

CYPE(5)-20-20 - Paper to note 14

Vaughan Gething AC/AM
Y Gweinidog Iechyd a Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol
Minister for Health and Social Services

Kirsty Williams AC/AM
Y Gweinidog Addysg
Minister for Education



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Lynne Neagle AM
Chair
Children, Young People and Education Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1NA

21 August 2020

Thank you for your letter of 3rd July 2020 requesting information about the provision of services to support the physical and mental health of children and young people given the impacts of COVID-19.

Now more than ever the importance of supporting the mental health and emotional well-being of our children and young people can be seen. The pandemic and subsequent lockdown has affected us all, but particularly our children and young people who have had to endure months without seeing friends and close family members; have seen the way in which they are educated change way beyond recognition; and, for some, have had to cope with the bereavement of loved ones.

Throughout this challenging time we have continued to prioritise the physical and mental health of children and young people. Informed by engagement from children and young people themselves, alongside a wide range of stakeholders, we have looked to provide support and guidance during the lockdown and as we ease out of the restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. We aim to meet the physical and mental health needs of children and young people in a timely and effective manner, in line with our whole school approach, though we recognise there is always scope for improving experiences and outcomes further.

In Annex 1 we have provided a response to each of the points raised in your letter. We look forward to working with service users, stakeholders, and the Committee to deliver further improvements to support children and young people in Wales.

Canolfan Cyswllt Cyntaf / First Point of Contact Centre:
0300 0604400

Gohebiaeth.Vaughan.Gething@llyw.cymru
Correspondence.Vaughan.Gething@gov.wales
Gohebiaeth.Kirsty.Williams@llyw.cymru
Correspondence.Kirsty.Williams@gov.wales

Bae Caerdydd • Cardiff Bay
Caerdydd • Cardiff
CF99 1NA

Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

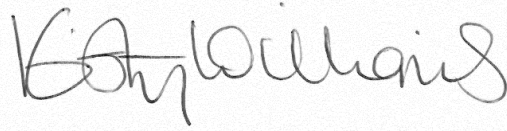
Yours sincerely,



Vaughan Gething AC/AM

Y Gweinidog Iechyd a Gwasanaethau
Cymdeithasol

Minister for Health and Social Services



Kirsty Williams AC/AM

Y Gweinidog Addysg
Minister for Education

1. School closures

(i) Children’s well-being must be at the centre of decisions relating to schools, and we urge the Welsh Government and the sector to work together to be adaptable, bold and innovative in the face of this global pandemic.

We have published learning guidance¹ for the autumn to set out clear expectations for schools about the priorities of learning. The purpose of this guidance is to give schools and supporting partners a common set of priorities for learning, regardless of the level of operations in response to COVID-19. Schools will need to prepare for a range of scenarios and this guidance sets out what learning priorities should remain constant throughout those – a single approach which is flexible enough to respond to changing conditions.

In summary, when considering their approach to autumn term learning, schools and settings should consider:

- health and well-being: learning should support learners’ mental, emotional, physical and social well-being, as well as recognise the importance of outdoor learning and play
- purpose: all learning should have a clear purpose in mind, focused around what is important for learners now and in the longer term
- literacy, numeracy and digital competence: learners should have opportunities to develop and apply these skills across the curriculum
- broad and balanced learning experiences: learners should have learning experiences that span a broad curriculum and that include opportunities to develop a breadth of understanding and a range of knowledge and skills
- progression and assessment: learners should make meaningful progress throughout this period. Learning should be designed to support increasing depth and sophistication of learning over time. We encourage the use of assessments to help learners move to the next steps in their learning
- partnership with parents, carers and learners: schools should develop a common understanding and language with parents, carers and learners; this can help underpin learning and support learning experiences.

(ii) From September, children across Wales must have consistently high quality contact with their teachers, and that opportunities to progress their education must be maximised for all children in Wales. This will also enable schools to play their vital part in the whole-system approach to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.

