

Senedd Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

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

COV 183
Ymateb gan: Comisiynydd y Gymraeg

Welsh Parliament
Children, Young People and Education Committee

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

COV 183
Response from: Welsh Language Commissioner

Inquiry into the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on children and young people in Wales (including students in further and higher education)

1. Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the above inquiry into the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on children and young people in Wales. My comments relate to the impact of the crisis on the Welsh language and children and young people, by virtue of my role in promoting and facilitating use of the Welsh language. As this situation is changing regularly, it is possible that I will contact you again to share further comments. I should also note that I have asked the Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee to hold a specific inquiry into the impact of the crisis on the Welsh language.¹
2. My officers have been in contact with Welsh Government officials during this period specifically to discuss the early years and make comments on impact assessments regarding closing and reopening schools. We have not taken part in other discussions nor discussed the impact of the crisis on further education and higher education with Welsh Government officials.
3. As an organisation, during lockdown we have continued to operate and have received several messages and comments from members of the public expressing concerns regarding the impact of lockdown on different aspects of Welsh-medium education. Below we express a number of matters and concerns we would like the Committee to consider as part of its inquiry.

¹ <https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s102786/COV58%20-%20Welsh%20Language%20Commissioner.pdf>

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4. Early years

- 4.1 Early years childcare provision was closed to everyone apart from children of key workers or vulnerable children during lockdown. This means that work carried out by cylchoedd meithrin (playgroups) and meithrin settings to introduce the Welsh language to children ceased in many places. Research shows that as many as 88% of the children who are in Welsh-medium pre-statutory care transfer to Welsh-medium primary education.² Some children who will be attending cylchoedd meithrin and meithrin settings in September 2020 will have missed almost 6 months of Welsh-medium care since March 2020. Our concern is that there is potential that this experience will undermine the positive decisions made by parents to send their children to Welsh-medium education because they are concerned that their children have lost a period of immersion in the Welsh language and that they cannot support them.
- 4.2 It is fair to note, of course, that Mudiad Meithrin has taken steps to fill the gap such as the Clwb Cylch sessions on YouTube and that the Dewin and Doti tour has also happened virtually, in an attempt to fill the gap to a certain degree in terms of meithrin education. S4C also released a number of children's programmes from the archive and there was an increase of 182% in the average number of viewers of children's programmes since the beginning of lockdown.³
- 4.3 As restrictions are lifted and schools reopen, we understand that an inconsistent pattern is emerging as some locations open and others do not, depending on providers' individual decisions and/or decisions by local authorities. For example, we are aware of cases where cylchoedd meithrin's ability to use school buildings has been limited as a result of the crisis because some schools have banned the use of school halls and toilets, meaning that it is not possible to open cylchoedd meithrin. Of course, it must also be remembered that a number of cylchoedd do not have their own dedicated buildings and are dependent on community settings such as village halls and so on which remain closed. An additional concern as settings re-open is the impact on the economic viability of these settings of the adjustments that they need to make as a result of social distancing requirements. In this respect,

²Data from Mudiad Meithrin's Annual Report for 2018-19

https://www.meithrin.cymru/creo_files/upload/downloads/terfynol_saes_adroddiad_blynyddol_18-19_llai.pdf

³ Evidence to the Westminster Welsh Affairs Committee's inquiry into the impact of Covid-19 on the Welsh economy <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/5630/pdf/>

the context of early care provision differs from statutory education although numbers and social distancing requirements apply in both locations. We do not have specific information on the impact on Welsh-medium settings but we cannot see that the situation would be different as the social distancing requirements would be the same as in all other childcare settings.

- 4.4 In terms of looking to the future, messages regarding the benefits of Welsh-medium education need to be reinforced further in order to ensure that a proportion of children who would have gone on to receive Welsh-medium education in primary schools are not lost. Consideration also needs to be given to the additional support which could be given to those parents who are possibly concerned about sending their children to Welsh-medium education as a result of the circumstances resulting from the crisis. This should be considered particularly as there is a possibility, of course, that we could see further outbreaks over the coming months or years.

