

# Scrutinising the Welsh Government's approach to COVID-19 recovery and winter pressures: key issues from Senedd Committees

## Research Briefing

December 2021



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## 1. Background

On 16 December the Senedd's **Committee for Scrutiny of the First Minister** will scrutinise the First Minister, Mark Drakeford MS. The first part of the meeting will focus on the Welsh Government's approach to COVID-19 recovery and winter pressures on public services. This briefing focuses on some of the key issues which may come up during the discussion.

## 2. Health and social care

### 2.1. Planning for winter pressures

On 21 October 2021, the Minister for Health and Social Services published the **Health and Social Care Winter Plan 2021 to 22**, stating, "This plan has been developed in consultation with health and care partners, following months of planning". The plan was backed **by an extra £42m funding** available for social care to help ease the pressure on hospital beds.

The winter plan required each Regional Partnership Board (RPB) to submit their own integrated health and social care winter plan by **25th November**. In **Plenary on 30 November** the First Minister stated that "the whole system has to find a way of responding to the very many pressures that the service is currently under".

The then NHS Wales **Chief Executive Andrew Goodall warned** the dual challenge of the pandemic and other respiratory viruses will make this winter "one of the hardest we have ever faced". There are **reports** of poor performance figures against **A&E** and **ambulance response** targets.

The Health and Social Care Committee has agreed to undertake a short 'temperature check' early in 2022 to look at how plans and services are delivering on the ground, and the level of winter demand.

### 2.2. COVID-19 vaccination programme

The vaccine programme is being **extended and accelerated significantly**. In **Plenary on 30 November** the Minister for Health and Social Services acknowledged the scale of the challenge in delivering the programme:

[...] we are going to mount now a massive response in terms of how we mobilise this new vaccination army that we will be developing in the next few days. We've already, obviously, spoken to our health boards who are coming up with more detailed plans for us tomorrow. Discussions have already been had with local government, with the army, with all kinds of organisations to see what more can we put in place and who's up for this – who is up for helping us out at this very challenging time.

The **Welsh NHS Confederation** has welcomed the expanded programme but warned that it will – on top of existing service pressures – “add complexity and workload to an already challenging vaccination programme”.

### 2.3. The health and social care workforce

The workforce was one of the most significant priorities for stakeholders who responded to the Health and Social Care Committee's consultations on **priorities for the Sixth Senedd**. The responses to **the Committee's health and social care workforce** consultation also highlighted the impact of the pandemic on an already-stretched workforce, and called for action to address **staff shortages and wellbeing**, and to improve **recruitment and retention**. Specific areas of concern include: diagnostics; cancer; anaesthetics; critical care; community and district nursing; palliative care, and pharmacy.

Lack of capacity in the social care workforce was another major concern. **According to Care Inspectorate Wales** (CIW), staff recruitment and retention is one of the biggest issues facing social care. CIW is worried that with domiciliary care shortages, more people “will end up in residential care earlier than they need to or, if they have multiple health issues, they'll end up in hospital”.

Some local authorities are re-prioritising services for those with the highest need. This means some existing support packages are being reduced, with family and unpaid carers having to plug the gaps.

Sue Evans, Chief Executive of Social Care Wales **has told the Committee** that “The alignment of social care and health is fundamental for both systems to work properly. So, if you underfund one, it has a direct impact on the other”. The Committee has heard evidence from academics about the need to address social care workforce issues, and develop a better strategy for hospital discharge. The **Welsh NHS Confederation** has also identified the need for increased support for social care and its workforce.

The Fifth Senedd's Health, Social Care and Sport (HSCS) Committee, **called for parity of esteem for social care workers** with NHS staff, in terms of pay, working

conditions and recognition. The **Co-operation Agreement 2021 between the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru** includes commitments to:

- set up an expert group to support the ambition of creating a National Care Service, free at the point of need, with an implementation plan by the end of 2023.
- better integrate health and care and work towards parity of recognition and reward for health and care workers.

### 3. Children, Young People and Education

#### 3.1. Managing the pandemic in the short-term

Schools currently remain open to all pupils other than those who are self-isolating because they are symptomatic of, or have tested positive for, COVID-19 or are awaiting a negative PCR test due to a positive case in their household.