The learning guidance sets out that schools and settings will need to think carefully about how time in the school or setting should be used. Contact time will be valuable and precious. Practitioners should think about the balance and relationship between learning time in school and learning elsewhere, using contact time carefully and effectively and identifying how time at home or elsewhere can support making connections and consolidating learning. They should consider a wide range of pedagogical approaches that effectively use school and out-of-school learning to empower learners.

¹ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-07/guidance-learning-schools-settings-from-autumn-term.pdf>

On 17 August we published Keep Education Safe: Guidance for Supporting Vulnerable and Disadvantaged Learners from September 2020². It supplements guidance found in the operational and learning guidance providing specific advice for vulnerable and disadvantaged learners.

During the crisis, it became clear that many learners suffered negative impacts in terms of their progress in learning, some heavily so. Evidence from a range of reliable sources, including those focusing on Wales, suggest that most, or all, learners have been affected, and that the most vulnerable have been affected the most.

Our response to this situation is to dedicate financial resources to the creation of new capacity in the system. The investment amounts to almost £29 million between September 2020 and August 2021, and will be enough to grow capacity in the system by around 600 teachers and 300 teaching assistants. Alongside this, we will use our current investment in Professional Learning, digital infrastructure, connectivity, devices and content to enrich the experiences schools and settings make available to learners.

Curriculum reform remains our central priority for education in Wales. It is essential that all our work with the education system in the context of COVID-19 aligns with international best practice, which is also the basis of our curriculum reform proposals. Our focus for the coming year will be:

- literacy, numeracy and digital skills within a broad and balanced curriculum;
- development of independent learning skills; and
- supporting and engagement through coaching.

This focus will be particularly relevant for priority cohorts. We will work closely with Qualifications Wales to ensure our approach to curriculum and learning is consistent with and promotes the credibility and validity of the 2021 exam series.

(iii) We believe that this guidance [whole school approach framework] should be published for consultation as a matter of priority, to ensure that support for our children’s emotional and mental health can be a central feature of their education.

The Committee will be aware that it had been our intention to commence formal consultation in March, and extensive pre-consultation with stakeholders had already occurred to support this. The onset of the pandemic coincided with our plans and it was logical that this was put on hold whilst schools prioritised supporting learners during lockdown. However, we also recognise that our whole school approach is an important part of supporting the wellbeing of both learners and staff affected by the current pandemic and its long-term effects, which are likely to outlast the initial physical impact of Covid19. As a result the Committee will be aware that we commenced consultation on 8 July³. Consultation will last until 30 September.

2. Recognising diversity of well-being and mental health issues

² <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2020-08/guidance-supporting-vulnerable-disadvantaged-learners.pdf>

³ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2020-07/draft-framework-guidance-on-embedding-a-whole-school-approach.pdf>

(i) It is clear from the evidence we have received that an important balance needs to be struck between recognising and supporting mental health problems and not medicalising natural responses to a frightening pandemic..... In our view, this demonstrates further the importance of our Mind over Matter recommendations relating to provision of emotional resilience and early intervention support, and addressing the gaps in service for those children and young people who find themselves ineligible for CAMHS services but unable to find suitable therapeutic or “lower level” support – the so-called “missing middle”. The Welsh Government must continue to prioritise implementation of our Mind over Matter recommendations.

We agree, that is why we are continuing to prioritise the work of the Joint Ministerial Task and Finish Group on a Whole School Approach to Wellbeing and are now consulting on our proposals. As noted above, this will not only address the recommendations in Mind Over Matter, but also play an important role in tackling the short, medium and long-term impact of the Covid19 pandemic.

We are also backing our proposals with £5 million, jointly from the Education and Health Budgets, in the current year to take forward activity to develop consistent whole-school approaches across Wales. Meeting the needs not only of learners, but the wider school community, recognising the link between teacher and student wellbeing. This includes:

- £1,250,000 of additional funding for school and community-based counselling services, including supporting the delivery of services to clients during lockdown.
- £465,000 to extend age appropriate well-being support to children below Year 6.
- £450,000 to deliver staff training on mental health and well-being.
- £600,000 to deliver school based universal and targeted mental health and well-being interventions.
- £450,000 to deliver well-being support for the school workforce.
- Almost £1m to continue the work of our CAMHS school in-reach pilots.

