

# COVID-19 and its impact on children and young people: Summary of consultation responses

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg - Mawrth 2021  
Children, Young People and Education Committee - March 2021

## Summary of consultation responses

This is a summary of the 202 responses submitted in respect of the Committee's [consultation on COVID-19 and its impact on children and young people](#), which ran from 28 April 2020 to 11 March 2021.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Summary

The Committee's consultation received responses from a range of organisations and individuals that have suggested areas of scrutiny across a breadth of topics. Some respondents stated their views on a topic, whilst others called for general and specific policy changes. Although case rates among children and young people are low, responses strongly suggest that COVID-19 has had a profound impact on their lives.



Several organisations welcomed the early steps the Welsh Government took to safeguard and support children and young people, for example providing emergency funding for Free School Meals, guidance to inform the delivery of children’s social care services, and pledges to address digital exclusion. Other respondents highlighted a range of issues, set out in this paper, which caused concern or where further work was needed.

Multiple organisations reported adapting and migrating their services online, rising to the challenge of COVID-19 swiftly. While concerns were raised about the negative impact of this on children and young people, several organisations felt that positive lessons could also be learned from how services had adapted and that these might benefit some service users going forward. .

**202** responses were received and can be categorised as follows:

- Individuals: children, young people<sup>1</sup>, parents, carers and professionals.
- Local government
- Health Boards
- Professional health bodies
- Trade unions
- Education awarding/ assessment bodies
- Work-based learning sector
- Higher education
- Further education
- Education sector
- Childcare/ Play/ Early Years sector
- Welsh language sector
- Representative of faith based education
- Youth service
- Children/ Children’s rights organisations and service providers
- Youth organisations
- Education organisations
- Parent organisations
- Equality organisations
- Physical and mental health organisations
- Community organisations
- Domestic abuse/ violence support organisations

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<sup>1</sup> The Committee has also [consulted](#) directly with children and young people

## 2. Key Themes

This summary sets out the concerns raised with the Committee at the time of writing by respondents, from the period the consultation opened in March 2020 to the present date.

The key themes raised in these consultation responses have been scrutinised by the Committee and reflected in its work in detail, at multiple evidence sessions with Welsh Government Ministers and Stakeholders from April 2020 the present date. These being:

- Statutory Education
- Children and young people's mental and physical health
- Further and Higher Education
- Vulnerable children and young people

### 2.1. Mental health and wellbeing

Concern about children and young people's mental health and well-being was a significant theme running through many of the consultation responses. This was identified by both children and young people themselves and their parents, but it also featured in responses from organisations. The broad themes were:

- Concerns that the mental health support system was already **in need of change** to deliver the right support to children and young people.
- The pandemic has **exacerbated these pre-existing issues** by placing **more stress** on an increasing number of children and young people at a time when services became much less accessible. Numerous parents were concerned about their children's wellbeing, **noticing a change in their behaviour**:

*"Our children are normally so happy, outgoing, active and polite... it's been heart-breaking seeing their personalities change during this time."*

Clinical psychologists, local health boards and mental health charities argued that the pandemic will have a **long-term detrimental effect** on children and young people. Although the physical risks of COVID-19 to children and young people is minimal in comparison to adults, [Mind](#) and [Resilience Project](#) responded that their **mental health and wellbeing is at greater risk** than any other generation.

## 2.2. Support for children with additional learning needs

A notable theme in the consultation responses was the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people with additional learning needs (ALN). This was recognised in responses from organisations and professional health bodies, parents and teachers.

- Many third sector services and teachers report they have done their **utmost to support families** under COVID-19 restrictions, and are concerned about the long term effect of parents and carers having **no respite**.
- Concerns over the impending potential **backlog in services** such as assessments and care planning. The [Third Sector Additional Needs Alliance \(TSANA\)](#) and [All Wales Forum](#) encouraged policy makers to play their part financially by ensuring care services can '**build back stronger**'.