Prior to the start of this academic year, the **Welsh Government published** Local COVID-19 Infection Control Decision Frameworks for **schools** and **colleges**. The Welsh Government has also provided **funding to improve ventilation in schools and learning environments** and updated its **guidance to schools** on 30 November in light of the new variant.

With the cancellation of exams, **schools determined pupils' GCSE, AS and A level grades** in 2020 and 2021, under a process put in place by Qualifications Wales. Exams are **set to return in 2022**, with some changes to account for the disruption to courses so far, although Qualifications Wales has made contingency plans.

#### 3.2. Educational recovery in the medium to long-term

Pupils lost months of face to face learning when schools were closed other than to vulnerable pupils and children of key workers. While there was remote educational provision via the online platform 'Hwb', there are concerns about variable experiences of remote teaching and learning (as **reported by Estyn**), in terms of provision by schools and pupils' home environments. There are also particular concerns about pupils who were already disadvantaged.

The 'primary focus' of the Welsh Government's educational recovery plan, **Renew and Reform** is to 'provide funding direct to schools and colleges to support and promote wellbeing and progression for all learners'. In total, the Welsh Government has allocated **over £150 million in 2021-22**, in addition to over £220 million in 2020-



21 for the education sector's response to COVID-19. The **Education Policy Institute reported** in June 2021 that this was highest in the UK.

In addition to recovering from the pandemic, the Welsh Government will be expected to resume its focus on the long-standing **school standards agenda**, which has arguably lost momentum whilst schools have striven to simply maintain, rather than necessarily improve, provision.

### 3.3. Post-16 education

Whilst restrictions were in place, universities moved most of their learning on-line initially and then decided themselves whether to introduce more in-person teaching where it was considered possible or necessary. The nature of university degrees means each university made their own assessment arrangements for each course.

Further education providers broadly followed the same pattern of teaching, however assessment arrangements were different from universities. Colleges followed the **alternative arrangements for GCSEs, AS and A-Levels** and **changes made to vocational qualification assessments** by the respective awarding bodies.

### 3.4. Children and young people's physical and mental health

In October 2021, the Children, Young People and Education (CYPE) Committee **questioned the Minister for Health and Social Services** about children's ability to access to health services, and the need to protect resources for children's health services, in the context of winter pressures and COVID-19 recovery.

The Minister **told the Committee** that the harm arising from COVID-19 restrictions has significant impacts on all aspects of children and young people's life and development.

Latest **statistics** show that in September 2021, **542 children and young people were waiting more than four weeks** for a first appointment for Specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (**CAMHS**). This compares to 152 in September 2020, meaning the proportion waiting for more than four weeks has risen **from 26% to 73% in 12 months**.

The **Minister for Education and Welsh Language advised** the CYPE Committee following **oral scrutiny** that the Welsh Government has provided an additional £2 million for school counselling services in 2021-22. This is part of an **overall £9 million** for the whole school approach to mental health in 2021-22.

## 4. Local Government and Housing

### 4.1. Local Government

Local government has been at the forefront of the response to the pandemic, providing leadership and coordinating local efforts. The sector's resources have been stretched to the limit, against what was already a challenging financial backdrop for local authorities.

The pandemic brought about a sudden increase in demand for certain local government services, and a rapid reduction in income generation. As a result, the Welsh Government established the **Local Government Hardship Fund**, providing local authorities with a safety net.

At the beginning of 2021, **over £600 million** had been allocated to local authorities via the hardship fund. As part of the Welsh Government's Final Budget 2021-22, an **additional £206.6 million** was allocated to the fund.

In a recent **debate in Plenary on the First Supplementary Budget for 2021-22**, the Minister for Finance and Local Government stated that she intended to keep the fund in place throughout the 2021-22 financial year. The **Minister's evidence paper to the Local Government and Housing Committee** stated "I **do not** anticipate continuing specific funding for the Hardship Fund in 2022-23". Local authorities will, as a result, "need to plan now for changes in service delivery and demand".

There are mounting pressures on local authority finances, from pay and pension increases to inflationary prices in goods and materials. Local government leaders noted during **evidence to the ELGC Committee of the Fifth Senedd** (14 January 2021) that while additional funding is always welcome, "it's not enough to pay for what we need now".

