



Association of Educational Psychologists

Survey into the effects of Covid-19 on the provision of educational psychology services in Wales

Document control summary

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1. Executive summary

The Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP) undertook a survey of educational psychology services in Wales in order to determine the effect that the Covid-19 pandemic was having on the delivery of educational psychology services. In Wales all educational psychology services are run by the local authority and although most educational psychologists (EPs) have not been designated as key workers there have been no reports of them being redeployed to other roles. Indeed the current situation has led to increased pressures on services as EPs come to terms with the challenges of working in the current environment of 'lockdown' and the resultant social isolation.

The survey focused on the following issues: providing statutory advice; home working; child care; well-being; trainee EPs and children and young people who are potentially vulnerable. As a result of the responses received it has become apparent that the current situation raises important issues regarding working practices, including the need to ensure safety, maintain data security, uphold professional standards and use technology appropriately. There are also concerns about the increased work pressures that EPs are experiencing and the effect on their emotional health and well-being. As a result of the information received several recommendations have been made to ensure best practice can be maintained in these challenging times.

2. Best practice recommendations for all EP services

A. Providing statutory advice

- 1) Services should have a policy on when it is appropriate for educational psychologists to complete statutory advice on children and young people with whom they have had only limited contact.
- 2) When it is not possible to obtain all the necessary information, educational psychologists should be given clear guidance on what caveats should be included in their reports to indicate what information was not available and whether it will be appropriate for there to be further involvement with children and young people when they return to school.
- 3) In some circumstances it may be appropriate for EPs to indicate that, given the limited information available, they are unable to provide any meaningful advice. It will be important that such decisions are discussed and agreed with educational psychology service managers who will need to have clear criteria in place to cover such scenarios.

B. Home working

- 1) All local authorities should ensure that their EPs have the necessary equipment for them to undertake remote working from home. At a minimum this should include a suitable computer; a mobile phone and/or a land line; a contribution to the cost of a broadband connection at home and suitable furniture.
- 2) Where it is necessary, training in the use of video conferencing tools should be provided.
- 3) Service managers also need to provide clear guidance on which work tasks can be carried out at home and which are not appropriate.

C. Child care

- 1) There is a need for all services to acknowledge that many of their staff have childcare or other care responsibilities.
- 2) Services should have a clear policy in place which emphasises that, under the current circumstances, individuals are encouraged to work flexibly and that each person's wellbeing is equally if not more important than working their full contracted hours where this is causing considerable stress.
- 3) It should not be necessary for individuals to have to take annual leave to meet childcare arrangements caused by the current pandemic.

D. Wellbeing

- 1) All EPs should be having access to regular, planned sessions for supervision and support.
- 2) It may be helpful to supplement these with additional arrangements for peer support, such as the use of a “buddy system.”
- 3) The facilitation of arrangements for joint project work and collaboration on producing resources with colleagues should be promoted whenever this is possible.
- 4) Risk assessments should be undertaken for those members with additional needs and other potentially challenging circumstances.
- 5) Given that many of the concerns which could adversely affect wellbeing related to working arrangements, it is reasonable to expect that employers should provide appropriate technology, flexibility where it is needed, and guidelines for maintaining professional standards and writing statutory advice, in the current circumstances.

E. Trainee educational psychologists

- 1) Universities and local authorities should work together to ensure that there is a coordinated response to providing information for trainees.
- 2) Steps should be taken to ensure that all trainees are consulted as to whether the information meets their needs.
- 3) Supervision and support (provided by electronic means) should be both regular and predictable.
- 4) The increased use of theoretical models, training and project work should be considered in order to ensure that competencies are achieved.
- 5) Reassurance should be given as to how to manage the demands which may be accruing for some trainees in their final year.

F. Children and young people who are potentially vulnerable

- 1) EPs have valuable skills which can, and should, be used to support local authorities and their services at a strategic level. Many examples of this work have been provided in this survey.
- 2) EPs should also be encouraged, and be provided with time and resources, to develop materials which can be used to support many children and families. Again, many examples of this type of work have been provided in this survey.
- 3) All educational psychology services should be able to provide remote consultation and advice to schools and to other professionals to help them to meet the needs of potentially vulnerable pupils, those who are looked after, on the “at risk” register or who are at the point of transition.

3. Summative report based on the responses from Wales to the AEP Covid-19 Survey, April 2020

The survey was carried out in April 2020 and consisted of 14 questions. It was sent to AEP representatives (or to principal educational psychologists in those authorities that do not have an AEP representative). The aim was to obtain a snapshot of how educational psychologists are working during the current unusual circumstances.

