

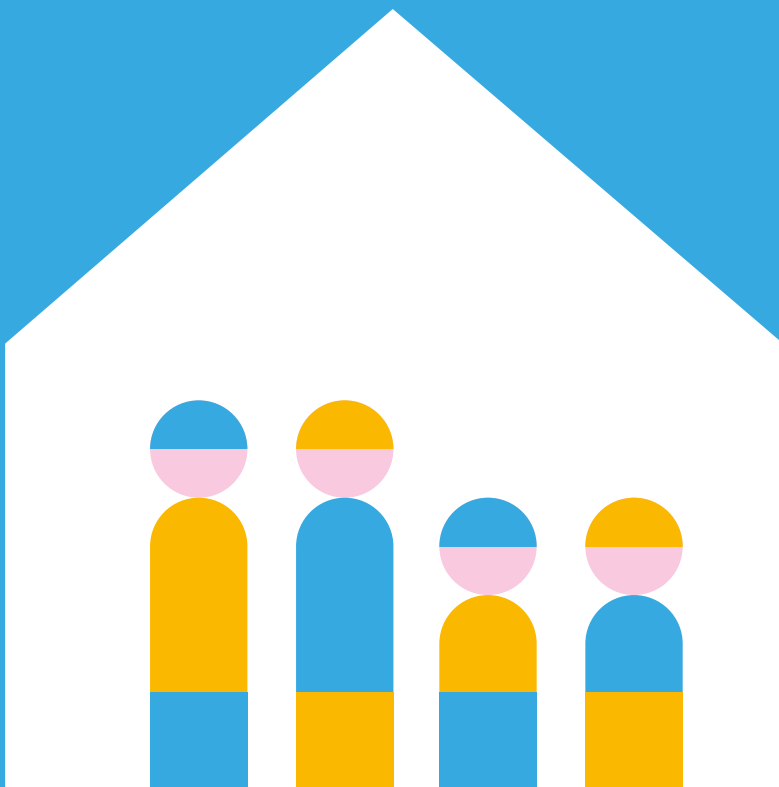
Coronavirus & Us

September 2020



**Comisiynydd
Plant Cymru**
Children's
Commissioner
for Wales

2020: A year that has turned our world upside down. We have experienced change on an unimaginable scale in every aspect of our lives.

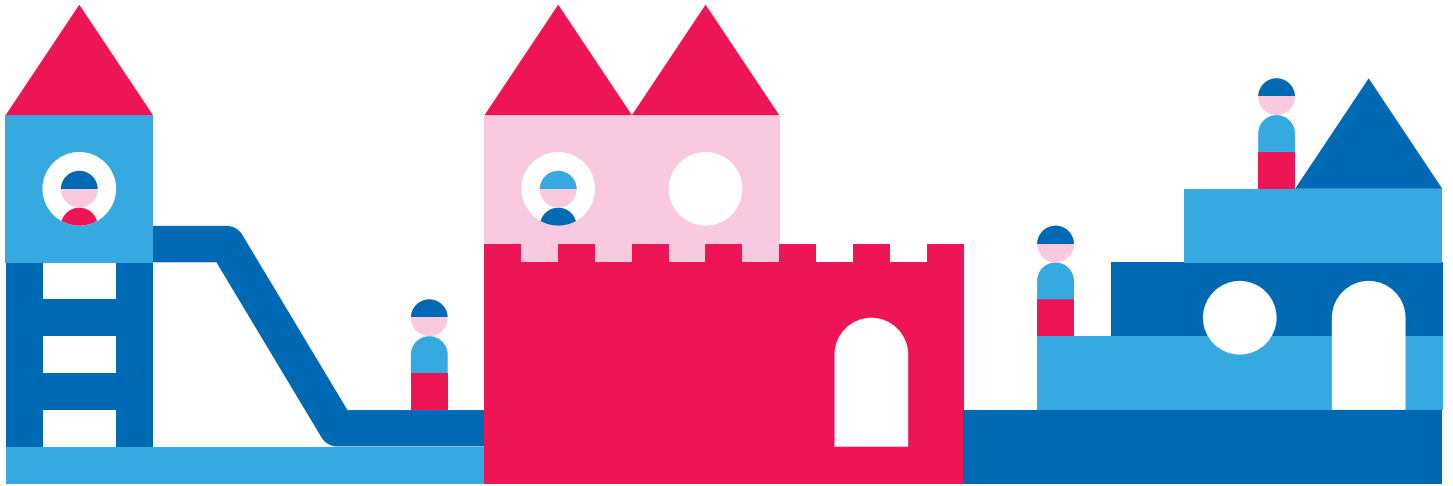


When it became apparent to us in mid-March that the lives of Wales' children and young people were to be affected on a large scale, we knew that this year was going to be one of the most important years in this office's 19-year history.

