

The impact of COVID-19 on children and young people

Final report

24 March 2021

In July 2020, this Committee published an [interim report](#) outlining our findings in relation to the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people, including students in further and higher education. Nine months on, as we approach the Senedd election, our time as a Committee comes to an end.

This report provides our conclusions about the steps that need to be taken now and in the future to support our children and young people. It draws on our [COVID-19 scrutiny](#) and the [wider scrutiny work](#) we have undertaken across our portfolio over the last five years. Its aim is to help inform the work of our successor Committee, and the next Welsh Government.

Introduction

1. As a matter of course, before a Senedd election, most committees conclude their work in the form of a legacy report. For us, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a different course of action for our final publication of the Fifth Senedd.
2. As a Committee, since March last year, we have prioritised scrutinising the impact of the pandemic on our children and young people. As we near the end of our term, and one year since the first lockdown began, seeking to mitigate the



impact of COVID-19 on our children and young people has remained our top priority. While we recognise that children and young people have thankfully been less susceptible to COVID-19 than adults, there is little doubt that the wider effects of the pandemic—and the measures taken to manage it—have impacted their lives and their rights significantly.

3. To that end, our remaining weeks of scrutiny, and this, our final report, have focused on recovery from COVID-19 for our children and young people. Nevertheless, every area of policy and legislation we have considered during this Senedd has been impacted by COVID-19. As such, this report aims to draw on our learning over the last five years, as well as our scrutiny of the management of COVID-19, to make a series of recommendations to the Welsh Government and our successor Committee to pick up in the next Senedd.

Our key findings

4. We have grouped our key findings into five overarching areas:

- 1.** Cross-cutting issues.
- 2.** Statutory education;
- 3.** The mental and physical health of children and young people;
- 4.** Further and higher education;
- 5.** Vulnerable children and young people

5. These key findings, and the areas on which we have focused our recommendations, seek to identify the issues we believe need to be prioritised. These judgements are based on the evidence we have received and recognise the need to be mindful of the pressures on public services at this time. In that context, we have sought to highlight what we believe are the most critical areas needing action.

6. We also recognise that children and young people have been impacted in many other ways beyond those we discuss in this report. Other sectors have also been affected, including childcare, play, youth services, and family support. It is our expectation that these areas will also feature in our successor Committee's scrutiny, and in the priorities of the next Welsh Government.

7. Where appropriate and relevant, we have drawn on pre-COVID inquiry work and recommendations to inform this report.

How we gathered evidence

- 8.** We have held public oral evidence sessions with stakeholders across the sector. A rolling consultation has also been open throughout the pandemic to ensure that children, young people, parents, professionals, and any others who wanted to share their experiences with us, could submit their views to inform our work.
- 9.** We have also been conscious to reach out to those who may not always be heard in work of this kind. We have done this via a series of engagement activities which have been used to inform our questioning of witnesses throughout our scrutiny over the last year.
- 10.** Details of the main themes arising in the written evidence, and our engagement activity, is provided in the Annex to this report.
- 11.** Our final report should be read in conjunction with our interim report, published in July 2020. It should also be considered alongside our report on the Welsh Government Draft Budget 2021-22, which made a number of key recommendations to the Welsh Government and our successor Committee.
- 12.** We would like to take this opportunity to thank all of those who have contributed to our work during this Senedd. We are thankful to everyone who has given us their time during the pandemic, and emphasise our gratitude to the thousands of professionals and volunteers who have supported our children and young people throughout this most challenging of years.

1. Cross-cutting issues

13. The evidence presented to us about the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people demonstrates that some of the challenges and opportunities created by the pandemic are common across different areas of our portfolio.

14. Drawing on our pre-COVID inquiries as well as the evidence we have received since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, we have remained committed to:

- prioritising our children and young people’s well-being,
- highlighting their rights, and
- ensuring that their voices are heard.

