

Senedd Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

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

COV 117
Ymateb gan: Cymdeithas Llywodraeth Leol
Cymru (CLILC)

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 117
Response from: Welsh Local Government
Association (WLGA)

About Us

The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) represents the 22 local authorities in Wales, and the three national park authorities and the three fire and rescue authorities are associate members.

The WLGA is a politically led cross-party organisation, with the leaders from all local authorities determining policy through the Executive Board and the wider WLGA Council. The WLGA also appoints senior members as Spokespersons and Deputy Spokespersons to provide a national lead on policy matters on behalf of local government. **Cymdeithas Llywodraeth Leol Cymru**

The WLGA works closely with and is often advised by professional advisors and professional associations from local government, however, the WLGA is the representative body for local government and provides the collective, political voice of local government in Wales. Discussion with both ADEW and ADSS Cymru have helped inform this response.

Introduction

The late economist John Maynard Keynes said, "When the facts change, I change my mind." This is an apt description of the current context in which we are all currently working. The Committee's inquiry into the COVID-19 outbreak comes during a period of unprecedented uncertainty, with a rapidly changing evidence-base, continual review of policy direction and regular updating of statutory guidance and regulations. This response can therefore only provide a brief high-level overview and snapshot of some of the main issues impacting on local authorities at this time in relation to the impact on children and young people. As evidence gathering, evaluation and reviews are undertaken, the WLGA's views may be revised accordingly. It is likely that, given the potential length of the COVID-19 emergency, there will be several longer-term inquiries and reviews into different aspects of the UK Government, Welsh Government and wider public service response to the crisis, all of which will enable more detailed evidence and reflection on the responses taken.

Councils, with partners in the health service and third and independent sectors, are providing a front-line response to the rapidly changing national emergency of COVID-19. Councils have shown incredible resilience and responsiveness in how

they have responded to this public health crisis and all frontline workers should be commended for their incredible efforts, innovation and flexibility. Many have and are working at incredible speed at redesigning and reprioritising local services, and many thousands of workers in other services across Wales' 22 councils have volunteered to temporarily change roles overnight to help contribute to the emergency effort.

The WLGA is working closely with councils, the Welsh Government and others to help coordinate and support the public service response to COVID-19. The WLGA Leader is in regular dialogue with the First Minister and Cabinet and WLGA Spokespersons meet regularly with Ministers. Through the WLGA the 22 leaders participate in weekly meetings with the Housing and Local Government Minister to receive updates, share intelligence and raise queries or issues of concern. Other Ministers have also attended these meetings, including the Minister for Education, the Minister and Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services, the Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government and the Deputy Minister for Economy and Transport.

Ministers and leaders, through the WLGA, typically seek to work closely together through political dialogue, but during this crisis we have seen an unprecedented level of access, engagement and openness. This degree and regularity of central-local engagement is not seen in other parts of the UK. Whilst these regular meetings have been constructive, there have inevitably been some challenging discussions, but the level of engagement has been valued by both leaders and Ministers. The WLGA is also working with Chief Executives, Directors of Education, Directors of Social Services, Directors of Public Protection, and Monitoring Officers to inform emergency legislation and shape the emergency response of council services across Wales' communities.

There are several Committee Inquiries into COVID-19 being undertaken at the same time, as such there are some commonalities from the response to the crisis from local government as a whole. These include:

- There has been and continues to be good political engagement between Welsh Government and Local Government.
- The response has been an enormous challenge for everyone, whilst everyone has done their best in difficult circumstances things have not always been right first time, but the focus has always been on delivering the best outcomes and learning lessons. We also need to acknowledge that things could have worked better during the initial outbreak, in particular some Welsh Government departments and national agencies' communications, engagement and approach to joint planning.
- The challenge to authorities has been immense and they have all had to transfer to 'essential services' models of delivery. All authorities have had to restructure around essential services such as social services, education and waste, this has involved staff being redeployed, the undertaking of skills audits and in some instances the furloughing of staff.
- There has been confusion with the public and challenges around coordination given UK Government announcements and plans where there have been different approaches in Wales. This is not a new issue but has led to more significant problems during the crisis around communications.

- The focus at the moment continues to be improving joint working as we are still in the response phase. The transition to easement and recovery will also need to be a joint endeavour.

