
Senedd Inquiry into the Impact of the Covid-19 Outbreak on Children and Young People in Wales

We welcome the opportunity of submitting evidence to this Senedd inquiry on the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak and how it is being managed on children and young people's physical and mental health and wellbeing, their education and their social care. Our evidence focuses upon food poverty and the significance of nutritious food for optimising learning, behaviour, health and wellbeing through the provision of free midday school meals.

Introduction

The Education Act 1944 made providing school meals and milk a statutory duty for local authorities. ...LEAs were initially required to provide free school meals only to poorer children and to subsidise meals for other children. The meals had to be substantial enough to be considered the main meal of the day. Free school meals are a devolved matter. The relevant regulation was changed in 2019. (1) We are now asking for this to be urgently reviewed.

With the long-term consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit and Austerity, we urge an increase in the availability of free school meals to those experiencing food poverty and to ensure effectively monitoring of school meals. Our evidence is set out as follows:

1. Provide an economic overview – which is a bleak forecast;
2. Highlight the intersectional nature of inequality;
3. Prevalence of food poverty before and during Covid-19;
4. Welsh policies/programmes, including school meals, Healthy Start Scheme;
5. Monitoring Food Insecurity;
6. Recommendations;
7. References; and
8. Appendices.

1. Economic Overview – a Bleak Forecast

In considering the impact of Covid19 pandemic on poverty, it is worth taking account of the current economic weather. The most recent data suggests a worsening situation for those families already suffering hardship and exclusion.

In Wales, £1.7 billion of support for businesses available through the current Welsh budget, which sees businesses receiving £680 million through Welsh local authorities to date. In May, 316,500 employees in Wales had been furloughed through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, with 102,000 self-employed individuals applying for support through the Self-Employment Income Support scheme. Despite this, early data suggests there has been a large increase in unemployment in Wales. From 1 March to 12 May, there were 122,160 new Universal Credit claimants in Wales, with daily claimants peaking at 6,860 new claimants on 27 March. (2)

In comparison to other parts of the UK, Welsh Workers are more likely to be furloughed; more likely to be employed by an SME (driving 62% of the base economy); less likely to be self-employed; more likely to be employed in key-worker roles (predominantly health & social care, retail, tourism, hospitality and catering). Data suggests that during lockdown those of both genders, age 18 to 25 had to bear the brunt of lay-offs. (3)

It could be said that the strength of public sector employment in high Multiple Deprivation Index local authorities will mitigate the growth of poverty following the cessation of furlough. However, this optimistic view contrasts with early data. Drilling down during lockdown, key workers in Wales with children aged 16 or under are more likely to have no partner (17%) in comparison to non-key workers (13%). In addition, 21% of key workers with dependent children have a partner who is also a key worker and about 49% of key workers with children have a partner who is a non-key worker. This means that 38% of key workers with children have either no partner or are partnered with another key worker. Their situation is even more acute when we consider that almost all key workers in Wales (87%) with children aged 16 or under have either a partner in work or are without a partner. In assessing the impact on 12 to 16 year olds, 19.3% of families are effected with 11% likely to be furloughed. Finally, 71.4% of young workers aged under 25 working in sectors affected by the shutdown live with their parents meaning that younger siblings will have already experienced precarity and a likely overall reduction in household income. (4)

2. Inequality is Intersectional

In understanding the impact of Covid-19, by far the most important thing to remember is that inequality is intersectional. As both the literature and evidence suggest; whilst poverty amounts to a primary driver, it must be understood alongside other indices of disadvantage. The Timpson Review into School Exclusion found that issues can be the result of multiple, interrelated and layered vulnerabilities, which when present can have a multiplier effect. Vulnerabilities identified included additional needs, SEN/SEMH needs, poverty, low attainment, being from certain minority ethnic groups, being bullied, poor relationships with teachers, previous life trauma and challenges in their home lives, including poor housing, abuse and parental illness. (5)

Mind is conducting an ongoing survey of young people aged 13-17, across England and Wales. 63% of young people responding say that their mental health has 'got a bit worse' or 'much worse' during recent weeks. Nearly 70% say that feeling lonely has made it worse and almost 76% say that not being able to see friends or their boyfriend/girlfriend has made their mental health and wellbeing worse. Not being able to go outside was another high-ranking factor, with 72% saying this. (6)

The nature of lockdown means that the economic impacts of increased poverty, job losses and issues within the family and household all have the potential to have greater impact upon children and young people's mental health, even more than these might do under normal circumstances.

In particular, this includes families who were already in poverty before lockdown, BAME communities, families of key workers who have been away at work and those who have experienced bereavement during this period, or where family members have been unwell. All of this provides a platform for understanding how the experience of lockdown might catalyse with pre-existing issues.