We have also created a toolkit on Hwb which promotes a variety of digital tools designed specifically to support young people with their own mental health and emotional wellbeing. The Young Persons’ Mental Health Toolkit⁴ links young people, aged 11 to 25, to a wide range of online resources that can support them through the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. In each of the six sections there are up to ten self-help websites, apps, helplines, and more which support mental health and wellbeing.

In the autumn term, learners will require time, support and understanding to develop new behaviours; appropriate opportunities to play, socialise and nurture relationships can support this. In recognition of these challenges, we have been working closely with higher education institutions to develop a range of professional learning resources to support schools and settings in putting the well-being of both learners and staff at the heart of everything they do as they teach within the context of COVID-19’s ongoing impacts. The first in the suite of resources have now been published⁵.

⁴ <https://hwb.gov.wales/repository/discovery/resource/e53adf44-76cb-4635-b6c2-62116bb63a9a/en>

⁵ <https://hwb.gov.wales/playlists/view/5e4722f8-5980-4970-bdf0-43d7990796e9/en/1?options=CNIQ39k7rbEp4zsz8OdGxip83XDxyAM%252BxyuNqUgoOrvEtxGXwma9Q0UtNK7LrNnQ6bYw53adgkcTL6FXxVsVHOOFICANNqBCqXUn8j4rA%252FHKuyCg49jGbtVn9p1V1ZR%252FzAiXP%252BmKsqDVlpl%252BEPnrW8KuqPebc7M59OWX6qL3KISkAdV7JfwDYbeF2XRTs%252F1sWNcTaW7rkUKf5PeHlp2kWq%253D%253D> and <https://hwb.gov.wales/playlists/view/7fa16952-91be-4679-a2e9-aaebc5834695/en/1?options=CNIQ39k7rbEp4zsz8OdGxip83XDxyAM%252BxyuNqUgoOrvEtxGXwma9Q0UtNK7LrNnQ6bYw53adgkcTL6FXxVsVHOOFICANNqBCqXUn8j4rA%252FHKuyCg49jGbtVn9p1V1ZR%252Fllf%252BVW7zinYaVlxZIE1yQu4sm0bldNr60YAeXlsEpfqKJ1ZjQPkbO4ppUW8qqhUFvH5RvJ%252BWXpW6om6zo3YBEq%253D%253D>

We are also actively pursuing strategies with partners inside and outside education settings to provide for young people in need of lower level support.

Throughout the covid-19 pandemic, mental health services remained open and able to support children and young people, including those whose needs are at tiers 0 and 1. All health boards have given assurances to Welsh Government that this has been the case. Welsh Government has also stepped in to fund support services under pressure due to Covid-19 for example the Beat Eating Disorders Helpline, which provides information and advice for people living with eating disorders and their families.

The Early Help and Enhanced Support Together for Children and Young People Workstream builds on the work of the Whole School Approach through the development of a framework which supports children, young people and their families, and will deliver proposals for best practice and service development. Work on this area has continued during the pandemic.

3. Data

(i) We are concerned to ensure that a clear and transparent picture of the number of children and young people accessing services to support both their physical and mental health is available publicly. The Welsh Government must make this data available in a timely and accessible way, to ensure that the impact of the pandemic and measures to manage it can be scrutinised fully.

Data on children accessing primary care exists on GP IT systems and likewise information exists within secondary care on numbers of children presenting at Emergency Departments. Officials will work with the RCPCH to identify a useful outcome indicator for children accessing health services.

Welsh Government intends to resume the publishing of routine performance data before the end of 2020. This will include Local Primary Mental Health Support Services data split to show under-18s for the first time.

4. Digital infrastructure

(i) We are unclear, about the steps the Welsh Government is taking to monitor how many children are currently without access to the digital infrastructure necessary to access their education, health and support services. We would welcome further detail on these monitoring arrangements, and the steps being taken to measure how many children are benefitting from the investment made.

