

The Royal College of Nursing Wales response to the Children, Young people and Education committee inquiring into the effect of COVID-19 outbreak on children and young people in Wales

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) Wales would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to provide written evidence.

In our evidence for the Committee the Royal College of Nursing addresses the following concerns:

- 1. Physical health of children and young people**
- 2. Mental health and emotional wellbeing of children and young people**
- 3. Safeguarding**
- 4. COVID-19 testing capacity**
- 5. Nursing student experience**

Annex A – letter to Kirsty Williams regarding waiving nursing student maintenance loan debt, 12.05.2020

Annex B – letter to Andrew Goodall, Chief Executive of NHS Wales and Jean White Chief Nursing Officer, regarding overreaching commitments to nursing and midwifery students, 05.05.2020

Section One - Mental health and Emotional well-being of children and young people

Recommended Actions:

- The Welsh Government should ensure that in perpetration for schools reopening, any school nurses, health visitors and CAMHs services that were redeployed during the COVID-19 pandemic return to their normal practice.
- The Welsh Government should work with Local Authorities to ensure mental health resources are readily available for *before* the planned reopening of schools
- The Welsh Government should work with schools and professional bodies to design a single stop website for children and young people to go to if they are experiencing anxiety, stress and poor mental health.

- Schools should look to ensure social distancing measures are adhered to, whilst allowing pupils to socialise with their friends.
- The Welsh Government should issue advice and guidance on the easing of lockdown for children and young people.

The Royal College of Nursing is a strong supporter of the ‘Mind over Matter’ report published by the committee in 2018. Since 2018 it was recognised that there was a need for step changes in emotional and mental health support for children and young people in Wales. COVID-19 has provided the opportunity for an evaluate current capabilities and an opportunity to determine the extent of the need to expand services in order to improve mental health service for children and young people in Wales.

The NSPCC reported that young people use the word “trapped” to describe how they feel about being at home during the lockdown, particularly since strict social distancing measures were put in place¹. NSPCC commented that Children and young people are concerned about:

- The loss of contact with friends
- Concerns regarding grades
- Concerns about home learning,
- Loss of support and their ‘safe’ environment.

Not being able to go to school, visit family or friends or take part in activities outside of the family home is having a negative impact on their mental health. As the Lockdown is being eased, advice on the changes to law needs to be given to children and young people to ensure they are aware of the changes and what they can and cannot do.

Children and young people are increasingly anxious and distressed regarding COVID-19. The added impact of media stories and families and friends debating schools reopening contributes to the child’s heightened anxiety level and poor mental health. This may be particularly true for those that have a family member that is shielding or a BAME community that is particularly vulnerable.

Anxiety and distress are particularly prevalent when considering those that have experienced bereavement of a family or close friend. Bereavement can be emotionally distressing for children and young people. It is important that a school is informed of a family bereavement so that they can offer any necessary support.

School nurses are in the ideal position to provide advice, support and referrals for pupils that have experienced distress and anxiety caused by COVID-19. However, in order to do so, the school nursing services require support in terms of their capacity including administrative capacity along with access to the latest resources and advice on referrals².

¹ NSPCC Learning

² Delivering the school nursing healthy child programme during the covid19 pandemic RCN June 2020

Section Two - Physical health of children and young people

Recommended Actions:

- Schools should work to limit the impact of social distancing measures on the ability of pupils to compete physical activities. i.e. P.E.
- The Welsh Government should work with schools to discuss how measures can be introduced to change from contact sports to socially distanced exercise.
- Routine physical checks on children and immunisation programmes should be resumed.

During the COVID-19 lockdown children and young people were restricted to one outdoor exercise a day, close to their house e.g. walking, running, cycling, etc. This was lifted on the 11 May and children and young people were allowed to go outside as much as they wanted but restrictions on meeting friends and family members remained in place.

The physical health and mental health of children and young people are closely related. For some children the restriction on outdoor activities would have a negative effect on their mental health as prior to lockdown they may have been an extremely active individual. Furthermore the inability of children and young people to attend team sporting activities would not only reduce their physical health but would also negatively impact their physical health.

Teachers may need support to change activities from contact sports. Commonly in schools, physical activities include football, rugby and netball. Contact sports and team activities would not be appropriate during social distancing measures, therefore schools will need to adapt to ensure they can still provide physical activities for children and young people whilst adhering to social distancing measures.