There is continuing uncertainty around the future course of the pandemic, and its potential long-term impact on local government services. Local authorities are concerned about the increasing cost pressures on their services, on top of existing pandemic pressures.

Audit Wales noted in a **recent report, that** regardless of the future path of the pandemic “it will almost certainly affect public sector finances, including local government, for many years to come”.

With this in mind, and with the emergence of a potentially concerning variant, talk of winding down the hardship fund may be deemed premature.

### 4.2. Homelessness

The **Programme for Government** commits to “fundamentally reform homelessness services to focus on prevention and rapid rehousing” and the **Co-operation Agreement 2021** commits to ending homelessness.

In response to COVID-19, the Welsh Government effectively suspended the priority need test set out in homelessness legislation and made it clear that no one should be without suitable accommodation and support during the pandemic – a ‘no-one left out’ approach.

This policy was supported with additional funding and statutory and non-statutory guidance. As a result, the numbers of people in emergency temporary accommodation has increased significantly. As of 30 September 2021, just under **7,000 people** were in **temporary emergency accommodation** and over 1,000 people are presenting as homeless to local authorities each month.

Steps have also been taken to help prevent homelessness during the pandemic. There was a moratorium on evictions that ended in June 2021, and notice periods for most tenants have been extended to 6 months (this is currently due to expire on 31 December 2021).

The **Tenancy Hardship Grant** was introduced to help with COVID-19 related rent arrears; £4.1 million additional funding was provided to local authorities for Discretionary Housing Payments and additional funding has been provided for advice services. There was an increase of £40 million to the Housing Support Grant, which funds support services.

A private sector leasing scheme, supported by the Welsh Government, is being rolled out across Wales to ease pressure on housing services for people at risk of, or who are experiencing, homelessness.

**Ending Homelessness in Wales: a high level action plan 2021 to 2026** was published on 30 November 2021. It commits to supporting the emergency public health response to homelessness during the pandemic with funding provided

through the local authority hardship fund (noting this has been on average around **£2 million a month**).

### 4.3. Housing

Increasing housing supply is one of many factors that can contribute to preventing and ending homelessness. The Programme for Government contains a commitment to build 20,000 low-carbon social homes for rent. The Welsh Government's Social Housing Grant Programme, which supports most new affordable homes, has seen its budget increase to **£250 million in 2021-22**.

In a [letter](#) to the Local Government and Housing Committee in October 2021, the Minister for Climate Change noted "Work is also underway on developing a new tripartite Housing Pact agreement between this Government, the WLGA and Community Housing Cymru."

## 5. Economy and Trade

### 5.1. Tourism levy

In March 2021 the previous Welsh Government published a [new recovery plan](#) for the tourism, hospitality and events sector which was developed in consultation with the Welsh Government's Tourism Taskforce.

The Welsh Government is currently developing an Action Plan that will provide more detail on the interventions set out in the document and address how these will be delivered and by whom. There is no mention in the document of the implications of a possible **tourism levy**.

With regard to the impact of the pandemic the document notes that 97% of tourism businesses in Wales reported a loss in revenue for 2020, with nearly half (49%) reporting losses between £10,000 and £50,000.

In March 2021, the Welsh Government's [Welsh Tax Policy Report 2021](#) provided an update on progress to examine the case for enabling local authorities to introduce a tourism tax.

The report noted that Welsh Government previously intended to publish a call for evidence on a tourism tax in 2020. However, this work was paused in spring 2020 in light of the uncertainty and continued impact of COVID-19 on hospitality. The report states further:

We continue to monitor progress and consider examples, both internationally and within the UK, of how tourism taxes work in practice. It will be important to continue to do this in 2021 as we consider what the implications of COVID-19 might be on tourism taxes internationally, as the industry seeks to recover from the impact of the pandemic. A number of policy issues require further exploration and consideration, including Value Added Tax (VAT) rates on tourist accommodation, particularly now that the UK has exited the EU, and how local tourism taxes would intersect with other key policy areas such as local taxes and existing regulatory pressures, and the potential need for statutory registration.

The Welsh Government’s **Programme for Government** for the Sixth Senedd noted that it would “consult on legislation permitting local authorities to raise a tourism levy”.