Generally, we know there is a large proportion of people across Wales who are not digitally confident – they either do not personally use the internet or lack the basic digital skills to access vital services and information. We must ensure they are not left behind in society especially as we emerge from and consider future policy following this pandemic. Our future policy will be built on the recognised need to support everyone to gain the motivation, confidence and skills in order to make informed decisions and choose how they participate in, and make the most of, our increasingly digital world. Digital inclusion will be at the heart of all we deliver.

Our leading online learning platform Hwb continues to play a crucial role in supporting the delivery of education during this challenging period, with an average of 2.5 million logins per month over the last three months - a 131% increase on the previous year. There has also been an average of over 9.1 million page views per month over the same period - a 152% increase on the previous year. Over 99% of schools are actively engaged in using the platform.

To support digitally excluded learners in maintained schools, the Minister for Education has committed up to £3 million. Based on the demand identified by schools and local authorities, there have been 10,848 MiFi devices and 9,717 software licences funded by the Welsh Government and deployed across Wales. Based on local authority feedback, through their own arrangements or via our nationally provided support, we understand that provision for digitally excluded learners is now in place. If a parent / carer hasn't accessed this provision, they need to contact their local school for provision to be made.

More broadly, our Superfast Cymru programme, which provided superfast broadband access to over 733,000 properties, has proved to be a vital investment in supporting Wales through the pandemic and beyond as we focus on recovery. The Deputy Minister for Economy and Transport recently announced that under our current agreement with Openreach the number of properties that will benefit from access to full-fibre broadband will increase from 26,000 to 39,000.

The Welsh Government's Access Broadband Cymru (ABC) scheme provides grants to fund the installation costs of new broadband connections for homes and businesses in Wales (it does not include monthly rental costs). In anticipation of an increase in applications to the scheme, we have streamlined the application process to ensure swift access to improved connectivity.

Support may also be available to connect to gigabit capable broadband through the UK Government Rural Gigabit Connectivity programme. We have recently announced a Welsh top-up to the scheme which doubles the amounts available to homes and businesses to £3,000 and £7,000 respectively. We are also investing in new and innovative ways of connecting whole communities, working with local government and social enterprises through our £10 million Local Broadband Fund.

(ii) In many circumstances, particularly in relation to mental health, face to face interaction remains a vital component of support. Service design must have children and young people at the centre, and must recognise that individuals' needs and preferences vary – one size does not fit all. We request reassurance that plans are in place for a safe return to face to face services where they are the most appropriate option, and that clear principles are in place to assess where a continuation of remote, digital support may be beneficial.

For learners, we recognise the possibility of future disruption to schooling at a local level from the impact of the pandemic. We are clear that schools and Local Authorities need to ensure plans are in place for responding to disruption based on local scenarios, and that these should include impact on individuals and groups, the closure of a school for a period, or the closure of a group of schools such as a local cluster, or all the secondary schools serving a community

As we go into September, we will clearly state our expectation that schools do all they can to ensure continuity of learning under future conditions of disruption. Schools will be expected to set out in their plans pupils' entitlement to contact and support, the frequency

and duration of teaching and learning sessions, and the amount of time pupils are expected to spend in independent study

Schools will also be expected to set out the curriculum that will be available to learners involved in the *Recruit, Recover, Raise Standards* programme and the general curriculum available to all learners in the case of disruption to normal operation.

Schools' plans will be scrutinised by their regional consortia and Local Authorities, and monitored as part of the work Estyn do in the coming year

We are aware that the regional consortia have undertaken considerable work to make guidance and Professional Learning available to schools in support of their approach to blended and remote learning, and that the Hwb now contains significant resources for use by schools in developing their plans.

In relation to learner wellbeing, at the start of the pandemic we moved quickly to announce additional resources of £1.25m for our school counselling service, with a focus on maintaining provision for existing and new service users during lockdown. This meant counsellors developing new skills in delivering services online and investment in the infrastructure (software licences, etc) to enable them to work effectively. We also recognised that once children return to school there would likely be a short-term spike in demand and also longer-term implications on their psychological wellbeing. From the information provided by local authorities, our investment has enabled us to provide an additional 14,550 counselling sessions up to the end of March, with an estimated 3,120 additional children and young people being able to access the vital support this service provides.