AEP Region	Geographical area	Number of EP Services	Number of Responses	TEPS/Others	Key Workers
9	Wales	20	14	0	5
% of responses:			70%		35%

Note: *All educational psychology services in Wales are provided by local authorities. There was more than one response from a number of local authorities. Where this occurred the authority has been counted only once. In Wales there are 20 local authority educational psychology services providing services to 22 local authorities; Gwynedd/Ynys Mon educational psychology service covers both local authorities and Rhondda Cynon Taf provides an educational psychology service for Merthyr Tydfil.*

In approximately one third of those authorities where a response was received, the EPs have been designated key workers, although there seemed little difference in their work from those EPs who were not designated key workers. Many of the duties outlined were those normally undertaken by EPs albeit now performed by remote working. These include duties involving, where appropriate, completion of Appendix D statutory advice and other work related to the SEN Tribunal for Wales. Other duties arising from the lockdown were: providing COVID-19 bereavement support; helping to identify vulnerable learners/families and acting as named contact for identified vulnerable learners and their families.

There have been concerns that EPs may be redeployed to other duties, and responses to this have varied. Some EPs replied that they had not been asked to undertake anything other than their usual role. In some local authorities EPs have been asked to fill in questionnaires detailing what skills they have. The implication is that they may therefore be asked to take on other roles if they have the necessary skills. Where the issue of potential re-deployment has been raised the response has been that EPs are fully employed with undertaking their duties and are not available for redeployment.

The responses have been analysed against a series of headings as below.

A. Providing statutory advice

All respondents indicated that they were continuing to undertake statutory work. There are, however, problems with completing statutory assessments, particularly if it has not been possible to observe or work with the child. Concerns were expressed around timelines as there is some confusion as to whether or not current timelines still apply. There are concerns about lack of guidance on this issue from the Welsh Government.

EPs are completing statutory assessments based on existing information in the child's EPS file, reports from other professionals, and information from school and parents/carers gained via telephone consultation. They are also using appropriate standardised questionnaires and/or inventories that can be completed over the phone to gather further information where necessary. There are concerns about the difficulty of being able to gather pupil views. If sufficient information cannot be obtained, then EPs are not prepared to make recommendations.

Some EPs reported that timescales remain in place, but others reported that they were not working to timescales. As one commented: *"timetables are a bit flexible at present"*. Some LAs have sent a standard letter to all families to explain the difficulties and possible delays and some LAs are not accepting new requests for statutory assessment at this time.

Currently EPs are trying to comply with the timescales for Appendix D's, where possible but there will be some barriers to achieving this in the future. Some services are using a RAG rating (red/amber/green) to determine how they can complete any already started. Most LAs are giving priority to pre-schoolers that are starting school in September. LAs have retained moderation panels which are holding meetings remotely and reviewing each outstanding case on a regular basis

EP Services have developed a caveat statement to go with the Appendix D. The gist of these caveats being that the report has been compiled under limitations imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. As it has been difficult to undertake a comprehensive assessment about needs and provision, and information may be incomplete, further EP involvement/assessment maybe required.

B. Home working

The majority of EPs have had some experience of working from home and have the necessary equipment. Many use laptops and mobile phones provided by their LA. However, this is not the case for all EPs, and some are using their own mobile phones and landlines. Some reported that they have the facility to log in to the work server using their personal internet provider at home. Team meetings are held using various platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Skype, or Zoom. Other meetings, such as panel meetings and meetings with parents, are also undertaken using these facilities. Holding meetings remotely can be problematic, particularly if a number of people need to be involved. Sometimes there is a lack of speech clarity and a poor signal makes it difficult

to hear at times. The sheer number of users in an LA trying to access its IT network means that there are times when access to email/ files etc. are denied. However, there were several comments that IT departments are on hand to offer support and that this was a valued service.

Some EPs reported that their home circumstances led to connectivity problems, with two people working from home in the same household who both required an internet connection at the same time. For some their homes lack appropriate screens, desks and suitable chairs for sustained home working.

Not all LA's have a well-established 'Working from Home' policy as their EPs are normally office based when they are not in schools. Therefore, some of the procedures and protocols that might have been in place if home working had previously been permitted are not there, which can cause difficulties.

C. Child care

The majority of the respondents mentioned childcare, and for those EPs with young children this was an important issue. Most respondents reported that their LA had been very supportive and understanding of the need to balance work with childcare responsibilities. One EP commented "*we are at home during a crisis trying to work, rather than 'working from home' in the usual sense*". It is understood that for some EPs normal working hours could not be adhered to and a flexible and reasonable approach is required by all.

Sensible compromises may include a change in normal working pattern / hours and dividing parenting responsibilities with a partner if possible. Where EPs worked part-time, they could make up their weekly hours flexibly so that they could accommodate childcare and any other commitments. However, one respondent reported that in her LA EPs with young children had been sent an email suggesting that they work in the evenings after the children have gone to bed. Her comment was that this put pressure on some EPs and that their well-being isn't considered during this time.

