Protect

Both you and the Committee have emphasised the importance of the Test, Trace, Protect (TTP) strategy to the resumption of school activity.

We would welcome further details of:

- the discussions you are having with the Minister for Health and Social Services about the critical role of the TTP strategy;

² CYPE Committee, Record of Proceedings [para 45], 7 July 2020

- any assurances you have received from the Minister and his officials that the aim³ of tracing an estimated 80% of contacts, at least 35% of which are to be traced within 24 hours, will be met within a school environment.

Higher and further education

During our session on 7 July and our Plenary debate on 15 July, we highlighted the concerns raised with us by the higher and further education sectors about the impact of COVID-19 on their work and students.

On **22 July** you announced over £50 million additional funding for universities and colleges, with £27 million provided to higher education institutions, and £23 million to support students in FE colleges and sixth forms.

We welcome this announcement, and would be grateful to receive further information about the following:

- the extent to which the funding granted to HE and FE respectively as part of this announcement meets in full (or otherwise) the bids you have made within the Welsh Government for additional funding for the sectors;
- the consideration you have given to the issue of student hardship, particularly over this summer break, and an indication of why there does not appear to be any ring-fenced or hypothecated funding for this purpose;
- the measures on which you expect to see the £15 million⁴ allocated to further education colleges and sixth forms spent;
- the criteria that would need to be met to trigger potential further funding support in the autumn⁵; and
- whether you have any further funding bids (HE/FE or otherwise) submitted to the Welsh Government's COVID-19 funding process, and/or whether you expect to make more.

³ Technical Advisory Group, [Advice on return to school - Proposed by Children and Education subgroup](#), 7 July 2020, page 2.

⁴ The Minister's [statement](#) of 22 July outlines that, of the £23 million allocated to further education, "15 million will be provided for learners beginning their A level or vocational course at an FE college or sixth form, to increase teaching support following their time away from their education setting earlier this year and to help with their transition to post-16 learning. The funding will be provided for all full-time learners between 16 and 19 years and represents a 5 per cent increase to funding-per-student",

⁵ The Minister's [statement](#) of 22 July outlines that "[The Welsh Government] will consider the situation and needs again in the autumn, to continue our support for the economic and social recovery from COVID-19".

ANNEX B – Unasked questions from the session on 7 July, for written response

Questions submitted directly from children and young people

- Would the Minister be able to ensure that support will be made available above and beyond the current support specifically targeted at BAME young people following GCSE and A-Level results day to minimise the risk of them becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and avoid them further falling behind?
- Can you tell us what help there is for managing my mental health and not just stats on number of deaths?

Support for vulnerable children and other priority groups of pupils

- Could you summarise how teaching and learning for children and young people with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) is continuing under the current 'blended learning' model? To what extent is there a very real risk that these pupils could be particularly adversely affected and what is the relative position of special schools?

Awarding of qualifications

- Are you fully confident that the standardisation model being developed by Qualifications Wales and the WJEC will not disadvantage particular groups of learners, for example those in schools with previous lower attainment rates due to the model's use of centres' previous results?
- Is it satisfactory that candidates will not be able to appeal against the grades submitted by their school or college and will also not be able to appeal themselves against the way WJEC uses this data? Could this infringe their human rights given they have been denied an opportunity to demonstrate themselves under full exam conditions, in contrast with previous cohorts?

Post-16 education and training

- Has the decision to postpone the Tertiary Education and Research Bill been the most significant loss to your department's programme arising as a consequence of the need to respond to the pandemic? To what extent was this decision driven by objections from within the sector rather than by the Welsh Government?
- Have you explored lowering the maximum fee universities can charge, or have you considered other options for how to compensate students or adjust the costs to them to reflect the likelihood of having a very different learning and teaching experience during the next academic year?

- Are there any other options that Welsh Universities should be considering in this regard?
- To what extent are you satisfied that Competition and Markets Authority guidance, and consumer law requirements, are being met by providers?
- What discussions have you had with your UK counterparts about the student number control on England domiciled students? What have you assessed the impact of this to be in Wales?
- How satisfied are you that the FE sector is responding to the needs of vulnerable and hard to reach students? How do you respond to concerns from some stakeholders that FE students have not received the same support as schools and their pupils in this regard?
- Are you satisfied with the arrangements in place to award post 16 vocational qualifications? Has there been a lack of urgency to resolve those issues compared to the announcements about academic qualifications?