We recommend that the next Welsh Government and our successor Committee maintain a close focus on the following areas:

- **Well-being and education:** Placing our children and young people’s well-being and education at the centre of all recovery planning must be a priority.
- **Positive steps forward:** Acknowledging the impact of COVID-19 on our children and young people, and the disruption it has caused to their lives, is vital. But there is an important balance to be struck between recognising and addressing this, and promoting much more positive messaging about children and young people’s resilience and their opportunities going forward. Replacing the unhelpful narrative and language about “lost learning” and need for “catch-up” must be a priority.
- **Contingencies:** Preparing for, and resourcing, the response to supporting our children and young people through any further disruption from COVID-19 must be a priority, across all public services.
- **Children’s rights and voices:** Adopting a children’s rights approach to all decisions, across all sectors, must be a priority, and the voices of children and young people must be heard by the decision makers to help shape our road to recovery.

2. Statutory education

15. Over the past year, our scrutiny of the educational impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people has focused on the immediate to short-term effort to re-open schools, the quality of remote provision while they have been closed, and the longer-term challenge of recovering from the substantial disruption to schooling. In doing so, we have drawn on our scrutiny of education issues throughout this Senedd such as school funding, the standards agenda, inequality of educational outcomes, and vulnerable pupils.

16. As part of our rolling call for written evidence and our programme of oral evidence sessions, we heard from Ministers, teaching unions, school and local government representatives, the Children's Commissioner for Wales, Estyn, other educational experts and parents and families. Our scrutiny of the Welsh Government Draft Budget 2021-22 also took an in-depth look at the financial implications of COVID-19 and needs going forward.

We recommend that the next Welsh Government and our successor Committee maintain a close focus on the continuing impact of COVID-19 and the long-term challenge facing our education system, with particular attention on the following areas:

- **Recovery infrastructure:** Putting in place the infrastructure for the medium- to long-term recovery from the disruption to education from COVID-19 and the implications for the further work needed on school improvement and achieving equality of outcomes. Having enough of the right people in post is key to this, as is the need to maximise the impact of all parts of the education system, including schools, local authorities and regional consortia.
- **Education contingencies:** Preparing for, and resourcing, the response to any further disruption from COVID-19, including any future need for remote teaching, learning lessons from the past twelve months e.g. in terms of digital exclusion (including issues relating to connectivity), varying experiences of learners, impact on the Welsh language skills of pupils from non-Welsh speaking households, and the importance of parental engagement.
- **Support for both vulnerable and disadvantaged learners:** Supporting progress and educational outcomes among these groups, including (but not restricted to) those eligible for free school meals (eFSM), children from other low income households, those with Additional Learning Needs (ALN), young

carers, care experienced children, and learners in Pupil Referral Units and other EOTAS settings. This should be underpinned by the collection and publication of disaggregated attendance data for this group of pupils during the pandemic to identify any specific changes.

- **Whole-system approach to mental health and well-being:** Delivering a whole-school and whole-system approach to learners' emotional and mental health and well-being, following our 'Mind over Matter' inquiry reports.
- **School funding:** Delivering the recommendations of our school funding inquiry and subsequent Sibietta Review, to ensure that sufficient funding is provided for schools and distributed effectively.
- **Qualifications:** Monitoring the awarding of general and vocational qualifications in 2021 and 2022, including the balance between maintaining public confidence in the credibility of qualifications and ensuring fairness for cohorts affected by the disruption from COVID-19.
- **Major legislative reform and competing pressures:** Ensuring that sufficient resources are available to manage the impact of COVID-19 alongside the implementation of the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018 from September 2021 and the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021 (subject to Royal Assent) from September 2022.

3. The mental and physical health of children and young people

17. We took evidence from a range of experts about the pandemic's impact on the physical and mental health of children and young people. While it still appears to be the case that children and young people are less susceptible to physical illness from COVID-19, we heard growing concern about the impact of the ongoing pandemic situation on young people's mental well-being.

18. We were told that this is in large part due to the 'displacement' of their usual activities, services and opportunities. We also heard that the pandemic has not affected young people equally, with differing impacts experienced according to age group, economic background, and health status.

