

CYPE Committee
National Education Union Cymru response
Scrutiny of Covid-19 and its impact on children and young people
(including students in further and higher education)

NEU Cymru response

NEU Cymru welcome the opportunity to respond to the Children, Young People and Education Committee's call for evidence on the impact of Covid-19. We would note that this is an extremely difficult time for the education workforce and learners alike. For some weeks now schools and colleges in Wales have not been operating as 'normal'. Today, as schools open to a wider number of pupils, we know our members and workplace representatives across Wales have worked hard to try and ensure that the return is as safe as possible.

We would like to express our gratitude to all of those involved in the education sector and note that our members have been working extremely hard under very difficult circumstances. We would also emphasise that we very much welcomed the Education Minister's approach in putting the safety and wellbeing of learners and staff alike as her top priority. We cannot emphasise enough how important this is.

We have produced comprehensive advice for members, ahead of wider-schools opening this week, including a joint check-list with Unison, Unite and GMB: <https://neu.org.uk/coronavirus-advice-members-wales>

In Wales, we have been heartened to see the government and other bodies take a relatively agile and pragmatic approach:

- **Estyn**¹ – for decisive action to cease inspections.
- **Education Workforce Council (EWC)**² – for suspending hearings.
- **Qualifications Wales**³ – for issuing exam guidance.
- **Welsh Government** – for taking swift action to **close schools**, for still providing **free school meals** over the holidays, for introducing

¹ <https://www.estyn.gov.wales/coronavirus-covid-19-latest-information>

² <http://www.ewc.wales/site/index.php/en/ewc-news/1418-coronavirus-covid-19-and-our-work-what-you-need-to-know.html>

³ <https://www.qualificationswales.org/english/news/qualifications-wales-issues-guidance-to-teachers/>

free childcare for key workers⁴ and for introducing regulations on social distancing in the workplace⁵.

We believe the Welsh Government plans to use a blended approach to learning in September are sensible.

It is well known, that for reasons relating to safety, we would have preferred a more limited return to school now, with wider opening starting in September. This was to ensure Test, Trace, Protect, had more time to establish itself – as it is vital for the safe wider opening of schools, as outlined in the Technical Advice Cell⁶ guidance. But we have fully supported our members in preparing for wider opening this week.

We know there has been much speculation about the so-called 4th week. Last week, we issued a statement, which said:

"It is up to local authorities about their decisions to open on the fourth week, taking account of their local circumstances and the challenges of wider opening, as you would expect. We know our members have been working hard to try and get as many children back to school in the weeks after the 29th June.

"The rumours over the weekend have been very unfortunate, and it is important we highlight we were always clear the fourth week was for our members to work on a voluntary basis. It is well known we would have preferred to have waited until September, but all we had asked for with regard to the fourth week, is confirmation that our members will be asked if they can work as a voluntary arrangement.

"Many of our members now will be deeply involved in plans for the wider opening next week. Everyone wishes this was a return to school as normal. But the virus is unfortunately still very real, and everyone is trying their best under difficult circumstances to ensure the wellbeing of staff and students alike."

We have attempted to address your specific points below.

The physical and mental health of children and young people.

⁴ <https://gov.wales/critical-workers-get-free-childcare>

⁵ <https://gov.wales/taking-all-reasonable-measures-maintain-physical-distancing-workplace>

⁶ <https://gov.wales/our-latest-understanding-covid-19-respect-children-and-education>

NEU Cymru welcomed the Welsh Government (WG) announcement of £1.25m⁷ for mental health support. We have also welcomed the WG focus on wellbeing of learners in the 'Stay Safe. Stay Learning.' policy statement and guidance. There is no doubt that the that there will be a significant impact from the current Covid-19 outbreak, and we know that our members are working hard to try and ensure that children and young people are supported in their wellbeing, as well as their access to learning.

We remain concerned that should schools / colleges return in a form which is open to more learners in September, the inability to protect learners and members alike, for example through social distancing, will be a challenge. We agree with the Education Minister's approach so far – to put the safety and wellbeing of everyone involved as a priority.

We also note that in Denmark, where numbers of children have gone back to school, the infection rate for Covid-19 has risen since the re-opening of schools. Although it is now only an R rate of between 0.6 - 0.9⁸, we do not have this much so-called 'head room' in Wales. We would be concerned about an early return to school for children and young people, their families, and our members, in terms of exposure to the virus.

Vulnerable and disadvantaged children (including pupils with special educational needs and disabilities, children in need, looked after children and children eligible for free school meals).