The pandemic is not over, but questions are already emerging about how well Governments and public services have protected and supported citizens of all ages during the crisis.

In this report we provide some analysis on children's rights in Wales during the pandemic so far. We also share how the Children's Commissioner and our team have responded to the pandemic.

We agreed our priorities and set to work on them the morning after the Prime Minister announced the lockdown. Here's a quick summary of them; there's a lot more detail in this report.



1

Make sure children, young people and their families have clear and reliable information and advice.

To do this we launched our bilingual Coronavirus Information Hub. [The Hub](#) had been visited over 45,000 times up to the end of August 2020, and organisations like schools, the government and Public Health Wales have recommended it as a reliable source of information and support.

2

Make sure that children and young people have a chance to express their views.

There is a lot of information in this report about how we did this. We kept in close contact from day one with places like young people's mental health units and secure units to check they had everything they needed and checked that schools and social services were keeping in touch with children who they were worried about. We checked that Government was monitoring all of this and acting on any gaps in service or concerns.

3

Make sure that children and young people are listened to.

In May we launched our '[Coronavirus and Me](#)' survey. We designed this survey with Welsh Government, Welsh Youth Parliament and Children in Wales to capture the views of 3-18 year olds in Wales and children and young people helped inform the questions that we asked. Nearly 24,000 children and young people took part and the results have helped shape some Welsh Government, local authority and school decisions, as well as our own decisions.

We gave children and young people the opportunity to put their questions to the Education Minister, and many of these were answered live on BBC One Wales. We heard and acted on young people's concerns about their education across the summer term and the exam results.