As noted in section 1, our key message is that children and young people's well-being must be at the centre of recovery planning. We recommend that the next Welsh Government and our successor Committee give particular consideration to the following:

- **Physical activity:** Increasing opportunities for physical activity for children and young people, in communities and within schools, in order to maximise the physical and mental health benefits of exercise and play. Opportunities for outdoor activity should be opened up as soon as safely possible, and only subject to future restrictions if absolutely essential and evidence of the need to do so is clearly demonstrated.
- **Sustainability of the workforce:** Addressing the recruitment and retention issues in the child (physical and mental) health workforce, and ensuring that the Welsh Government and Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW) look strategically and creatively at how this workforce is used and the skillsets needed. This should include consideration of roles which bridge the gaps between services (for example between primary and secondary care and between specialties).
- **Poverty:** Demonstrating a clear recognition of the strong link between poverty, mental ill health and suicide, taking urgent action to address the economic impacts of the pandemic on children and young people's mental well-being, and mitigating against a potential increase in suicide. Linked to this, further urgent work is needed to explore the potential for extending statutory education and training beyond age 16, to positively contribute to

reducing poverty and the associated links with mental health problems for young people, including young suicide.

- **Seeking help:** Communicating the importance of seeking timely advice to avoid delays in diagnosis and necessary treatment. Ensuring young people and their families are aware that children's physical and mental health services are open, and that there is clear signposting to services and sources of support.
- **Digital infrastructure:** Addressing the 'digital divide', to ensure children and young people across Wales have equitable access to telehealth services, and ensuring NHS Wales' ICT infrastructure is fit for purpose and can support effective, remote ways of service delivery.
- **Mind over matter:** Continuing to implement the recommendations of our original and follow-up reports which, in light of the pandemic, are now more relevant than ever.
- **Self-harm and suicide:** Ensuring that now, more than ever, the right services are available to identify and support children and young people in crisis. Taking a robust, systematic approach to understanding the impact of COVID-19 on levels of self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide among children and young people, in order to take mitigating action and ensure appropriate support is available.

4. Further and higher education

19. Exploring the views of learners in higher and further education, from a variety of backgrounds, including those with challenging circumstances or who have been adversely impacted by the pandemic, has been a priority for us. We wanted to make sure that the voices of students were heard, and we are very grateful to all those learners who were willing to participate in the focus groups we held.

20. We put the views we gathered to the higher and further education sector, including Principals of further education colleges and university representatives. We also took evidence from Qualifications Wales on the challenges of vocational qualifications in the pandemic, and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales.

Based on what we have heard, we recommend that the next Welsh Government and our successor Committee give particular consideration to the following:

- **Mental health and well-being of students:** ensuring that provision is sufficient and meets the specific needs of all learners. Mental health provision must be more consistent between pre- and post-16 education, and across different providers, to ease learner transition from one to the other as they progress along their learning.
- **Support for learning:** Ensuring that learners and students who have experienced gaps in their learning because of the pandemic are supported. In particular, as its regulator and primary funder, the Welsh Government must give the further education sector the funding and flexibility it will need over the years ahead to support learners to overcome the disruption they have faced after they transition from school and/or before they progress beyond FE.
- **Preparing learners for the world of work:** Supporting and enabling the wider experiences, placements and attainment of life-skills that not only enriches the lives of individual learners and students, but also provides important opportunities to prepare them for the world of work, and to improve their life chances.
- **Vocational and academic learning:** Continuing to work towards establishing “parity of esteem” between vocational and academic learning, and instituting the bold changes that are likely to be required to achieve this.

- **Pandemic pressures funding:** Learning—and monitoring the outcomes—from the considerable funding interventions that have been made in both sectors as a result of pandemic pressures. Particular attention needs to be paid to the impact of funding intended to support vulnerable learners, and those more likely to have been impacted by the pandemic. These investments have created opportunities to understand and capture innovative approaches and to share the lessons learned across the education sector.
- **FE and HE as assets in Wales's overall recovery:** Actively positioning and funding both the further and higher education sectors to fulfil their potential to play vital roles in the recovery of Wales and its people from COVID-19. A multi-billion pound post-16 education sector that can transform the life chances of almost 300,000 learners each year, and is involved in so much of the activity we know drives prosperity, has a huge role to play in our recovery. The most must be made of this enormous asset to Wales. Any future reform of the tertiary education system should take this into account.
- **Digital and blended learning:** Understanding, sharing and harnessing the benefits of digital and blended learning across the post-16 education sector. Whilst blended and digital learning has presented considerable challenges to institutions and to learners, it also has considerable potential to improve the learning experience and educational outcomes of learners if used in the right way. The pandemic response has been deeply disruptive, but there is also an unprecedented opportunity to launch a structured, sector-wide programme to learn from it, both to improve learning, and to improve the digital skills of the people of Wales.