Whilst much strategy is being set nationally, the crisis has demonstrated the importance of ensuring delivery partners, especially local government, are engaged in its development; it is not only important to allow flexibility to interpret strategy and respond according to local circumstances and capacity but that organisations with experience and expertise in service delivery help shape the response.

Key issues in relation to the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on children and young people in Wales

The following are some of the key issues that have been experienced and highlighted by local authorities. It is not an exhaustive list but, at this still early stage in the response to the outbreak, aims to highlight to the Committee some of the key issues that the pandemic has had on children and young people and the local government services that seek to support them:

- The COVID-19 virus has meant that we have all had to make changes to the way we live our lives. During this time schools and education and youth settings are closed to most children and as a result their learning has had to continue in a different way. In line with Welsh Government guidance the focus for local authorities, across both education and social care, has always been on ensuring that learners are supported to remain safely at home with schools making plans for children to receive learning outside of the school setting.
- The approach to dialogue, engagement and between local government and Welsh Government around education and schools in particular has been effective; there are weekly meetings at a political level between the Minister for Education and the WLGA Leader and Education Spokesperson, and at a strategic and operational level between senior Welsh Government officials, WLGA and representatives from SOLACE and ADEW. This has ensured a shared approach and understanding to the COVID-19 response; leaders recognise that a balance needs to be struck based on the latest scientific analysis between the necessary health response and the shared concern about the impact on educational attainment and wellbeing of children and young people. Leaders therefore recognise that no approach or option is risk free and have been supportive of the Welsh Government's more cautious approach to reopening of schools.
- The role of schools has significantly changed as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. They are currently closed for the statutory provision of education and are instead playing a key role in enabling the response to COVID-19. Schools have done a remarkable job in switching overnight from a largely face-to-face teaching and learning model to a more 'blended' approach that involves a combination of physical and virtual pedagogies. A wide range of resources have been created and made available to learners across Wales. Schools across Wales have made great efforts to continue to engage learners by making resources available and signposting families to suitable support, including for

those learners and families who do not have access to connectivity and devices.

- Arrangements for the supporting and safeguarding of 'vulnerable pupils' has been prioritised. In some cases, provision is being made via a 'hub', whereby pupils from a number of schools attend a single location (usually a school site) with staff drawn from across these schools. This has enabled local authorities to be able to check on those vulnerable learners attending the hubs and how they are coping, providing some respite for families. However, it is important to note that placement in a childcare hub is not necessarily the safest or best way to protect all 'vulnerable pupils' and as such the support being provided by local authorities is tailored to respond to each child's unique circumstances and to address particular needs, for example managing behaviour and supporting Care Leavers. Going forward, Education Welfare Service, Education Psychology Service and Vulnerable Groups Teams will all need to reconfigure the way they work in order to dispense their key duties effectively and safely.
- Free School Meals (FSM) have remained a priority throughout the COVID-19 outbreak. Welsh Government have worked closely alongside local authorities to adapt local arrangements for the continued provision of FSM. Approaches include food parcels, food vouchers and direct payments. These arrangements have also enabled local authorities to check on those vulnerable learners that are not attending hubs. There has been an increase during the COVID-19 outbreak of families that are eligible for FSM but have not taken the offer previously, and new claimants. This would suggest that families are experiencing difficulties during this outbreak which is in line with the significant increase in universal credit caseload in Wales. One of the issues local authorities will need to wrestle with going forward is how they transition from the current offering (whether it is food vouchers, direct payments or food parcels) back to a more school-based provision model; especially in light of the increased demand expected as more children become eligible for free school meals.
- Councils are very concerned about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable children, including those who are already in contact with social services and those who may have become more vulnerable as a result of or during lockdown measures. From the outset of the crisis one of the priorities for local authorities was to put systems in place to be able to map and risk assess all open cases and vulnerable learners. This has enabled a better understanding of the risks faced by some of our learners and meant that local authorities were able to put in place and provide appropriate support where it was required. This has included making the best of technology, but also face to face meetings where required and risk assessed.
- We know that many families are concerned for the health of their children and other family members if they attend school, and councils are working with schools and families to provide reassurance, and to make sure that where children are not in school, they are still being spoken with regularly. Contact Protocols have been put in place in order to ensure that regular contact with families by both schools and social care services is maintained.

