

Senedd Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

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

COV 65
Ymateb gan: Cymdeithas y Plant

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 65
Response from: The Children's Society

The Children's Society is a national charity that helps the most vulnerable children and young people in Britain today. We run services and campaigns to make children's lives better and change the systems that are placing them in danger. We listen. We support. We act. Together with our supporters we're improving the lives of children today and building hope for a better future.

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted the life of every child in the country. Welsh Government and decision makers face a huge challenge in responding to the unfolding crisis. We recognise important steps already taken to protect the public's health and livelihoods during this time, yet we know that there is much more to be done in the coming weeks and months to protect the most vulnerable groups in our society.

This response to the Children, Young People and Education Committee will focus on Welsh Government's guidance for safeguarding vulnerable children and young people during the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak. We welcome the guidance and believe that it provides some useful guidance for supporting children and young people in foster care, residential care, care leavers, and children and young people suffering from mental and emotional ill health.

The Children's Society's response is informed by our analysis of Welsh Government's guidance and the insights we have gathered from our children's services evidence collection form.¹ As the inquiry progresses, we will continue to feed in insights to help inform the work of the committee.

1

<https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=SOAKNBzYq06lpLdJH6ikCHR939zAbv9Aq3i6KKCCb1xUNVhYUks1WTE5MVc2VTNUMkw1SEFLWThQTS4u>

Record keeping of vulnerable children and young people's attendance at the school

Whilst it is welcome to learn that local authorities should keep record of the number of vulnerable children who attend school during the outbreak, we believe that there needs to be more detail on what is being done to support children who are vulnerable but who do not attend school during the outbreak.

"My work is done on a one-to-one basis in schools supporting children and young people who have witnessed domestic abuse - at present my work is severely affected by the crisis. I am able to reach some of my clients by messenger/Whatsapp etc. but it is very difficult to continue this work which relies upon confidentiality at present." - Worker who responded to our evidence collection form.

If neither home or school are a place that a vulnerable child or young person would consider safe, we believe that it is crucial that more information is offered in the guidance as to how these children or young people can be supported, so as to ensure that they are not hidden from local authority records, thereby putting their health and safety at risk of harm.

Recommendation: Use data from record keeping of children who attend schools to identify 'hidden children' and ensure that provision is in place to ensure that these children are safeguarded appropriately under current social distancing requirements.

Looked after children who are placed out of area

While we welcome the information in the guidance on supporting children and young people in foster care, children in residential care and care leavers, we believe that there should be information in the guidance for looked after children who are placed out of their home local authority area.

Needing to have been placed out of their home local authority area to increase their safety will bring to these children and young people its own challenges even before the COVID-19 pandemic took hold. During this time, those challenges and difficulties risk intensifying, leading to greater loneliness, lack of contact or support from a social worker or advocate for whom the young person will have developed trust, and lower levels of well-being and increased risk of mental ill health.

While we appreciate that this is a complicated area with no easy solutions, we would urge Welsh Government to update its guidance so as to include

information on how to best support looked after children and young people who are placed out of area can be best supported.

Recommendation: Welsh Government should update its guidance for safeguarding children and young people during COVID-19 so as to include information on how to best support looked after children and young people who are placed out of area can be best supported.

Return home interviews for children and young people who go missing from home or care

Children and young people going missing from home or care is a sign that things are not well in their lives. In particular, we know from our research that the principal trigger for going missing is problems with family relationships. These may be exacerbated by the current restrictions on movement which mean that families are obliged to spend more time together, at a time when the additional stresses within households (for example, due to financial hardship) are increasing.

Arrangements for return home interviews in Wales vary across the country – in some parts they are provided by independent practitioners, and in other parts they are offered by social workers. Even so, we would urge Welsh Government to update the guidance so as to reflect that children and young people who go missing from home or care must continue to receive a return home interview, which could take place over the phone, or by other remote means, due to social isolation measures.

Recommendation: Welsh Government should update the guidance so as to reflect that children and young people who go missing from home or care must continue to receive a return home interview, which could take place over the phone, or by other remote means, due to social isolation measures.

Social distancing

We have heard from partner organisations that some young people have struggled with the concept of social isolation, leading them to lose long-term placements as hosts/families have asked them to leave for not adhering to government guidelines. We appreciate this is a difficult issue to navigate, but we would urge update the guidance to reflect this and accompany this update by developing and distributing targeted guidance for children and young people in care on government guidelines on social distancing and up to date public health measures/restrictions.

Recommendation: Welsh Government should develop and distribute targeted guidance for children and young people in care on government guidelines on social distancing and up to date public health measures/restrictions.

Increased collaboration with the third sector

With most children currently being at home, there has been an increase in the use of Welsh Government's online learning platform, Hwb. However, our colleagues from the sector have told us that there is a missed opportunity to collaborate with organisation from the third sector to provide information for children and young people that could help them with living under lockdown. We have heard from organisations that focus on young people's well-being and mental health, physical health, and domestic abuse charities, about how they can contribute information to the Hwb learning platform, particularly on how children and young people can develop and maintain positive well-being during lockdown, and support for children and young people who are experiencing anxiety or other forms of mental ill health during lockdown.

Recommendation: Enable third sector organisations the ability to provide information on the Hwb online learning platform on how children and young people can develop and maintain positive well-being during lockdown.

We appreciate that COVID-19 has presented challenges to ensuring that vulnerable children and young people continue to receive the support that they need, and deciding on solutions for these challenges and implementing them is difficult. But we would urge the committee to consider the points raised here and the recommendations below. We in the sector would be more than happy to support the committee in any way with continuing to support vulnerable children and young people during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we would welcome the opportunity to work with you on this.

Recommendations

- Use data from record keeping of children who attend schools to identify 'hidden children' and ensure that provision is in place to ensure that these children are safeguarded appropriately under current social distancing requirements.
- Welsh Government should update its guidance for safeguarding children and young people during COVID-19 so as to include information on how to best support looked after children and young people who are placed out of area can be best supported.
- Welsh Government should update the guidance so as to reflect that children and young people who go missing from home or care must continue to receive a return home interview, which could take place

over the phone, or by other remote means, due to social isolation measures.

- Welsh Government should develop and distribute targeted guidance for children and young people in care on government guidelines on social distancing and up to date public health measures/restrictions.
- Welsh Government should consider working with higher education institutions and offer social work students who are currently in their second and third year of study roles to help with workload and ease pressure on children's services.
- Enable third sector organisations the ability to provide information on the Hwb online learning platform on how children and young people can develop and maintain positive well-being during lockdown.