

Senedd Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

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

COV 113
Ymateb gan: Grŵp Gweithredu ar Dlodi 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 113
Response from: Child Poverty Action Group

About CPAG

Child Poverty Action Group is a registered charity that was set up in 1965. We have offices in London and Glasgow, and a team in Wales focused on delivering the Cost of the School Day project in partnership with Welsh local authorities.

Child Poverty Action Group works on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. We work to understand what causes poverty, the impact it has on children's lives, and how it can be prevented and solved – for good.

We are the strong and trusted voice on child poverty. We provide training, advice and information to make sure hard-up families get the financial support they need. We also carry out high profile legal work to establish and protect families' rights.

In Wales, we are delivering the [Cost of the School Day](#) programme, working with schools to ensure that no child is disadvantaged due to their family's socio-economic status. Our approach to poverty-proofing puts children and young people in the lead, allowing schools to co-produce authentic and empowering solutions to address the impact of child poverty in the classroom.

Introduction

CPAG welcomes the opportunity to share our evidence with the Children, Young People and Education committee. There is much to welcome in the Welsh Government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Likewise, the efforts of our local councils to support children and young people have been extremely impressive during this difficult time. As an organisation that works across Wales, Scotland and England, we have seen many examples of

exemplary practice here which we have been proud to share with colleagues in other nations of the UK.

We particularly commend:

- the decision to offer cash transfer as an option to replace free school meals
- the provision of additional funding so families continue to receive support for food costs through the school holidays, up until schools re-open
- the provision of devices and data to help digitally excluded pupils get online
- the removal of EMA attendance requirements, enabling young people to continue receiving EMA payments while their learning institutions are closed
- The continued provision of free period products to children and young people who need them
- The strong emphasis on the health and wellbeing of the whole school community.

Parents, pupils, educators and third sector organisations like ours have all benefited from the clear and reassuring direction of the Education Minister throughout this time.

The Cost of the School Day project is currently conducting a major survey across the UK, exploring the support that has been provided to families while schools are closed to the majority of pupils. Our surveys (one for parents and carers, and one for children and young people) are underpinned by in-depth interviews that seek rich qualitative data about the effectiveness of the support provided. We are also seeking to understand what people feel they need from schools as we begin to make our way out of lockdown. We are currently analysing the results of these surveys, and our final report will be published in mid-June. This response is therefore a precursor to a more detailed report, which we will send to the committee once we have concluded our research.

In this response, we will focus on one area that we have been scrutinising since the coronavirus restrictions forced the majority of children to remain at home. The CPAG team in Wales have been closely monitoring the alternative provision for children who usually qualify for free school lunches. We'll share what we consider to be examples of good practice, including what parents and children have told us is working well for them.

Replacing free school meals for low income households during the lockdown

We strongly believe that the preferred and most equitable solution for replacing school meals during this crisis is to transfer equivalent funds directly into the bank account of the child's parent or carer¹. We do not believe that supermarket vouchers are an acceptable alternative, and wrote to Kirsty Williams on the 25th of March to outline why vouchers are a less safe and less dignified solution for replacing free school meals during these times.

- A voucher scheme is likely to tie families to certain large retailers and reduce their options for sourcing essentials that are in short supply through supermarkets, but that may be available locally. It also precludes families from using food co-operatives and local veg box schemes.
- For many low-income families, a trip to a particular retailer may mean the need to take public transport, with additional costs and risk to health. Current social distancing restrictions and public transport shutdowns mean families may have to walk several miles with their children in tow in order to use a voucher in a designated shop.
- Two-thirds of children eligible for FSM in Wales live in lone parent households. Contracting coronavirus will be especially harmful to these households, who will not be able to follow household isolation guidelines, and risks leaving children with an incapacitated caregiver.
- For families in self-isolation, cash allows families to ask a neighbour to shop on their behalf for small value essentials such as a pint of milk.
- Families with specific dietary needs may not be able to obtain the food they require in the designated store. Families with special diets may need to purchase food from specialist online suppliers during this crisis.
- We know from previous voucher schemes, for instance the scheme for asylum seekers, that when retailers won't give change in cash, families struggle with trying to ensure their basket of goods comes very close to the value of the voucher, and can feel stigmatised at the check-out.