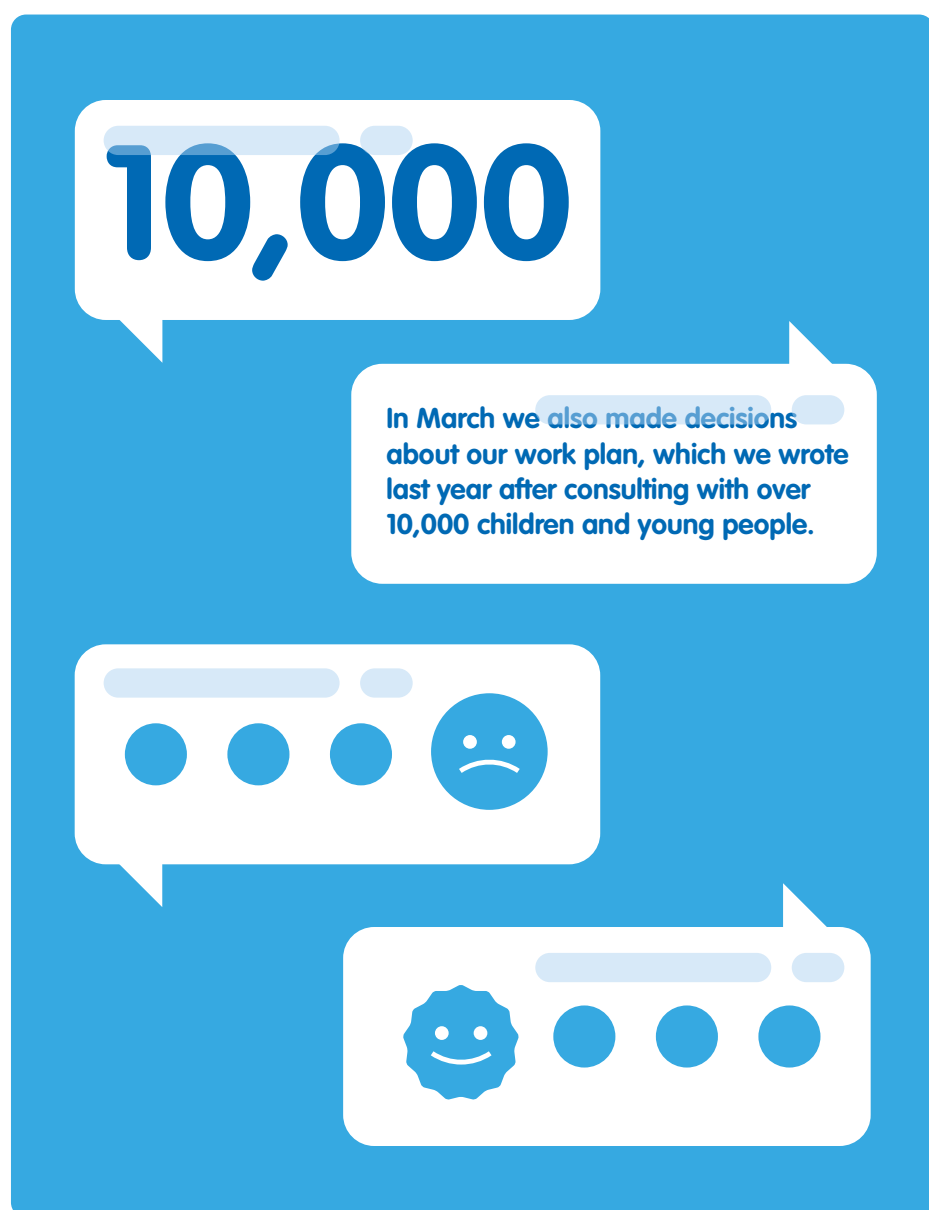
4

Help government and other services hear about and respond to children and young people's experiences.

We were in daily contact with different parts of Welsh Government to make sure children had their rights. We made sure that senior officials and Ministers heard about the problems families were facing, by providing them with weekly written updates and having regular meetings. The Commissioner updated the Deputy Minister, Julie Morgan, about children's views and experiences in weekly meetings. We made sure government got the results of our survey as they came through so that they could act on them straightaway.

Accountability to young people who we're here to champion and protect is something we pride ourselves in; when children and young people tell us about something and we've promised to do something on their behalf, an important part of the work is to tell them what we've done. The purpose of this report is to provide children, young people and the adults who support and care for them with the details of what we've done since Covid-19 turned our world upside down. [There is also an easy read version here](#) →.

It's also our job to hold the government to account on children's rights. In this report we tell you what we think the government did well on children's rights, what went less well and what we think should happen next.



What about the rest of our work?

In March we also made decisions about our work plan, which we wrote last year after consulting with over 10,000 children and young people.

As well as taking on additional work in response to the pandemic, we decided to continue with our projects – but to change when some of this work would happen to allow us to respond to the most urgent issues that children were facing.

We've continued to deliver our day-to-day work across our teams, despite the new and challenging environment: Our Investigation and Advice team has listened directly to children and families, our Participation Team has engaged with groups across Wales on video platforms, and our Policy team have responded swiftly to inform and advise on children's rights in new Government guidance on mental health, education, childcare, social care and transport during this period. Our Communications team has continued to ensure that we speak out on important issues, such as ensuring children could return to school in September.

Our whole staff team was keen to do their bit and stepped up to the challenge the virus posed. Several of us also volunteered in our communities and we gave staff some time off to do that.

The rest of this report gives an overview on how well Wales has done so far on children and young people's rights during the pandemic and what we have done about it.

Please note that this report gives an overview. We expect there to be a more detailed look at Welsh Government's records through the public inquiry that is expected to take place in the UK and/or Wales and also the independent review into the problems with exams results.

The United Nations priorities for children in the pandemic: How did Wales do and what did we do about it?

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child is a panel of independent experts that are responsible for monitoring how governments across the world protect children's rights. In April 2020, they advised governments across the world to focus on 11 key areas:

1

Consider the health, social, educational, economic and recreational impacts of the pandemic on the rights of the child.

2

Explore alternative and creative solutions for children to enjoy their rights to rest, leisure, recreation and cultural and artistic activities.