D. Wellbeing

A number of EPs reported that it was a challenge to come to terms with a different way of living and working in a fast-changing situation. The uncertainty around the length of lockdown heightens EPs' concerns about their and their families' well-being. A few reported that they have family members who are at 'high risk' and were in total self-isolation.

For many EPs the majority of the day is spent on the computer, which can cause eye strain, headaches and RSI. Occupying younger children whilst working from home can be tricky but working arrangements are flexible so far. This does often mean working very early mornings and during evenings when children are asleep; though manageable

so far it could have a potential impact on well-being in the longer term. Those who have young children, especially partners of keyworkers, find it hard to complete the work within normal office hours with young toddlers around. For managers there are problems in ensuring the well-being of staff and being able to provide enough support for teams.

A common complaint is that there are constant emails with lots of information from different sources such as CAMHS, Counselling Services, etc. There can also be difficulties in understanding the ways in which Hubs are operating. Educational psychology services are having to review working practices in order to keep up with and complete ongoing work during lockdown. There are also concerns about the increased workload which will result once schools reopen, and that the poor staffing ratios in many Welsh EP Services will lead to increased pressure on staff.

E. Trainee educational psychologists (TEPs)

All TEPs are working on placement activities as fully as they can. They are recording activities completed that can be regarded as placement focused, and field-work supervisors will be signing these off as such, so that the University can ensure as much as possible is done to accrue the required number of completed placement days by the end of the year.

Each Year group is being provided with a list of suitable alternatives for different core activities, working towards acquiring the relevant competencies whenever possible. University supervisors have been staying in touch with TEPs, to help contain anxieties, keep them focused on tasks that need to be done and clarify queries. This has been both through individual contacts with every TEP and weekly Year group meetings via Zoom.

In those EP services with a TEP on placement, some TEPs are now undertaking work with the EP team, such as helping to write documents and guidance on Covid-19 issues.

F. Children who are potentially vulnerable, are looked after, are on the “at risk” register or who are at the point of transition

Many EP Services are sending out support packs by email to schools and parents around the issues of anxiety, emotional health and well-being, home educating and the new home/school relationship. Email and telephone support lines have been set up to provide ongoing support to schools and parents. EPs are also working alongside the ‘hubs’ and most services have provided a named EP for each hub.

EPs are following up new Early Years referrals by phone-call and email to referrers and parents as they cannot meet them face-to-face at present; initial information collection is taking place and advice is being provided by these means. Some EP Services have set

up a weekly helpline for SENCOs and teachers; parents of vulnerable children are able to contact their EP by phone/email. In some cases EPs are also contacting parents weekly to provide support. There is also contact by phone or email with social workers and care workers as needed.

Those children 'looked after' on the vulnerable groups list who are not attending a hub will have weekly phone contact from the most appropriate person. However, it may be difficult to ensure that all children 'looked after' are receiving support at this difficult time as there can be problems with accessing contact information etc.

For those children and young people at the point of transition there is discussion with schools and families regarding possible scenarios, and how transition can be meaningful and effective. There is a focus on managing anxiety and worry, including worries about exams. There are concerns about how the process of transition will be managed within local authorities, and how transition will be organised, particularly if the majority of schools re-open in September: e.g. whether pupils will return to their current schools with a delayed transition, or whether all transition pupils will start at their new schools.

One service reported that it has developed an EPS Emerging Needs and Priorities plan, and is developing appropriate support materials with respect to transition. The Welsh Government have stated that any return to schools will be phased, with priority given to those with SEN and those who are vulnerable. There has also been mention that priority may be given to those attending Welsh medium schools for whom Welsh is a second language.

Additional Information

There are a number of initiatives in place in different LAs. Many services have Critical Incidence Protocols and are updating these in light of the Covid-19 pandemic. Many EP services have also sent out documents to families, signposting to various support groups/websites/helplines around how to enhance their well-being at this time.

Individual EP services are developing their own resources for a range of people including school staff, children, young people and families, and also amending existing documentation to reflect the Covid-19 pandemic. Welsh EP Services are sharing ideas, information and documentation with each other, and NAPEP Cymru has been disseminating information between services.

4. Conclusions

The survey has generated a good response from local authority EP services in Wales. There is some variation in how well services are managing to cope with the present circumstances although the majority are providing a range of services under difficult conditions.

It is still relatively early days in terms of how the situation is going to develop and it may be that a further survey later in the summer term will identify other issues which need to be considered.

The key message from the services is that EPs need appropriate support both from their managers and, importantly, from senior staff in their authorities in the range of areas discussed above, if they are to be able to maintain an effective service under these conditions over a prolonged period of time.