Vulnerable learners

Our members are concerned about vulnerable learners at this time. Those who are considered vulnerable, such as receiving support from social services, can go to school under Welsh Government guidance⁹. Though we do not expect them to take this up.

With 28%¹⁰ of children in Wales living in relative income poverty, we are keen for learners to continue with their learning and go back to school when it is safe to do so. Poverty inevitably makes equitable access to the education system very hard at this time. We have written to the Housing and Local Government and Education Ministers, asking for

⁷ <https://gov.wales/increased-support-childrens-mental-health-following-covid-19-outbreak>

⁸ <https://www.thelocal.dk/20200430/reopening-denmark-has-increased-rate-of-infection-spread-ssu>

⁹ <https://gov.wales/how-schools-will-work-during-coronavirus-pandemic#section-39118>

¹⁰ <https://gov.wales/relative-income-poverty-april-2018-march-2019>

support for Local Authorities for summer activities, digital training for parents, and greater use of public buildings to allow more children to return in the Autumn.

Summer holidays

Local authorities must be funded to make a summer holiday local offer to children and young people. Local authorities should coordinate the planning of summer holiday clubs, particularly in areas of deprivation, so that children and young people have a safe place to go, have positive activities to engage and interest them, and build their confidence for a successful return to school in September, where possible.

We have written to the Education Minister, and the Minister for Housing and Local Government outlining ideas for the summer:¹¹

“We believe that supporting the wellbeing of children who have faced challenges in the last few months could include:

1 Engage. Activities which children and young people will enjoy and be keen to participate in, including play, to support their wellbeing and sense of self-belief

2 Exercise. Outdoor activities such as sport sessions, to counteract the lack of opportunities for physical exercise during lockdown

3 Create. Creative opportunities such as dance, art, music, science, and adventure playgrounds

4 Connect. Partnerships with local libraries, local museums, galleries or art centres and their education outreach teams

5 Prepare. An element of personal study/digital skills support, where the local authority can plan volunteer schemes where teachers, youth workers, supply staff, support staff and other professionals could volunteer to support schemes.”

We sincerely hope these types of schemes play a central role to the work to support learner wellbeing and will be carried out, with support from Welsh Government.

We also know that educators are not trained as social workers. Educators are working hard to ensure safeguarding is followed for staff

¹¹ <https://neu.org.uk/press-releases/coronavirus-summer-holidays-letter>

and students alike. We are asking local authorities to coordinate a consistent approach.¹²

We know that in a household with a disabled person, or with someone who is from a non-white ethnic group as head of the household, they are more likely to be living in relative income poverty¹³. So, whilst it is clear that those learners who are disadvantaged need to go back to school, we cannot risk those who are more likely to be in vulnerable groups contracting the virus – i.e. those in black and disabled households. Nothing will be so detrimental to the wellbeing of our young people as if their parents/carers contract, and are severely affected by, the virus.

We note that Welsh Government are working on a risk assessment for those from so-called BAME groups.

Learners with ALN / SEN

We note, and welcome, that the Welsh Government has included disabled learners in those who are still allowed to attend school throughout. Although complicated, as many children with SEN may be more at risk of the virus, it is right that individual heads can limit places, for example at special schools, to enhance safety. Our members tell us that PPE has been provided in most Special School settings, and this is welcome.

However, special schools will not be able to take back a high proportion of their learners. We believe some have been put under pressure to do so, and this is unacceptable. Children with disabilities are likely to be less able to comply with social distancing measures, and may need more physical contact, which necessitates PPE to help with the safety of both staff and students alike.

We believe, with regret, that disabled children are not automatically considered 'children in need' under the Social Services and Well-being Act 2012, and as such, the local authority will not necessarily have a record of all disabled children in their area. At a time like this, we believe it would be useful for the local authority to be able to know about, and support, disabled children.

Disability and SEN are not necessarily the same thing. Those with a 'statement' may, for example, have significant educational needs, but

¹² <https://neu.org.uk/coronavirus-what-you-need-know-vulnerable-students>

¹³ <https://gov.wales/relative-income-poverty-april-2018-march-2019>

not necessarily be as at risk from the virus as others. All young people need to be carefully considered before returning to school.

Children's services, including social care and safeguarding.

We have some concerns about the role of children's services at this time. Social workers undertake a highly specialised job, and we would be concerned that the 'welfare checks' which are expected of teachers, do not replace the role of social workers.