3. Prevalence of food poverty before and during Covid-19

Food insecurity can be broadly defined as experiencing hunger, the inability to secure food of sufficient quality and quantity to enable good health and social participation, and cutting down on food because of a lack of money. It is equally well established that good nutrition is important for the brain as well as the body. A well-fed brain is more likely to lead to good mood, behaviour and learning. (7)

In November 1919, a study 'The State of Hunger' commissioned by the Trussell Trust found evidence that food bank use is driven by the interaction of three factors: the structure of the benefit system, challenging life experiences (such as eviction or divorce) and lack of informal support. Five benefit-related factors in particular have also been driving this demand: PIP assessments, 'bedroom tax', benefit sanctions, the roll-out of Universal Credit and the benefit freeze. (8)

The Covid-19 lockdown has certainly exacerbated food poverty with price increases, access and availability issues. The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology provides a comprehensive report on 'The Effects of COVID-19 on the food supply system'. In particular evidence from the University of Hertfordshire "discussed the exacerbation of a pre-existing critical food system failure, that there are high levels of food insecurity

caused by poverty, managed through a precarious reliance on charitable provision, such as food banks, with support from the private sector". (9)

In April 2020 the Food Foundation published a preliminary report: 'Vulnerability to food insecurity since the COVID-19 lockdown'. They found "the lack of basic food supplies in shops in recent weeks particularly impacted households with children ...(and as) the economic downturn continues, it is likely that the numbers losing income will grow... food insecurity is a reality for too many who have been affected by the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. (10)

Key findings published by the Food Standards Agency on 12th August found that food insecurity has shot up, bringing risk of malnutrition and obesity with their latest Covid-19 Consumer Tracker survey showing that food insecurity in England, Wales and Northern Ireland was experienced by about 16% of adults – equivalent to up to 7.8 million people. This figure more than doubled under Covid-19 and has remained stable over the first four months of the pandemic. This study warned: "the problem would worsen if incomes continued result of the economic fallout from the pandemic. The people we spoke to face ongoing or increased food insecurity should disruption continue into the autumn and winter. (11)

4. Welsh policies / programmes

On 12th August, the Health and Social Services Minister summarises policies/ programmes in Wales that have a consequence on the food security and nutrition of children. We are also told "Government monitors the effectiveness of these programmes and seeks to improve delivery to ensure they have the best possible impact." (12) (See section 5). This summary excludes the £15m Food Box scheme, administered by local authorities until 16th August 2020. This was available to shielded individuals and presumably others at risk. With Covid-19, it is noted that the nutrient quality of school meals impacts on the food security and nutrition of all pupils.

We now turn to (a) School Meals, (b) Food Banks and (c) Health Start Scheme

(a) School Meals

Over decades Public Health professionals and campaigners have advocated Free School Meals as a key Public Health intervention. In 2004, Sir John Krebs (now Lord Krebs) stated "without effective interventions", "children would live less long than their parents ...life expectancy would go down."

The consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on midday meal provision requires particular attention to new school teaching arrangements because pupils will not be at school every day and will not receive a midday meal.

Whereas food poverty is deeply entrenched in some areas and intermittent in others, we call for an urgent review of the 2019 Order (1) to avoid pupils being excluded from free school meals focused upon the four bottom deciles. This will need to take account of new school arrangements and the need to access pupils who may be attending school every other day or week and will still need a proper midday meal.

We question the current ethos whereby private companies have contracts to deliver catering services where the objective is profit maximisation rather than nutritional content of the meal. This will remain a fundamental flaw in food and health provision. One solution would be to plan and actively encourage 'in-sourcing' whenever opportunities arise.

Alongside quality public sector catering, we fully support both co-operative and social ownership across the food chain. For example, we support co-operative solutions in food processing and distribution, to foster local economies, support SME producers, reduce the environmental impact of transportation to help drive the local circular economy.

On 12th August, the Education Minister unsurprisingly revealed a 37% increase on those receiving free school meals between January and June 2020. (13) It is significant to note that in contrast to Healthy Start scheme, Welsh Government does not collect data for those eligible to receive Free School Meals. (14) This a serious omission that needs to be corrected.

The new National Curriculum provides opportunity for pupils, for example, undertaking the Welsh Bacc Advanced Skills Challenge, to explore as citizens, the global food system, Fair Trade, local food production, a range of different business models, and how we can shape future employment and wellbeing, our school meals system, climate change and biodiversity.

The following require updating or reviewing in response to poverty and Covid-19: for example, good nutritional standards, food education and cooking skills, training of school meal catering staff, investing in school kitchens for the long term, local sourcing of food to support a circular, Foundational Economy.