Furthermore, contact sports are designing ways to return to practice and competition. It is important that these guidance and recommendations are shared with schools. The Welsh Government should work with schools to ensure the smooth transition back to contact sports when appropriate.

Section Three - Safeguarding

Recommended Actions:

- The Welsh Government, local authorities and schools should work together with local and national safe guarding boards to ensure safeguarding capabilities are not strained
- The Welsh Government should ensure the rise in demand for safeguarding is met with a rise in planning and funding.
- The Welsh Government should work in collaboration with Local Authorities, Schools and professional bodies to set out guidance for safeguarding upon the reopening of schools.

Lockdown is the key word in any COVID-19 conversation. This is specifically true when in discussion regarding safeguarding risks. Subjecting vulnerable children to nothing other than family contact for an extended period sets up perfect conditions for a safeguarding failure³.

The Royal College of Nursing Wales is concerned that the pressure cooker of family life during lockdown for some families has increased the chances of child abuse and neglect. The inability to distance from family members may exacerbate underlying tension and create unfavourable conditions. Then there is the absence of any outside oversight. Without regular interaction with safeguarding experts and caring professions, such as teachers, councillors and social workers opportunities to check on vulnerable families are lost. COVID-19 has unfortunately created perfect pressure cooker for a failure to safeguard.

It should be recognised that local authorities, schools, family prevention teams and child protection services have been working tirelessly to migrate the risks associated with COVID-19. The collaborative working has involved:

- Regular check ins with vulnerable individuals through Skype, Facetime, Zoon etc.
- Certain schools have remained open for vulnerable children
- Volunteers are delivering free school meals
- Local authorities have continued to deliver statutory safeguarding face to face visits where the highest risks have been identified and where children are rated as most vulnerable.

Nevertheless, evidence that these concerns are not misplaced includes increased calls to child support lines and increased police attendance at domestic abuse incidents⁴. The highest risk is for those that were not identified to child services prior to the lockdown.

These signals indicate that there will be a rise in safeguarding demand with the easing of lockdown measures. Upon the return to school, some teachers, social workers and school nurses may still be required to self-isolate, stretching safeguarding teams and straining service delivery.

³ British Medical Journal

⁴ Cited in Elliman D. Daily COVID-19 telephone conference of National Network of Designated Healthcare Professionals for Children, 15 April 2020.

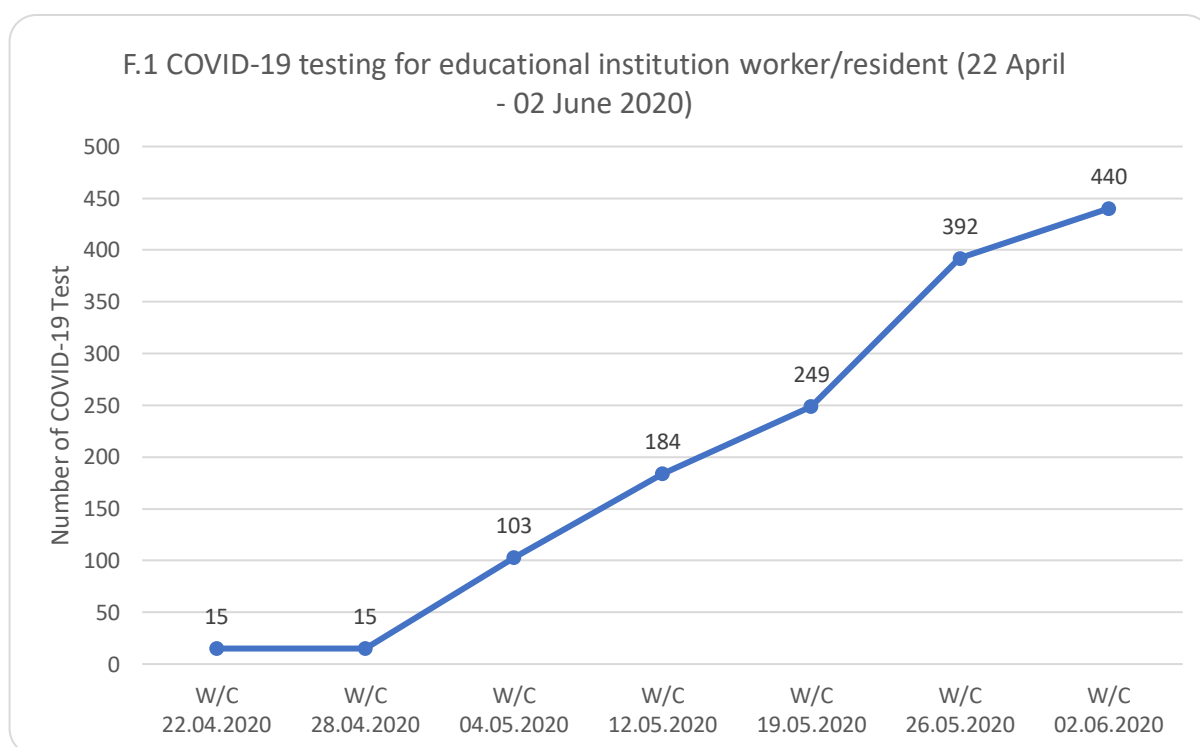
Safeguarding services will become vitally important upon the reopening of schools. It is crucial that safeguarding capacity, planning and funding is ringfenced to allow for the expected increase.