We know that social services have been undermined by years of austerity, imposed by the UK Government in Westminster. In our schools, our members tell us that, due to early intervention type services decreasing, this has meant an increase in the number of children who would previously have been supported. As a result, children go to school without support and, for example, may need nappies changing. In the context of the virus, this is a serious concern in terms of the welfare of the child and staff member involved, as changing a nappy inevitably involves close physical contact, and puts both parties at risk.

Early childhood education and care, including impact on the childcare market and childhood development.

We recognise that early childhood development can be supported through early support from childhood settings, which would be difficult to achieve at this time. We would expect that those children and families who need extra interventions from social services are able to receive them at this time.

Many children will be happy with this time at home with their families. We do appreciate that childcare and work are difficult to manage with very young children. However, in terms of everyone's welfare, we believe staying safe from the virus is the top priority.

We know that of our members with young (pre-school aged) children, finding appropriate childcare is a challenge. Like many people, they often relied on grandparents, friends and family, or local childcare providers, who are not fully operating at this time. The Coronavirus childcare assistance scheme¹⁴ is welcome, although we understand from members that availability of childcare is a challenge, especially in rural areas. Our members are also concerned that they are in a workplace

¹⁴ <https://gov.wales/support-childcare-providers-coronavirus-covid-19>

which cannot ensure social distancing, and should not be risking the health of family members, in looking after their own children.

Statutory school education, including arrangements for remote learning, continuity of learning, the impact on educational outcomes and the implementation of the critical workers policy.

NEU Cymru are pleased to be part of the Welsh Government Trade Union Group who has looked at the arrangements for the wider opening of schools / colleges. We have had regular meetings with the Welsh Government since the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis, and been able to comment on a range of documents to support education professionals. As we have stated above, we, like everyone, would prefer that all learners were able to go back to school / college. But, currently, we are not in that situation and we strongly believe that schools / colleges should only re-open to more learners when it is safe to do so.

We have largely welcomed the WG approach to learning at this time. As we look to more a blended learning approach in September, extra money for digital accessibility is key – including the training of parents, so that they can support their children in their learning at home.

Free school meals

We welcomed that free school meals will be available for children during the holidays. We also welcomed that the WG has chosen not to go for the style of voucher used in England. We welcome that some local authorities have gone for direct cash transfer, as we know that maximum flexibility is needed at this time¹⁵.

Exams and qualifications (including vocational qualifications).

Learners have worked hard over the last couple of years in preparation for their examinations and we strongly agree with Qualifications Wales (QW) that learners, for whom a qualification-level centre assessment grade is submitted, will receive a grade for their efforts. We also strongly agree with QW that those who are best placed to award learners a grade are their teachers, and we welcome the trust that has been placed upon them to do so.

We have responded to Qualifications Wales' consultation on 'Arrangements for the summer 2020 exam series'¹⁶.

¹⁵ <https://gov.wales/free-school-meals-coronavirus-guidance-schools>

¹⁶ <https://qualificationswales.org/media/5902/consultation-arrangements-for-summer-2020.pdf>

Higher and further education, including the financial sustainability of the sector, the effect of changes to courses, student accommodation and other student services, and the impact of this on students' legal rights.

NEU Cymru is pleased that the WG has kept funding the FEIs through grant funding, and welcome that this has meant many staff in FE are working from home to support students, and not subject to redundancy arrangements. We believe those staff who are grant funded are not eligible for furlough arrangements, which do not apply to those employed in the public sector.

NEU Cymru represents many members in the FE sector. We know that, similar to members working in schools, this is a challenging time and issues about digital connectivity, mental health and supporting students are critical.

It is also worth noting that many of our members in FE will teach HE courses in the FE sector under franchise. Whilst we note that the WG has kept the grant funding for the FE sector in place, HE in FE is considered 'commercial' activity, and we believe more of these members will have been applicable for Furlough. Whilst there is a national lecturer contract in place in Wales, we know that members will be employed on a range of contracts, such as 'assessors' and 'technicians', which make the staffing structure more complicated in FE.

It is also worth noting that students who undertake HE courses within an FE setting are those who are more likely to be learning close to home – for caring, or a range of personal circumstances.

Student financial support including the impact on students who have lost their part-time employment.

NEU Cymru are pleased that WG has chosen to pay the £30 per week Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA)¹⁷ to eligible students during this period.

We are concerned that those undertaking apprenticeships and work-based learning (WBL) may have been Furloughed, or are unable to attend their place of work. It is an uncertain time for these young people,

¹⁷ <https://www.studentfinancewales.co.uk/fe/ema.aspx>

as it is unclear when employers, such as hairdressers, will re-open. But we welcome WG's safety first approach.