3

Ensure that online learning does not exacerbate existing inequalities or replace student-teacher interaction.

4

Activate immediate measures to ensure that children are fed nutritious food.

5

Maintain the provision of basic services for children including healthcare, water, sanitation and birth registration.

6

Define core child protection services as essential and ensure that they remain functioning and available, including home visits when necessary, and provide professional mental health services for children living in lockdown.

7

Protect children whose vulnerability is further increased by exceptional circumstances caused by the pandemic.

8

Release children in all forms of detention, whenever possible, and provide children who cannot be released with the means to maintain regular contact with their families.

9

Prevent the arrest or detention of children for violating State guidance and directives relating to Covid19.

10

Disseminate accurate information about Covid19 and how to prevent infection in languages and formats that are child-friendly and accessible to all children.

11

Provide opportunities for children's views to be heard and taken into account in decision making processes on the pandemic.



Here is a summary of what we know about children and young people in Wales's experiences of these priorities and how we worked to make sure the Welsh Government and other services delivered on these priorities.





Consider the health, social, educational, economic and recreational impacts of the pandemic on the rights of the child.

What happened in Wales?

- There were some decisions made that were clearly designed to protect the rights of children under the UNCRC. This included the extension of provision in lieu of free school meals across the Easter and Summer school holidays. No child should be going hungry during the holidays and we'd like to see provision for these children maintained all year round; the crisis has shown us what is possible when children's rights are prioritised in this way.
- Another positive example is something that didn't happen in Wales. Early in the crisis the UK Government introduced Statutory Instrument 445 which took away a wide range of safeguards in children's social care in England. To date, no such legal steps have been taken in Wales and children receiving social care have retained all of their existing rights to services and support.
- There were many times that the Government made decisions to protect some rights, primarily health and survival, that impacted on children's access to other rights such as education, seeing family and friends, and play. Although making such decisions can be justified in a crisis such as a pandemic, the government should also have been assessing the impact on all children's rights at the same time. The urgency to declare a public health crisis across the UK meant that some decisions were made very rapidly, such as the introduction of the overall lockdown measures. These decisions were heavily impacted by UK Government decisions, but decisions and Regulations made in Wales should have been subject to a Children's Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA). We know from the Welsh Government's evidence to the Senedd CYPE Committee that this was not done. Overt consideration of children's

rights at the earliest possible stage could have allowed a national plan for supporting education to develop for example, to mitigate some of the impact of the decision to close schools.

- In addition, the Welsh Government wrote to us in July 2020 to advise that work on regulations on statutory guidance for children educated at home and regulations to safeguard children at independent schools in Wales would no longer be progressed. The letter indicated that the decision “was reached following a cross Government exercise which evaluated current resources against workload in light of the unprecedented need to respond to Covid19 and the potential implications of the ending of the EU transitional period.” No CRIA was undertaken to inform this decision.

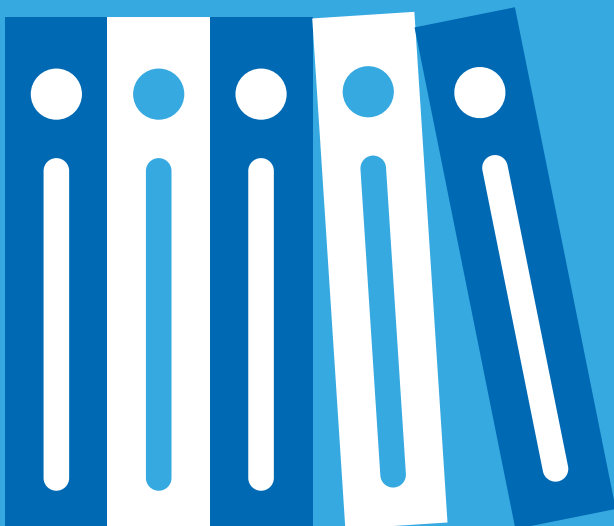
- There were also few children’s rights impact assessments published alongside decisions that were announced. When these documents were published they tended to justify why a decision had previously been made rather than weigh up the risks and balances to children’s rights. Many of the assessments were completed weeks after the original decisions were made so it was difficult to see how children’s rights had actually informed the decision that was made or the options that were considered.