Section Four - COVID-19 testing capacity

Recommended Actions:

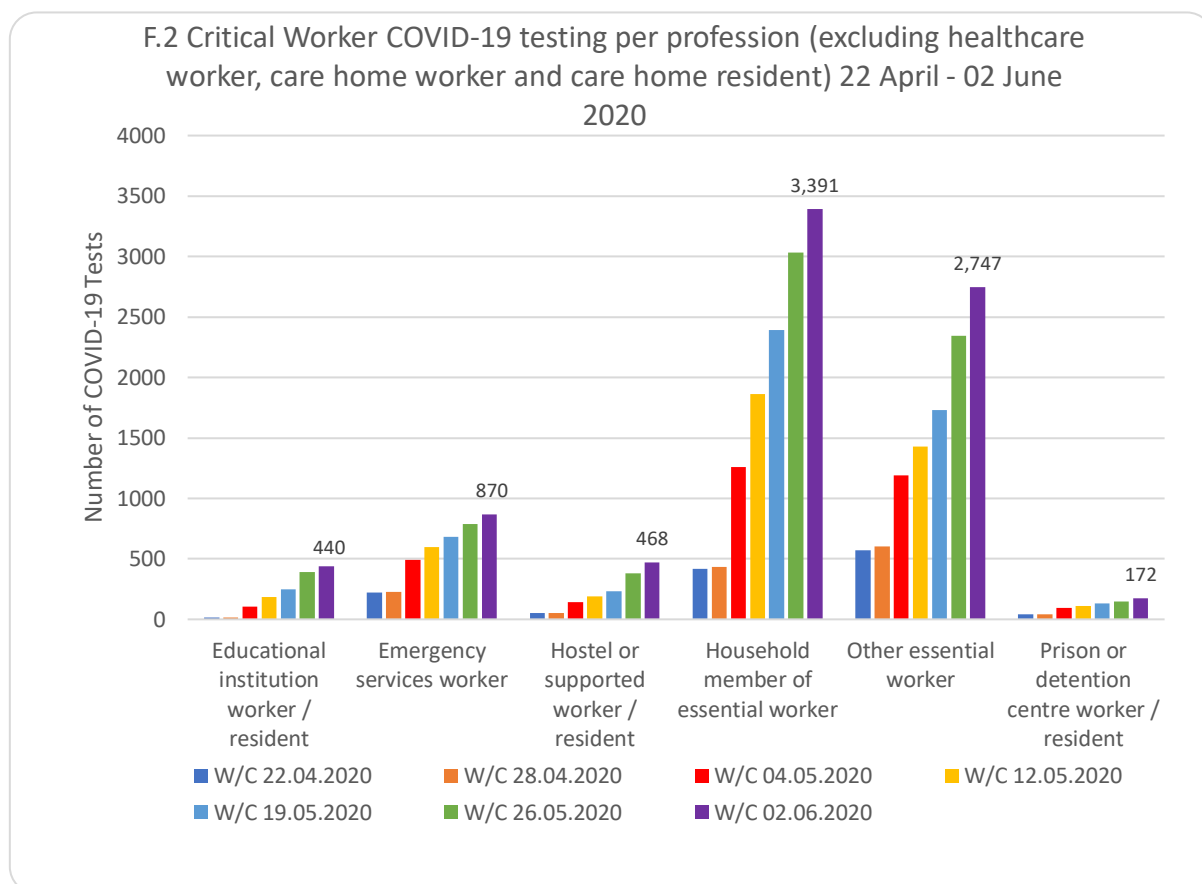
- To ensure children, young people and staff returning to schools are safe, it is crucial that testing within this sector is drastically increased
- Ensure the education sector is a priority group for the COVID-19 antibody test before the proposed school return date of the 29 June.