5. Children of statutory school age

- 5.1 It is a cause for concern, of course, that this period has affected the education of every child and that this, in turn, is causing concern amongst children. For example, the Children's Commissioner's report *Coronavirus and me*⁴ noted that 54% of children aged 12-18 are concerned that they will fall behind educationally as a result of the crisis; and only 11% noted that they were not concerned about their education. Of those children aged 7-11 who attend a Welsh-medium primary school and who responded to the Children's Commissioner's questionnaire, 8% said that they did not have opportunities to use the Welsh language during lockdown. This percentage that do not have opportunities to use the Welsh language increases to 15% in the 12-18 years age group. At first glance, these statistics suggest that only a small percentage of children have not used the Welsh language at all during lockdown. However, due to the Welsh language's position as a minority language and the fact that so many children from non-Welsh speaking homes learn the language through immersion, it is vital that children are given as many opportunities as possible to use the language.

⁴ https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FINAL_formattedCVRep_EN.pdf

- 5.2 It is a cause for concern that this lockdown has had a particular impact on pupils in Welsh-medium education who come from non-Welsh speaking homes, as they are not having the same educational and social opportunities that they would have in school to use the Welsh language. As you know, in order to become fluent in Welsh it is important that children learn the language when they are young, and in Welsh language immersion education, all children's teaching and learning, whatever their linguistic background, is conducted through the medium of Welsh until they are 7 years old. Young children from non-Welsh speaking backgrounds learn Welsh fluently in a short space of time so that they are able to learn the entire curriculum in Welsh. It is a cause for concern that this period, during which pupils have lost a period of immersion education, could potentially undermine their linguistic skills which are in the process of developing. Older children from non-Welsh speaking backgrounds in Welsh-medium education may possibly also be affected. The medium of these children's education is Welsh, and if they do not have the opportunity to use the language to the same degree as they would in school, the possible erosion of their linguistic skills could affect their educational attainment in the long term. We believe that schools will need to pay specific attention to the attainment of these children with support from the Welsh Government in order to ensure that there will be no impact on their attainment. This is also a cause for concern as it is possible that it will reinforce concerns by non-Welsh speaking parents who choose to send their children to Welsh-medium education that they cannot support them, and that this, in turn, will make them rethink their decision. This may be particularly true in those transition periods between early years and statutory education as previously noted, and between primary and secondary education. It is true that support is available from schools for non-Welsh speaking parents in some cases, but we believe that consideration needs to be given to whether a purposeful campaign is needed to support parents whose children are in Welsh-medium education. This must be considered in particular due to the possibility that further lockdown measures will need to be introduced again in the future.
- 5.3 According to statistics in the Children's Commissioner's *Coronavirus and me* report, children who receive their education in English-medium schools will have far less contact with the Welsh language than children in Welsh-medium education. Of those children aged 7-11 in English-medium settings who usually learn Welsh, 31% do not have any contact with the Welsh language; in the 12-18 age group, 26% do not have any contact with the Welsh language. This is not surprising of course, but

again the statistics are concerning as they highlight the challenges facing children in English-medium schools in learning Welsh, an issue which is particularly relevant considering the Welsh Government's objective in the Cymraeg 2050 Strategy⁵ to ensure that there will be an increase in the percentage of children leaving English-medium education who are able to speak Welsh.

- 5.4 We also ask the Committee to consider the impact of the crisis on children in bilingual education. The provision in bilingual schools varies depending on the school's linguistic category and local authority policies. There are significant variations which mean that some schools may offer all subjects in both languages or some subjects in Welsh only and some in English only, or even bilingual provision in the same class. We would like to gain a better understanding of how this period has affected Welsh-medium education in these schools, for example, has it led to decisions to teach subjects in only one language? Similarly, with social distancing rules affecting the number of children who can attend classes, we would like to know whether this has led to decisions which will reduce the number of subjects taught through the medium of Welsh.
- 5.5 Of course, every school's response to remote teaching has varied, and therefore it is difficult to generalise. However, we know that there are already fewer subject resources available in Welsh in general,⁶ and as there are many digital resources available on the Welsh Government's Hwb website and that there are more in English than in Welsh, it could be argued that it has been more difficult for Welsh-medium teachers to provide lessons remotely for their pupils. We are aware, however, that some work has been led by the Welsh Government to create more Welsh language resources for Hwb to support the work of teachers at this time.
- 5.6 In relation to the point above, we have received some evidence that parents are often directed towards these resources on Hwb, but that they are not necessarily aware which resources are relevant, how to access them, and in which ways they should be used. Perhaps it would be useful to collect further information regarding the use of such online resources during the past months in order to ensure more clarity and consistency in the future. It would be useful to look at these issues in relation to post-16 and higher education as well.