At the start of April, it transpired that major problems were emerging with the Edenred supermarket voucher scheme in England, leaving hundreds of thousands of children without the support they are entitled to. Wales wisely

¹ See our [extensive research](#) into food insecurity, poverty and stigma in childhood for more detail on this topic

chose to steer away from commissioning a similar scheme here, but stopped short of directing local authorities to provide cash in lieu of free school meals. Instead, guidance was updated to suggest providing food parcels or supermarket vouchers, with cash transfer relegated to a third option on the list.

Many poverty-aware councils immediately made the switch to cash transfer where possible. This had the effect of considerably increasing take-up of FSM entitlements in some local authorities. For example, Neath Port Talbot council told us:

“We decided to change to cash payments to follow government guidelines on social distancing and unnecessary travel – e.g. no need to have catering staff in schools or parents/children travelling to collect ‘grab and go’ bags...While operating the ‘grab and go’ bag system, only around 1000 families were choosing to access the service. Since moving to bank transfer payments, we have registered 2916 applications covering around 4474 children (as of Thursday 16th April) allowing us to support considerably more parents to provide meals for their children. We will also continue to make weekly payments to support the most vulnerable learners and families during this response to coronavirus.”

Spokesperson for Neath Port Talbot Council, 16th April 2020

In other areas, local authorities continued to provide a mixture of food parcels and grab-and-go lunches. The rationale for not providing cash payments was often predicated on unfair stereotypes of parents in poverty as financially irresponsible, untrustworthy and incapable of properly prioritising their children’s needs over their own. In fact, research shows that, when given additional money, low-income parents are more likely to spend this on their children than better-off parents². Likewise, parents on low incomes are often more highly skilled in budgeting than those who have money to spare³.

We also know that, when given a choice, low-income families overwhelmingly prefer to receive money to allow them to purchase the food they want to eat for themselves. In our current survey, 83% of the families

² Strelitz J & Lister R. (2008) [Why Money Matters: Family income, poverty and children’s lives](#). Save the Children

³ See Gingerbread’s [Scraping and Saving](#) (2019) for a detailed study of how low-income mothers budget effectively

who have responded so far have said cash transfer is working 'extremely well' for them. The same cannot be said for those subject to grab-and-go or food parcel schemes.

In some cases, schools and local authorities have decided to use the provision of food aid to simultaneously carry out checks on children's welfare. While we absolutely recognise the importance of ongoing safeguarding and wellbeing checks for children in vulnerable circumstances, provision of emergency food support during the pandemic should not be conditional on engaging with broader safeguarding activities. Such an approach risks driving some families away from the support that is intended to help them, further increasing the risk of children going without. At the start of lockdown, many parents were faced with the task of walking miles each day with children in tow to collect packed lunches from schools, exposing the whole household to additional risk of contracting the coronavirus.

While the delivery of food parcels has often been welcomed by the recipients, they do not provide low-income families with the dignity of choice, and often contain food that the families cannot eat for religious, ethical or medical reasons.

"Money in the bank is much easier as I have 2 autistic children with restrictive diets. Collecting a packed lunch wouldn't work as they wouldn't eat the things provided. The money means I can get the foods they will eat from which ever shop sells it. The food bank deliveries, which come to my house, feed me and the 5 year old and they provide the staples for me to make healthy dinners. There are lots of things the older two will eat as well."

(Single mother with four children, Neath Port Talbot)

We are happy that 20 of Wales' local authorities are now offering families the option of receiving money to cover the costs of meals while their children are home from school. Families have told us how grateful they are for the additional funds at this difficult time, not least because the money helps with the additional costs of acquiring, storing and cooking the food, as well as buying the raw ingredients. Receiving cash also allows people who are self-isolating or shielding to get friends and family to buy shopping on their behalf. A lone parent in the Swansea area told us that getting the money directly was working "extremely well [because] It means I can transfer the money directly to the person who is doing our shopping."

What we would like to see happen next

As we move into the next phase of gradually relaxing some lockdown measures, we hope that the much-appreciated financial support currently being offered to children eligible for free school meals will not be abruptly withdrawn.

We ask that:

- Families continue to be entitled to payments in lieu of free school meals, until all children return to school on a full-time basis.
 - That PDG-Access funds continue to be awarded to eligible families, even if schools have not reopened full-time to all pupils.
 - In the event of second and subsequent lockdowns, local authorities are instructed to offer all eligible families the option of receiving cash payments in lieu of the free school meals. This would not preclude offering food parcels/delivery as well, but would ensure socio-economically disadvantaged households are not exposed to additional risk, just because they are poor.
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