5. The capacity of health professionals to support children and young people

(i) We are concerned, however, that while the physical health needs of the population were necessarily a priority in the early stages of this pandemic, services to support children's mental health and well-being were exposed to the risk of de-prioritisation.

Ensuring children and young people with emotional health and wellbeing problems (both existing and as a result of the current Covid19 pandemic) receive access to support and treatment in a timely and appropriate manner has remained a key priority for the Welsh Government and is a fundamental requirement of the UNCRC.

Welsh Government positioned all age mental health services as 'essential' services during the pandemic. In practice, whilst services are affected and service models have had to adapt, we have continued to expect a safe and sustainable response for children and young people who needed the support of mental health services.

To ensure children and young people received the support they need throughout the pandemic, services have accelerated the use of non-traditional methods. This can be across the NHS (e.g. Attend Anywhere videoconferencing), local innovation (e.g. Gwent Community Psychology and Gwent Attachment Service resources), and Welsh Government led (e.g. Young People's Mental Health Toolkit).

(ii) Recognising the very real possibility of a second wave of coronavirus, the Welsh Government needs to set out the clear steps it will take to ensure that children's mental health services are protected to avoid the long-term consequences that would follow from a lack of specialist support.

In the event of a second wave, the mechanisms put in place during the pandemic so far can be quickly re-engaged. Building on the learning from the first few months of Covid-19 and the sharing of good practice, we will tailor our response to match the challenges of any potential second wave so that care continues in the safest possible fashion. This will include modified reporting so that priority data is collected without impacting on clinical time, alternatives to face-to-face contact, and weekly meetings between CAMHS Medical Directors and Welsh Government.

Our existing mechanisms provide a strong core of proven strategies backed up by clinical expertise which can be supplemented with additional measures as the situation demands. Services will have the advantage of familiarity with a renewed approach as well as flexibility continuing to provide high quality support in challenging circumstances.

(iii) We were particularly interested to learn of steps taken in some areas to enable parents to refer to single point of access facilities for CAMHS. We would welcome further details from the Welsh Government about where these models are in place, and believe they should be evaluated and considered for use all health board areas.

All of the Welsh Health Boards have been operating single points of access during Covid-19 to aid in the delivery of services and ensure that young people can access the support they need.

All specialist CAMHS services are also actively working towards implementing CAPA (the Choice And Partnership Approach) as a single point of access, although each Health Board is at a different stage of implementation as local considerations are taken into account during rollout. Welsh Government is continuing to work with health boards to ensure single points of access are considered and deployed as a key strategy for service improvement as CAMHS moves towards recovery planning following Covid-19

(iv) We request further details from the Welsh Government about:

- **the steps it has taken to monitor the crisis care support that has been available for children and young people during the period since lockdown;**
- **the arrangements it has in place to ensure that crisis care support for children and young people is available to all those children and young people who need it as the pandemic unfolds.**

Welsh Government convened the Mental Health Incident Group at the onset of the pandemic and co-ordinated the prioritisation and continuation of crisis care. The CAMHS Clinical leads from each health board also met weekly, sharing best practice, information, and reporting potential problems as they developed. Both groups focused on the continuation of key services including crisis, as well as developing mechanisms for service adaptation to the evolving landscape of care.

Welsh Government has provided £2 million to date, for additional mental health inpatient capacity to support health boards on a needs basis.

The Committee has also been made aware of the additional work carried out by the NHS Delivery Unit to investigate young suicide and probable suicide during the pandemic.

All health boards reported that they maintained capacity to respond to the mental health needs of children and young people and we are confident that high-quality, effective crisis care will continue to be available

6. Impact on specific groups of children and young people

(i) We recognise that coronavirus has affected all children and young people, however we are particularly concerned about its impact on specific groups, including black and ethnic minority, shielding and disadvantaged children. Our previous letters have also referred to the impact of the pandemic on children with additional learning needs, and those in education otherwise than at school. We would welcome further assurances from the Welsh Government about how these particular groups – and any others considered particularly vulnerable as a consequence of measures to manage the pandemic – are being specifically identified and supported in terms of their physical and mental health.