Support available for the workforce, including (but not limited to) health, social care, education, children's services, and youth workers.

We know that many of our members will have been in school throughout this period – as well as supporting learners from home, and many supporting their own children's learning at this time. Many who have contacted us are on the 'vulnerable' list, and we have encouraged them to seek support to work from home. This has largely been supported, though it would be a challenge were schools to go back fully, and is a particular challenge in education settings, as social distancing cannot be guaranteed.

We have welcomed WG's approach in terms of providing mental health support to staff and students alike.

NEU nationally have set 5 tests to the UK Government¹⁸ to meet before re-opening schools. We have shared these with WG and the Education Minister, and have welcomed that she plans to put the safety and wellbeing of staff and students at the centre of any plans for the wider opening of schools. We sincerely hope that the 'Test, Trace, Protect' system is robust, and followed by all, to ensure the safety of everyone returning to education this week.

As Wales sends the wider workforce back to school, we will need to ensure there are a series of measures in place to make this safe. We expect local authorities to now plan for September, and have written to the Minister, including proposals for the use of public buildings:

“We have welcomed Welsh Government's approach to return to school in September, recognising that whilst blended learning will be a challenge, it is safer than children all returning to school at once.

Alongside that, to ensure as many schools are able to welcome back as many children as possible, public buildings, such as libraries and sports halls, civic centres and religious buildings should be used to expand the space available to schools so that social distancing can be achieved, with greater numbers of pupils being educated in non-school settings, if not in schools.”

¹⁸ <https://neu.org.uk/press-releases/5-tests-government-before-schools-can-re-open>

We hope the Welsh Government can work with local authorities over the summer to make this as safe as possible.

Joint advice

NEU Cymru have welcomed the WG ‘Stay Safe. Stay Learning.’ Guidance. That guidance clearly sets out that the safety of the workforce is paramount in the Welsh Government’s priorities.

NEU Cymru has put out joint advice with UCAC, NAHT and ASCL. As our Joint Advice says:

“This is not education as we have known it. National Literacy and Numeracy Tests, GCSEs, AS and A-level exams, as well as Estyn inspections, have all been cancelled. In addition, Kirsty Williams has confirmed that there is no expectation for teachers to prepare lesson plans and a new curriculum whether in school or at home.”

This joint advice aims to deal with a range of issues which all our members are facing, and aims to come to a common understanding of what is expected from education professionals. This is not the time to be monitoring staff performance. Safety for everyone in education is critical at this time.

Please see the joint advice here: <https://neu.org.uk/press-releases/joint-covid-19-advice-wales>

NEU Cymru has produced some guidance for our members, including a joint check-list for with GMB, Unison and Unite:

<https://neu.org.uk/media/11076/view>

Supply educators

We have had many enquiries from members who are supply educators – teachers and support staff – especially from those employed by an agency. Like many workers on zero-hours or other forms of uncertain contracts, they are concerned about their income.

Whilst not the employer, the Welsh Government have published some helpful guidance, setting out the “Furlough” arrangements, which supply agencies should be able to access. They also highlight the expectations of ethical employment practices at this time. This letter has helped some

members to access Furlough from supply agencies:
<https://gov.wales/coronavirus-support-supply-sector>

We have written to the Minister to highlight the need to include supply staff in any forward planning:

“Supply teachers will be needed as class sizes will be smaller. This will help all children who have gone through a traumatic time during the crisis, and in particular disadvantaged children who will benefit greatly from lower pupil/teacher ratios. Perhaps now is the time for local authorities to revive their list of supply teachers and for Welsh Government to include them within teachers’ pay and conditions. This would make planning and support easier for everyone involved, and mean supply teachers are also within the system, ahead of the new curriculum. “

We hope the Committee can see the need for this type of planning and support for the supply workforce.

Children’s rights

The Education Minister’s approach, to put the safety and wellbeing of learners and education professionals as her top priority, seems to be in line with the following UN Convention Rights of the child:

Article 3¹⁹ – best interest of the child

Article 6 – right to life

Article 28 – right to education

Whilst it is possible that the right to education may be best served in school, currently, we don’t believe it is in the best interest of all children to be in a hostile school environment, and should only be fully returning when it is safe to do so.

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¹⁹ https://www.unicef.org.uk/child-rights-partners/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2016/08/CRC_summary_leaflet_Child_Rights_Partners_web_final.pdf

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