(b) Food banks

Sadly, our current benefit system means that food banks have and will continue to play a large part in tackling food poverty for reasons explained previously. The 'State of Hunger' research, commissioned by the Trussell Trust seeks to address how we end "the need for food banks". Apart from the urgent reform our benefit system, one key Trust message is that we should "Fund proper local crisis support so people aren't forced to food banks". (15) Our understanding is that during lockdown the Welsh Government offered to fund food for Trussell Trust food banks.

(c) Healthy Start scheme

This scheme which provides vouchers for fresh fruit, milk and vegetables should (a) be increased to £4.25 a week and extended to all pregnant women, and to all households with a child under the age of four where a parent is claiming benefit (16); (b) with further practical steps being taken to increase the uptake of the voucher scheme.

Jayne Bryant MS provided helpful information. This shows how many people in Wales are successfully registered and receiving Healthy Start vouchers and how many are eligible to apply. "Looking at Table 1 shows the take up rate in Wales has fallen from 61% in June 2019 to 53% in June 2020. This reveals the number of beneficiaries entitled and beneficiaries eligible by local authority for 25 May 2020 to 21 June 2020 (cycle 223). It is note worthy that Flintshire and Torfaen had the lowest take up rates (47%) and Cardiff the highest (59%). Newport had a take up rate of 57% in June 2019 this has fallen to 52% in June 2020". (17)

5. Monitoring Food Insecurity

On 12 August 2020, the Health and Social Services Minister states in commenting on Government plans to 'monitor and assess the effectiveness of policies and programmes on food security and nutrition of children': "In line with other public bodies in the UK measuring food poverty, the Welsh Government's approach to measuring food poverty will be guided by the US Department of Agriculture's Adult Food Security Module (10-item)". (18) However, the Scottish Government has confirmed they are implementing UN standard international comparative (eight) questions. (19) Of these three FIES questions had already been included with a view to implementing all eight questions in coming years. The results can be found at their website. (20)

Sustain state, "In 2016, three questions were approved for inclusion in the National Survey for Wales for 2016/2017 with just two included in 2017/2018. Despite the 2017/18 results suggesting an increase in acute food insecurity there appears to be no Welsh Government plans to build on these questions in line with the internationally approved measure of food insecurity". (21) Page 6, of their report also includes a footnote provided by Children in Wales which refers to the Concluding Observations from the Committee of the Rights of the Child who called for ... 'systematically collect data on food security and nutrition for children' and 'monitor and assess effectiveness of policies and programmes on food security and nutrition of children'. (22)

On August 12th 2020, the response to Covid-19 question by the Education Minister in relation to the Healthy Eating in Schools it is stated: “compliance with the Healthy Eating in Schools Regulations may cause increased challenges. The recommendation in these circumstances is that every effort is made to ensure that the food provided to pupils is as healthy and nutritious as possible, within the current constraints of the local and national supply chains”. (23)

6. Recommendations

1. Collecting, assessing and monitoring data

Government should collect, assess and monitor data on the number of people suffering from food insecurity at any time, and agree cross-departmental actions, where necessary, to support those who cannot access or afford food in line with the UN approved measure of food insecurity.

2. Free School Meals:

Whereas food poverty is deeply entrenched in some areas and intermittent in others, we call for an urgent review of the 2019 Order to avoid pupils being excluded from free school meals focused upon the bottom four deciles. (This will need to take account of new school arrangements and the need to access pupils who may be attending school every other day or week and will still need a proper midday meal).

3. Healthy Start Scheme

This scheme which provides vouchers for fresh fruit, milk and vegetables should (a) be increased to £4.25 a week and extended to all pregnant women, and to all households with a child under the age of four where a parent is claiming benefit (16); (b) with further practical steps being taken to increase the uptake of the voucher scheme.

4. The National Curriculum

The National Curriculum should play its part in enabling cross gender knowledge and understanding of the crucial importance of food quality in relation to pre-conceptual nutrition status in terms of menu planning and costing, for example, perhaps as part of the Welsh Bacc Advanced Skills Challenge Certificate.