The Welsh Government began publishing weekly information on how many COVID-19 tests have been undertaken on critical workers on 22nd April⁵. This give an indication that numbers of tests undertaken are rising, among critical workers. However, as the F.1 highlights COVID-19 testing within the education setting remain low with only 440 tests being taken to date.



⁵ <https://gov.wales/testing-coronavirus-weekly-updates>

F.2 demonstrates educational institution worker/residents are the second lowest critical worker sector to receive COVID-19 testing.



Section Five - Nursing student experience

Recommended Actions:

- Universities and Health Boards should work together to ensure every nursing student that assisted the COVID-19 response in Wales is offered a debrief and access to mental health support and resources.
- The Welsh Government should ensure that no student has suffered educational or financial detriment as a result of their assistance in response to COVID 19 and ensure any maintenance loan debt is waived (Annex B)
- The Welsh Government should aim to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on prospective nursing students and ensure recruitment to nursing is not negatively impacted by COVID-19.

For the duration of the Covid-19 crisis 2nd and 3rd year nursing students in Wales can *opt* to extend their clinical placement for example to a maximum of 80% (retaining 20% for academic time) by providing frontline care. If they do so they will be paid at a Band 3 or 4 level depending on their completed time on their degree program.

During this period their degree is not suspended – instead the University, NHS Wales (and the Nursing and Midwifery Council as the professional regulator) are recognising the time spent working clinically *as counting towards the required clinical placements hours for the degree*.

In addition, students with 6 months or less to qualification were offered the option of spending the last part of their programme in placement i.e. 100% and to join a temporary section of the Nursing and Midwifery Council emergency register and working in a Band 4/5 role.

The beneficial intention of this policy is clear, it is an attempt to ensure that nursing students won't need to work more to "catch up" to their degree and Wales will not suffer from a cohort of "missing nurses" once Covid-19 subsides.

However, in practice this policy has been implemented poorly, creating more confusion, anxiety and distress than necessary. RCN Wales continues to receive a high volume of calls from anxious and worried students.

*"I'm extremely disappointed by the lack of communication and support during this time. It has made myself and many other students feel **unvalued and unsupported**. I'm very confused as to how and why we had to opt in or out without knowing any terms and conditions of the agreement, no contract, no information on our new role or payment. All we know is we will be expected to work full time as band 4 which I'm more than happy about but we also have to complete all our academic work of 3 essays, third year competencies, management competencies and our portfolios. It appears no consideration has been made to how people will achieve this with no access to library or other places to do academic work and research. When not in work those*

of us with children are home schooling our children”- E-mail from RCN Wales student member

The RCN is also aware that some nursing students are experiencing delays in the issuing of contract which in turn has led to delays in payment. This is causing hardship for the students affected and we have asked Shared Services to look into this issue as a matter of urgency.

Nursing students have overwhelmingly aided the Welsh COVID-19, despite confusion over the policies and guidance. Nursing students have assisted in the treatment of patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19. It is important to consider the mental impact, especially on individuals' anxiety, that this may have had on these students. Nursing students should be offered a debrief to discuss their own unique experience during the COVID-19 response.

It is important to consider the COVID-19 effect on prospective nursing students. The Committee may wish to be aware that recruitment to nursing degree courses in Wales has continued however there are be implications regarding A level students and Access students who will now have predicted grades which may have an impact on offers made or some reaching the entry criteria.



Royal College of Nursing (RCN) Wales Annex

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) Wales has prepared evidence for the Children, Young People and Education committee's inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people. This document contains letters that the Royal College of Nursing has sent during the COVID-19 pandemic concerning children and young people

Annex A – letter to Kirsty Williams regarding waiving nursing student maintenance loan debt, 12.05.2020

Annex B – letter to Andrew Goodall, Chief Executive of NHS Wales and Jean White Chief Nursing Officer, regarding overreaching commitments to nursing and midwifery students, 05.05.2020



Annex A – letter to Kirsty Williams regarding waiving nursing student maintenance loan debt, 12.05.2020

12.05.2020

Dear Minister,

I am writing to you as the Director of the Royal College of Nursing Wales regarding reimbursement of tuition fees and forgiving current debt of undergraduate nursing students who choose to fund their studies via Student Finance Wales, including any outstanding maintenance loan debt for second and third year students.