Local authorities, schools and settings, as well as practitioners and partner agencies, have shown resilience and agility in adapting the services they provide for children and young people and their families who face barriers to their learning in these unprecedented times. Likewise, many parents/carers and families across Wales have had to quickly adapt and balance new ways of working whilst providing care, support and education for their children.

We recognise COVID-19 is likely to have affected vulnerable and disadvantaged children more than their peers. Since the outbreak the needs of vulnerable and disadvantages learners have been a cross-cutting theme to our work, including in the Continuity of Learning Plan, which was implemented during the lockdown. The purpose of identifying the vulnerable and disadvantaged as a distinct area of work is to ensure the education provision and support for these learners is inclusive and equitable with their peers.

As referenced earlier in this document we have published specific guidance for those more vulnerable learners, Keep Education Safe: Guidance for Supporting Vulnerable and Disadvantaged Learners from September 2020, which supplements the learning and operational guidance previously published. The guidance recognises the following groups of learners may have been more affected than their peers and promotes the importance of meeting their emotional and mental wellbeing:

- learners with special education needs (SEN)
- learners from minority ethnic groups who have English or Welsh as an additional language
- care experienced children, including looked after children (LAC)
- learners educated otherwise than at school (EOTAS)
- children of refugee and asylum seekers

(ii) We would also welcome a response to the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health's view that there is no reason for a child who is not under the care of a hospital consultant to be shielded.

The Chief Medical Officer for Wales has been conscious throughout the period he advised people to shield that shielding itself had associated harms. For this reason his advice was kept under constant review and changes made as soon as it was safe to do so. This is why, even before the end of the initial shielding period, he changed his advice to encourage exercise outdoors and permit the meeting outdoors with one other household. Whilst this was then confirmed in a follow up letter shortly afterwards, it was considered so important to

allow this to occur as soon as it was considered safe to do so, it was implemented immediately.

We continue to monitor and change the advice to shield by balancing the objectives of the advice to shield and its relative harms. This includes incorporating advice for those who are shielding as part of the provision to allow for extended households.

Matters in relation to shielding are considered by the four UK CMOs and then advice provided to Ministers as a result of those discussions. Once the UK CMOs had agreed to adopt the RCPCH guidance in relation to shielding and children we notified members of the intention to review the children currently on the Shielding Patients List (SPL) via a written statement, issued on the 16th July⁶. This activity will take place over the summer and with the advice to shield being paused from 16th August, all children can return to school for the autumn term. As part of this announcement the Chief Medical Officer for Wales recorded a video specifically for children to explain this change and this was shared via the education social media channels.

7. Funding

(i) The Mental Health Services Improvement Fund is a vital component of the financial support available for child and adolescent mental health services..... While we recognise the need for some activity and funding to be repurposed during the pandemic, children and young people must not lose out as a consequence of adjustments to budgets. We request evidence from the Welsh Government that sufficient funding is available to prioritise the service transformation required in children's mental health in Wales alongside the response to this pandemic.

To confirm the £7m Mental Health Service Improvement fund was re-purposed as part of our early response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Early on we positioned mental health services as 'essential services' and to support this, we immediately issued £3.5m of the mental health service improvement funding for local health boards to enable them flexibility to respond to the pressures associated with the current situation in mental health. This included access to crisis / out of hour provision and increased access to psychological interventions.

We have recently written to health boards to request proposals for the remaining £3.5m service improvement funding for 2020/21 and provisionally for the £7m from 2021/22 onwards. The funding will support the priority areas in our new three year Together for Mental Health Delivery Plan, including CAMHS / support for children and young people and increasing access to psychological therapies. We expect to receive proposals by 7 September.

⁶ <https://gov.wales/written-statement-update-shielding-and-adopting-guidance-royal-college-paediatrics-and-child-health>