The **Co-operation Agreement 2021** between the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru states they will “introduce local tourism levies using local government finance reform legislation”. In answer to a question from Tom Giffard MS in Plenary on 1 December, the Minister for the Economy **stated that** the Welsh Government is looking to consult on a ‘permissive power’ for local authorities to introduce levies, and that this will take place “during the next year or so”.

## 6. Culture

### 6.1. Continued revenue impacts and the funding cliff-edge

The Welsh Government has made two rounds of cultural recovery funding available for cultural organisations and venues including theatres and concert halls – so far avoiding widespread closures in the sector. These two rounds – announced in July 2020 and March 2021 – followed equivalent funding announcements by the UK Government in respect of England, which triggered Barnett consequential for Wales.

Arts organisations have recently approached the Arts Council and Welsh Government for a “swift and targeted response to support the recovery of key vulnerable businesses in our sector”, citing the continued financial impact of the pandemic. They said:

It is impossible to switch overnight to an immediately economically sustainable business model without some kind of tapered safety net aimed at providing vital continued support to enable long term recovery.

### 6.2. COVID passes

On 11 October 2021 the Welsh Government introduced mandatory **COVID passes** for nightclubs and large events. On 29 October the First Minister announced that the Welsh Government intends to extend the use of COVID Passes to theatres, cinemas and concert halls from 15 November.

In a press release following the announcement of the extension of the passes to cinemas, Ffilm Cymru said:

As with the UK Cinema Association, we are not aware of any instances of transmission taking place within a cinema context in Wales. We would therefore have preferred to have seen the Covid Pass as one of the measures that individual venues may have chosen to implement, rather than mandated for all cinemas in Wales.

Cinemas continue to be financially challenged. We are particularly conscious that many venues rely on 'walk-in' rather than advance bookings, which, coupled with a potential hit to consumer confidence, will likely mean reduced income when the COVID Pass is implemented. We therefore call upon Welsh Government to ready further financial support for the sector, whilst encouraging the use of our vital and valuable cultural spaces.

Cinema and Co, an independent cinema in Swansea, **publicly refused** to ask customers for their COVID passes, and has been **temporarily closed** by enforcement authorities. The First Minister **said on 18 November** that he has not ruled out extending COVID passes to the hospitality sector.

## 7. Equality and Social Justice

### 7.1. Pressures on the childcare sector

The **Co-operation Agreement 2021** between the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru includes commitments to:

- deliver a phased expansion of early years provision, to include all two year olds, with a particular emphasis on ensuring equity of access for more deprived communities
- do more to enable those in education/training or on the edge of work to access childcare
- explore with the Mudiad Meithrin and others the creation of a long term plan to strengthen capacity to deliver enhanced Welsh-medium early years provision

Coram Family and Childcare has **found that** the percentage of Welsh local authorities who had sufficient childcare provision increased for a number of groups between 2020 and 2021, but **fell** for families living in rural areas, parents working atypical hours and for families with disabled children.

Witnesses from the Equality and Social Justice Committee's inquiry into childcare and parental employment have highlighted the impacts of **staffing shortages** in the sector as a result of workers leaving during the pandemic. Dr Gwenllian Lansdown Davies of Mudiad Meithrin **told the Committee** that there has "been a recruitment challenge in the Welsh-medium workforce for many years, but the current pressure on the English-medium sector is also having an impact on the Welsh-medium workforce". She went on to note that action is needed in this area to create "a professional, qualified workforce that is financially recognised for what they deliver".

The Deputy Minister for Social Services told the Committee **on 29 November** that the Welsh Government will develop a plan for the workforce that will look at both the expansion of provision to two-year-olds and the longer-term approach.

### 7.2. Pressures on community services for adults with a learning disability and people with dementia

The pandemic significantly reduced access to care and support services, as day centre services and respite support came to a stop. Wales is currently at '**Alert Level 0**', however there continues to be a **legal requirement to carry out a coronavirus risk assessment** and put in place reasonable measures to minimise risks, which includes restrictions on numbers of people allowed in certain buildings.

It has been **reported** that due to continued restrictions, day centres are operating at decreased capacity, resulting in many people either not being able to attend or having their care hours reduced.

**A survey conducted by Carers Wales in November** found that "Carers are still having to take on more hours of care for the person they care for, with 64 per cent of carers having reduced or no access to day services and over a third of carers reporting reduced or no access to paid care workers".