During these difficult times, many nursing students have stepped up to offer their skills and knowledge to assist the Welsh Governments COVID-19 response. It is time for the Welsh Government to recognise the value and commitment of our nursing students.

A great number of nursing students in their second and third year of their undergraduate degree have entered clinical practice to care for patients in Wales. Many second and third year students have opted-in to an arrangement where they spend 80% of their time in clinical practice and 20% in academic study. Third year students have opted-in to undertake their final six months of their programme as a clinical placement. For those in the earlier stages of their professional education, they have adapted to the significant disruption with courage and a continuing commitment to their future careers.

I believe that the Welsh Government should ensure there are measures in place that will guarantee no student has suffered financial detriment as a result of their assistance in response to COVID 19. I would welcome a commitment from the Welsh Government that ensures tuition fees are reimbursed and any maintenance loan debt is waived.

The easing of pressure of the repayment would come as a great source of relief to our student members who took out these loans and would demonstrate the extent to which the Welsh Government is thankful for their commitment to the care of patients in Wales.

I seek your reassurance that the Welsh Government will commit to acknowledging nursing students selfless service, not only with words, but in this tangible and quantifiable way for this small group who choose this method of funding their studies.

I would be grateful for a reply to this letter.



Annex B – letter to Andrew Goodall, Chief Executive of NHS Wales and Jean White Chief Nursing Officer, regarding overreaching commitments to nursing and midwifery students, 05.05.2020

5 May 2020

Dear Andrew and Jean

Yesterday I had sight of a letter dated 4th May 2020 to the Chief Executives (CEO's) of Health Boards and Trusts, providing clarity on the overarching commitments that have been made to students in Wales.

I was disappointed to be given a copy for information and not to have been engaged in the issues the letter sets out. I have raised with colleagues in Welsh Government at several points my disappointment of the lack partnership working on the details of the deployment of our students, appreciating the need to move at pace but asserting my responsibility to represent RCN members interests. You will recall that the NMC joint statement released on the 19th March 2020 clearly stated:

Royal Colleges and Trade Unions representing nurses and students agrees to:

- Provide expertise with and on behalf of their memberships to inform the development and implementation of guidance, ensuring individual choice is paramount within the context of emergency measures.
- Negotiate employment terms and conditions within emergency measures.

<https://www.nmc.org.uk/news/news-and-updates/joint-statement-on-expanding-the-nursing-workforce/>

We agreed that CNO's Nursing Officers would work with Diane Powles, RCN Wales Education Professional Advisor and that the Welsh Partnership Forum Business Committee inclusion would be how to take this work forward in partnership.

I have also raised concerns about the lack of partnership working in the development of the student guidance with both Health Education & Improvement Wales (HEIW) and with colleagues in the Welsh Government Workforce in Health and Social Services team. Again, agreement was sort that we would improve partnership working going forward.
<https://heiw.nhs.wales/files/covid-19-nursing-and-midwiferysupport-guidance/>

There has been considerable confusion and anxiety surrounding the deployment of student nurses during these emergency measures. This has been reflected in our student members' and key stakeholders' feedback and I sense is also the rationale for your letter out to CEO's. The feedback to the RCN is telling us that there is lack of parity around training and support, there are differences in approaches across organisations, and frustrations at timelines being postponed. In addition, there is confusion as to whether and how students could be placed in other parts of the UK outside of Wales.

I recognise that HEIW has published student and employer/HEI guidance, however, there appears to be a lack of coordination regarding the process of implementing it across Wales.

Whilst the RCN in Wales was asked to comment on the emergency Job Descriptions for students opting into these deployed placements, we have not had any further involvement in the process. It is essential that communication is provided for the students to update them on the current situation and set out the expectations placed on both them and the employer. I believe that had we had better partnership working with you on this, we could have assisted you in ensuring that that had occurred.

I am also greatly concerned that students' expectations were raised in relation to them joining the emergency section of the NMC register, which has not happened to date and is not included in your list of 'overarching commitments'. I am led to believe from correspondence from HEIW to my team that this is not going to be an option for students. Jean, you and I have discussed this issue, but it has not been raised via our normal partnership working mechanisms, and thus the RCN has not had any opportunity to discuss this potential the change to the joint statement in detail.

I welcome all opportunities to work in partnership going forward, on the implementation of these joint statements, and I would expect RCN Wales to be consulted on and, where appropriate, negotiated with.