## 2.3. Social care and safeguarding

Responses from child protection services, youth groups and third sector organisations expressed concerns that vulnerable children are at further risk from the pandemic. The key themes were:

- Services and organisations faced **new challenges and hurdles** to stay in contact with vulnerable children as most face-to-face visits stopped, which is not viable in the long-term.
- Child protection services are anxious about the potential for a **surge in referrals when schools return** and safeguarding issues are identified, especially domestic abuse and sexual violence. Services such as [Action for Children](#), [NSPCC](#) and [Children in Wales](#) raised concerns about the **significant decrease in child protection referrals** since schools have closed.
- Children charities are concerned at the increase of children and young people **being groomed and criminally exploited** as they spend more time online. [Carmarthenshire Youth and Children's Association](#) said:

*"They are spending far more time online and consequently we are hearing 'new friends' being formed and increased risks of grooming."*

Some replies from foster families and social services reflected that, during lockdown, **relationships grew stronger** for children, young people and carers and viewed this as a positive experience.

## 2.4. Digital exclusion and remote learning

Since lessons have moved online, teaching bodies, parents and teachers have identified digital exclusion as a significant cause for concern:

- Children are **not receiving a uniform experience** of online learning, and UNICEF reported that the lack of digital access could result in **widening the attainment gap** even further.
- Several teachers and families reported weak internet connections, especially in rural areas, which **affected their ability to teach and learn online**.

Many organisations welcomed [the Welsh Government's scheme](#) to provide laptops and support to the most deprived digital learners. Nonetheless, [EYST Wales](#) and [SNAP Cymru](#) emphasised their concerns that the most deprived families **cannot benefit from the scheme effectively** as they do not have internet access at home.

## 2.5. Awarding of qualifications

Qualification bodies and unions agreed with the Welsh Government's decision to cancel examinations in Summer 2020. The main themes raised in relation to this decision were:

- Concerns about how vocational subjects can be taught and assessed online in the longer-term, with [Qualification Wales](#) saying:  
*"Given the complexity and diversity of the vocational qualifications landscape, it is not possible to implement a one size fits all approach."*
- [University and College Union \(UCU\) Cymru](#) highlighted that students who undertake vocational courses need to have **enough experience to achieve the best grade possible**. Similarly, [CollegesWales](#) said awarding **vocational qualifications should be consistent** across Wales.
- One of the most common reasons for young people and their families to contact **the Children's Commissioner** office has been around exams and qualifications, with many **feeling anxious** about predicted grades.

## 2.6. Welsh-medium education

Several parents and teaching bodies expressed concern that pupils in Welsh-medium education coming from non-Welsh speaking homes have been impacted since learning remotely. The key themes were:

- Concerns that children with non-Welsh speaking parents are at a potential **disadvantage to their peers**, and could **face long-term effects** from the pandemic. Some parents mentioned this is an **additional pressure when undertaking remote learning**. One parent said:

*"I do not feel it is viable for us to continue with this. As parents we are unable to support our children in the same way as we could if they attended a English speaking school."*

- Several parents commented that they were **rethinking their decision** to send their children to a Welsh-medium school.

[The Welsh Language Commissioner](#) recommended that schools will need to pay specific attention to these children. He suggests *"a purposeful campaign is needed to support parents whose children are in Welsh-medium education"*.

## 2.7. Children rights

Concerns about children and young people's rights were mainly identified by human rights and equality organisations, and featured in some responses from parents.

- Equality organisations report that children and young people's rights **must be a priority** for the Welsh Government, throughout the pandemic. The [Observatory on Human Rights of Children](#), [UNICEF](#) and several other equality organisations stress this must be **central to decision making** and **evidence of this consideration must be transparent**.

## 2.8. Other issues highlighted

Other issues and topics less commonly raised by respondents included views on the need to:

- Open the offer of free school meals to more pupils if the economic position deteriorates;
- Secure financial support to maintain and extend the relationships of grassroots organisations and specialist workers;

- Address the risk of child obesity rising;
- Increase training and support for teachers;
- Ensure the provision of well-being support for all children and young people, in particular healthcare students working on the frontline;
- Invest financial support in FE and HE institutions; and
- Strengthen support and career opportunities for new graduates, to mitigate the adverse impact of the pandemic. HE institutions need additional support from Government to assist with this.