References

(1) <https://senedd.wales/laid%20documents/sub-ld12133/sub-ld12133-e.pdf>

(2) <https://senedresearch.blog/2020/05/07/coronavirus-poverty/>

(3) https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/2409921/Covid_economy_report_1_Final_rep.pdf

(4) <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2019-11/welsh-index-multiple-deprivation-2019-results-report-024.pdf>

(5) <https://stats.wales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Education-and-Skills/Schools-and-Teachers/Schools-Census/Pupil-Level-Annual-School-Census/Ethnicity-National-Identity-and-Language/pupils5andover-by-localauthority-ethnicbackground>

(6) <https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s101759/CYPE5-15-20%20-%20Paper%203%20-%20Mind%20Cymru.pdf>

(7) <https://www.bda.uk.com/uploads/assets/b6b4554e-487b-413c-a664b18eed782174/Diet-Behaviour-Learning-Children-2017-food-fact.pdf>

(8) <https://www.stateofhunger.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/State-of-Hunger-Report-November2019-Digital.pdf>

(9) <https://post.parliament.uk/analysis/food-security/effects-of-covid-19-on-the-food-supply-system/>

(10) https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Report_COVID19FoodInsecurity-final.pdf

- (11) <https://www.food.gov.uk/news-alerts/news/covid-19-consumer-tracker-waves-three-and-four-report-published>
- (12) WQ80900 12th August, the Health and Social Services Minister statement. Attached
- (13) Question WQ80901, the Education Minister response, 12th August 2020. Attached.
- (14) Conversation with Welsh Government Statistics Department, 14th August 2020.
- (15) <https://www.trusselltrust.org/state-of-hunger/>
- (16) <https://www.nationalfoodstrategy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/NFS-Part-One-SP-CP.pdf>
- (17) <https://www.healthystart.nhs.uk/healthy-start-uptake-data/> Email dated 23rd July 2020.
- (18) WQ80900 - Health and Social Services Minister response, dated 12 August 2020. Attached
- (19) <http://www.fao.org/in-action/voices-of-the-hungry/files/en/>
- (20) Scottish Government COVID Public Health Directorate, 30 July 2020 email, with results which are published at <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/statistics/2020/02/scottish-health-survey-2018-main-report-revised-edition-2020/documents/scottish-health-survey-2018-edition-amended-february-2020-volume-1-main-report/scottish-health-survey-2018-edition-amended-february-2020-volume-1-main-report/govscot%3Adocument/scottish-health-survey-2018-edition-amended-february-2020-volume-1-main-report.pdf>
- (21) 'Food Poverty in South Wales: A Call To Action' February 2019, Food Power, funded by the Nation Lottery https://www.sustainweb.org/news/feb19_food_poverty_south_wales/
- (22) Children in Wales (2017) Wales UNCRC Monitoring Group Report <http://www.childreninwales.org.uk/resource/wales-uncrc-monitoring-group-combined-report-recommendations-wales/> accessed Feb 2019
- (23) Question WQ80902, response to: "What data and information is available on adherence with and the monitoring & appropriateness of the Healthy Eating in Schools (Wales) Measure 2009 and The Healthy Eating in Schools (Nutrition Standards and Requirements (Wales) Regulations 2013? Attached

8. Appendix A. Healthy Start Scheme

Looking at the country overview tab in the attached spreadsheet the **take up rate in Wales has fallen from 61% in June 2019 to 53% in June 2020**. The table below shows the number of beneficiaries entitled and beneficiaries eligible by local authority for 25 May 2020 to 21 June 2020 (cycle 223). This shows **Flintshire and Torfaen had the lowest take up rates (47%) and Cardiff the highest (59%)**. Newport had a take up rate of 57% in June 2019 this has fallen to 52% in June 2020.

Table 1: Number of beneficiaries entitled, beneficiaries eligible and take up rate by local authority; 25 May 2020 to 21 June 2020

Local Authority	Region	Beneficiaries entitled	Beneficiaries eligible	Take Up by LA
Anglesey	Wales	310	617	50%
Blaenau Gwent	Wales	519	916	57%
Bridgend	Wales	768	1535	50%
Caerphilly	Wales	1068	2033	53%
Cardiff	Wales	2384	4055	59%
Carmarthenshire	Wales	885	1724	51%
Ceredigion	Wales	221	437	51%
Conwy	Wales	523	1035	51%
Denbighshire	Wales	632	1132	56%
Flintshire	Wales	645	1380	47%
Gwynedd	Wales	469	944	50%
Merthyr Tydfil	Wales	465	872	53%
Monmouthshire	Wales	230	457	50%
Neath Port Talbot	Wales	972	1712	57%
Newport	Wales	1078	2066	52%
Pembrokeshire	Wales	611	1147	53%
Powys	Wales	375	760	49%
Rhondda Cynon Taff	Wales	1639	2894	57%
Swansea	Wales	1476	2572	57%
Torfaen	Wales	533	1131	47%
Vale of Glamorgan	Wales	612	1165	53%
Wrexham	Wales	727	1507	48%
Total		17142	32091	53%

Source: NHS Healthy Start, [Wales local authority uptake data](#) Notes: Eligible – those claimants showing as eligible to claim for Healthy Start i.e. are in receipt of specified benefits. Entitled – those claimants that are confirmed as having a validated application form/claim and therefore vouchers have been issued to them.