- Local government was concerned that referrals to children's social care fell in many areas. Councils therefore continue to work closely with local partners and communities to identify children who may be at risk, and to ensure that the message that council's safeguarding services remain open for 'business as usual', promoting safeguarding messages and communicating that normal processes should be followed is widely communicated. Recent campaigns such as the NSPCC campaign on reporting child abuse have also helped to raise awareness and through May local authorities were slowly seeing an increase in the number of referrals being received. This has provided some reassurance that the agencies working with local authorities are continuing to make referrals. Local authorities continue to monitor the number of referrals and where these come from, which will help to identify where concerns may exist and ensure that local authorities are able to communicate with those agencies appropriately.
- Schools have a critical role in helping to reach out to their community of pupils. Children's Services have worked closely with schools to consider their role in reaching out and supporting families so that even for those who are not attending hubs, schools are able to identify those that they need to keep in regular contact with. Where there are concerns processes are in place, for example through Education Welfare officers, to be able to go out and support those families. It is essential that local safeguarding partners, including councils, the police and health, continue to have the resources and capacity they need to keep children safe, and that communities know how to spot signs of risk and how to report these so that appropriate actions can be taken.
- One group of children and young people local authorities have highlighted particular concerns over are disabled children. A high volume of disabled children will have underlying health conditions requiring them to shield at home and therefore it is difficult for them to attend care provision during this time. This in turn places these families under increasing pressure and with their health needs being prioritised these children and young people are likely to be some of the last to return to schools. There is growing concern over the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on these children and young people and their families in the medium and longer term.
- Looking to the future local authorities are increasingly highlighting concerns about demands that will be placed on services as lockdown measures are eased. Local authorities are now anticipating surges in referrals over issues such as domestic violence and online grooming, particularly as schools return and safeguarding issues are identified. We also know that there is a backlog of court cases which will also impact on children's services, including adoption, and add to existing challenges in making appropriate and sustainable placements for the children and young people in our care.
- The epidemic will likely have many psychological impacts on the population which may have a detrimental effect on the short, medium and long-term mental health of some of our children and young people. In turn, this may reduce their resilience and ability to cope. The real impact of COVID-19 on children and young people has not yet been fully seen. Many young people will have missed their friends, the routine that the school day brings, some will be anxious about falling behind with their work. For those more vulnerable life at

home will have been more difficult and they will be feeling the impact of being isolated very strongly. This will lead to an increasing need for access to mental health and wellbeing services, which we already know are over-stretched. Now, and in the future, we need to think about how we can effectively support the emotional health and wellbeing of these children and their families. This is something that health, social care and education will need to plan and work more closely together on, giving consideration to how early help services are positioned and operate to support these children and young people.

- The financial pressures and shortfalls facing local authorities before the COVID-19 epidemic have been well documented. The WLGA recently undertook a survey to estimate the additional expenditure pressures and income loss of the first quarter of this financial year due to COVID-19. Overall, we estimate additional spending pressures and income loss is £101m and £95m respectively. There are some savings through cost avoidance which brings the spending pressure and income loss to approx. £89m and £84m respectively. Any surge in demand for social services and care will lead to increased pressures on a sector that was already in a state of financial vulnerability.
- Our education and social care workers are playing a vital role in caring for both adults and children in every community in Wales during this unprecedented crisis. They are supporting people to stay safe and well, which is crucial in helping relieve pressure on colleagues in the health service who are treating people with acute symptoms of COVID-19 in our hospitals. Across local authorities and schools, staff continue to rise to the challenges this crisis has brought. There has been a strong partnership formed between schools and social care through the sharing of information and intelligence in order to ensure that children and young people are supported and kept safe. Despite the restrictions and challenges in place local authorities continue to deliver the support required to meet the needs of children and young people in Wales, with many workers going above and beyond demonstrating commitment and integrity to support, safeguard and care for children and young people in Wales.

Conclusion

We know that in these extraordinary times all partners are having to work around the clock to resolve the critical operational issues that are preventing the most timely and effective response to COVID-19. Whilst there have been challenges and difficulties, and more are likely to come as we continue to respond to the impact of this crisis on our communities the significant progress that has been made in a short space of time should be noted.

Whilst both education and children's services have so far coped well, there remain many challenges ahead with the potential to further impact on these essential services as we ease current lockdown measures and enter the recovery stage. Further discussions will be required on how best to arrange and deliver these services, ensuring that local government is provided with adequate resources to be able to do so.