5. Vulnerable children and young people

21. Support for vulnerable and care experienced children and young people are key themes that run through a number of our Committee's [reports](#) and inquiries including statutory advocacy services, mental health support, the Pupil Development Grant for care experienced and adopted children and an in-depth look at funding for care experienced children in scrutiny of the Draft Budget 2020-21. We have also drawn on the work of the Public Accounts Committee on [Care Experienced Children and Young People](#).

22. Over the past year, our scrutiny of the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people has given significant attention to its impact on the safeguarding of children, and the support given to children in care and those who have been care experienced.

23. As part of our rolling call for written evidence and our programme of oral evidence sessions, we heard from Ministers, local government representatives, representatives of providers and the NGO/third sector, and the Children's Commissioner for Wales. We also heard directly from those young people affected, facilitated by Voices from Care.

We recommend that the next Welsh Government and our successor Committee maintain a close focus on the continuing impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable children and young people, including focusing on the following areas:

- **Safeguarding:** Continuing to monitor the levels of safeguarding referrals and the number of children in need of care and support, including responding to any changes as a result of the pandemic (e.g. due to poverty, neglect or domestic violence).
- **Support for families:** Monitoring and supporting the effectiveness of services and approaches to support families and to prevent children coming into the care system, including monitoring the numbers of care experienced children within the context of aims to safely reduce these numbers. Taking forward evidenced based strategies, for example the work to develop a pilot Family Drug and Alcohol Court in Wales, and the Welsh research findings of the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory.
- **Corporate parenting:** Paying specific attention to the corporate parenting support for care experienced children, with a specific focus on working

across Welsh Government portfolios to reflect care experienced children's need for support with their education and mental health.

- **Care leavers:** Supporting care-leavers and monitoring the economic impact of the pandemic on this group of young people.
- **Babies and early years:** Ensuring that the youngest children in our society, and the perinatal mental health of their parents and carers, is supported and prioritised as part of recovery planning.
- **Care experienced children:** Reviewing and documenting the primary impacts of COVID-19 specific to care experienced children and young people, with a view to ensuring any concerns are swiftly addressed. This should include consideration of:
 - residential care (including those in local authority, independent and unregulated homes),
 - access to advocacy provision, and
 - the extent to which children are having meaningful and appropriate contact with friends and family.

The Welsh Government should have an appropriate and effective mechanism to co-produce its approach with care experienced children and young people, and the sector which supports them, in a way that can be delivered swiftly to improve outcomes for children.

ANNEX

Summary of written evidence

The Committee's consultation ran from 28 April 2020 to 11 March 2021. 202 responses were submitted. A summary of responses, produced by the Senedd's Research Service, was published in March 2021.

- [Summary of consultation responses – March 2021](#)

Notes of engagement activity

In addition to formal evidence gathering, the Committee sought the views of the public through engagement activities, summary notes of which are published:

- [Scrutiny of COVID-19 and its impact on children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds - Summary Note 1 - 4 June 2020](#)
- [Scrutiny of COVID-19 and its impact on children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds - Summary Note 2 - 2 July 2020](#)
- [Scrutiny of COVID-19 and its impact on children and young people in Wales - Summary Note 3 - 23 November 2020](#)
- [Scrutiny of COVID-19 and its impact on student in further and higher education - Summary Note 4 - 2 March 2021](#)

The Committee also held a [virtual discussion with young people and staff from Voices from Care](#), to hear about the pandemic from the perspective of care experienced children and young people.