⁵ <https://gov.wales/cymraeg-2050-welsh-language-strategy>

⁶ <https://senedd.wales/laid%20documents/cr-ld11684/cr-ld11684-e.pdf>

- 5.7 Another matter which should be highlighted in terms of the Welsh language is that children have missed opportunities to socialise in Welsh, not only in school but also through school-affiliated community activities, through their Siarter Iaith for example or otherwise. These include activities which would have been arranged by Mentrau Iaith and sports clubs and other local clubs; visits to Urdd centres; the Urdd Eisteddfod and the National Eisteddfod and many other local Welsh-medium festivals which contribute to increasing children's confidence and interest in the Welsh language outside the classroom. Again, it must be noted that a number of schools have undertaken digital activities. Successful joint working between the Urdd, S4C and Radio Cymru also led to holding Eisteddfod T, for example, and Tafwyl was held digitally. However, these digital activities do not make up for the opportunities to socialise naturally through the medium of Welsh with friends and engage with Welsh culture which is so important in terms of giving context to Welsh-medium education. The educational experience of children is not confined to the classroom alone, so a plan and timetable for the resumption of activities such as sport that take place outside and beyond school provision is needed
- 5.8 The Children's Commissioner's *Coronavirus and me* report highlighted the impact of the crisis on children and young people's mental health, drawing attention to their concerns resulting from the situation. The impact of the crisis on children and young people's mental health in the long term is therefore a cause for concern. *Mind over Matter*,⁷ a report published by this Committee in 2018 on emotional and mental health support for children and young people in Wales, highlighted the concerns of several organisations regarding a lack of mental health services available in Welsh for children and young people. With this in mind, we are eager to ensure that there are adequate mental health services available in Welsh for children and young people, especially if there is an increase in demand for services as a result of the pandemic.
6. Further education and work-based learning
- 6.1 The Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol is responsible for developing the Welsh language in this sector. As with statutory education, we are concerned about the impact the change to remote teaching has had on Welsh-medium and bilingual

⁷ <https://senedd.wales/laid%20documents/cr-ld11522/cr-ld11522-e.pdf>

education in this sector, especially as the percentages and numbers who are doing so are generally lower than in the statutory sector. The same concerns in terms of losing social and educational opportunities in Welsh are also relevant in this sector, as well as the impact of this on students' decisions regarding the language medium of their education. We should emphasise that we have not received concerns about this, but again we would be eager for the Committee to consider the Welsh-medium and bilingual educational provision in light of the crisis.

7. Higher Education

- 7.1 As in the case of further education above, we are eager to ensure that the change to remote learning did not affect the Welsh-medium provision available in higher education. In the long term, we are also aware that Covid-19 could have a serious economic impact on Welsh universities.⁸ We are eager to ensure that these financial difficulties will not affect decisions regarding the universities' Welsh-medium provision and we encourage the Committee to keep this matter under review.
8. We have a natural tendency perhaps to focus on the negative impacts of crises and, of course, the pandemic has had an immense and personal impact on many people. We ourselves have also highlighted a number of concerns above, mainly regarding Welsh-medium education. As you consider these concerns, I ask you to consider also whether there are lessons to be learnt from the crisis in order to support Welsh-medium education in the longer term. For example, how non-Welsh speaking parents have adapted to support their children and the further help which could be offered to support them in future, based on those experiences; does the practice of teaching pupils and students remotely provide an opportunity to expand Welsh-medium provision in schools, colleges and universities?
9. However, in all instances, what is important is not only the medium of education but the opportunities to socialise in Welsh and the personal contact found in settings where Welsh-medium education is provided. This engagement ensures that the Welsh language is not only a language for education, but also a medium through which young people can socialise and communicate, and this is exactly what children and young people have missed out on as a result of this lockdown.

⁸ https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0010/2394361/Covid_FINAL.pdf