The Alzheimer's Society **report** that people affected by **dementia** have been hardest hit by the pandemic. For many people with dementia living at home, social distancing guidelines for friends and family, the advice to shield combined with the



reduction or cancellation of home care services meant they were left without vital social interaction and support.

Continued closures and reduced care and support services also have a clear **impact on unpaid carers**, who have to take on more caring responsibilities, without sufficient breaks or respite from caring.

In March 2021, the **Welsh Government** published a **strategy for unpaid carers** and announced funding of £3 million to diversify and increase access to respite services across Wales. The strategy prioritises meeting the increased demand for day centres and more traditional sitting and replacement care services.

## 8. Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure

### 8.1. Flooding

February 2020 saw **severe flooding across Wales**. Flooding is a significant winter preparedness issue, with 245,000 Welsh properties at risk of flooding.

The **Co-operation Agreement 2021** between Plaid Cymru and the Welsh Government commits to an independent review of local government and Natural Resources Wales (NRW) reports on the 2020-21 flooding.

The Agreement also pledges to increase flood management and mitigation investment, and for the National Infrastructure Commission for Wales to assess “how the nationwide likelihood of flooding of homes, businesses and infrastructure can be minimised by 2050”

The Welsh government has committed to “**additional flood protection for more than 45,000 homes**”. NRW **told the CCEI Committee** it is essential to ‘think big’, at ‘catchment area scale’.

Mandatory sustainable drainage systems (SuDS), a type of natural flood management, were introduced in Wales in 2018. The **Programme for Government** commits to legislate to strengthen these requirements, and:

Deliver nature-based flood management in all major river catchments to expand wetland and woodland habitats.



NRW emphasised the importance of land use planning alongside nature based solutions. The Welsh Government **recently announced** that developments will have to take into account future flooding and coastal erosion risk.

### 8.2. Public transport following the pandemic

Bus and rail passenger numbers collapsed during the pandemic and remain low. Car usage did not fall as far and has recovered more rapidly. Active travel / cycling spiked during the lockdowns.

Bus and rail received about £200m of additional emergency funding in 2020-21, with further additional funding allocated in 2021-22.

Senedd Research's article **Putting the public back into public transport** summarises the issues and action taken by the Welsh Government .

Evidence to the **CCEI Committee from the bus sector** called for a change in travel advice to encourage the public back onto public transport. Witnesses also called for greater clarity on transport governance, roles and responsibilities of public bodies, and regional working.

Public transport recovery, and delivery of the new **Wales Transport Strategy (WTS)** were priorities for CCEI witnesses and respondents, including the target that 45% of journeys will be by public transport / active travel by 2040, and avoiding a car led recovery.

The Welsh Government intends to publish a bus White Paper this year.

### 8.3. COVID impacts on fuel poverty

National Energy Action (NEA) **submitted evidence to the CCEI Committee** noting "Wales has the oldest and least thermally-efficient building stock" among UK nations and northern European countries.

The NEA's evidence outlined that even before the pandemic and recent surge in energy prices, poor households in Wales had to spend an extra £431 per household to stay warm. NEA pointed to **Welsh Government fuel poverty estimates** which indicate that 12% of all Welsh households were in fuel poverty in 2018. It noted:

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, these numbers are likely to be significantly higher now as people have been at home more, using more and owing more, all while earning less.

The Welsh Government announced a **Winter Fuel Support Scheme** in November, with eligible households receiving a one-off £100 cash payment.

In March 2021, the Welsh Government published **Tackling fuel poverty 2021 to 2035** setting targets to be achieved by 2035, including that no households would be living in “severe or persistent” fuel poverty, and no more than 5% in fuel poverty, “as far as is reasonably practicable”.

The **Warm Homes Programme** is a key Welsh Government fuel poverty alleviation policy. It comprises **Nest** and **Arbed**, which fund home energy efficiency improvements and advice for eligible households. **The Welsh Government will consult** on strengthening the Warm Homes Programme by the end of 2021, with the replacement scheme to commence in 2023

Audit Wales published a **report** in November 2021, which suggested the Nest scheme has focused increasingly on replacing broken or inefficient boilers for people on means tested benefits, rather than targeting those in fuel poverty. It also questioned the efficacy of the area-based approach of the Arbed scheme.