- The Deputy Minister published a statement on 17th July 2020 to mark the anniversary of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child’s Concluding Observations or recommendations to the UK. The statement set out how children’s rights had been progressed in a number of ways across the year but it also said that the Government would not be publishing a report on their fulfilment of children’s rights under the Rights of Children and Young Persons

(Wales) Measure 2011 as required in 2020, and that they would be extending the usual time between reports from 2.5 to 5 years. This was potentially unlawful as the Children’s Commissioner and children and young people had not been consulted as required for a change like this to be made and Members of the Senedd had not had the opportunity to consider a revised Children’s Rights Scheme with this timescale in it. After questions and concerns expressed by us and a number of other organisations, the government reconsidered this and have now committed to publishing this report in the new year.

- The Senedd Children, Young People and Education Committee has also published the findings from their Children’s Rights inquiry during this period and the Government’s response to this is expected in September 2020.

We wrote formally to the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services (the Minister responsible for children’s rights) to raise our concerns about the low number and quality of children’s rights impact assessments being done during the pandemic.



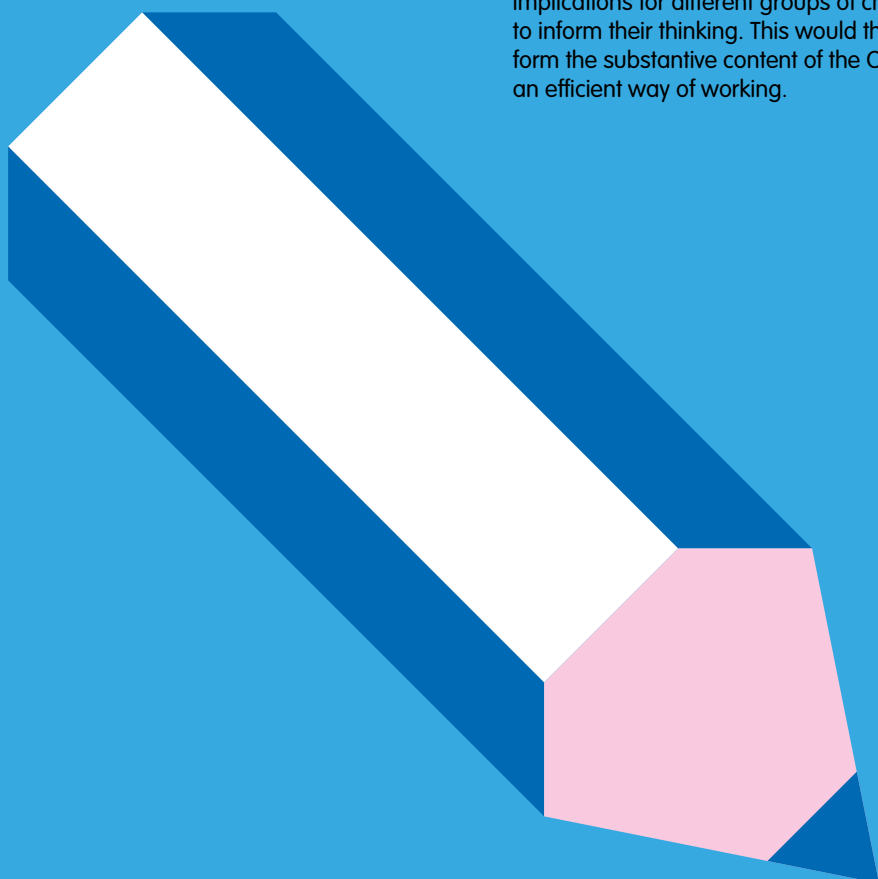
What did we do?

- Commissioner and team held frequent and weekly meetings with Ministers and officials to raise children's rights issues. At times these were daily.
- We wrote formally to the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services (the Minister responsible for children's rights) to raise our concerns about the low number and quality of children's rights impact assessments being done during the pandemic.
- As the pandemic continued we held meetings with officials where we helped them consider children's rights issues involved in new decisions and guidance. We also commented in writing on draft emergency guidance, often providing comments and improvements on documents within a few hours of receiving them. Through these processes we were able to change some decisions, ensure that different groups of children were considered, and block some potential changes at planning stage that we thought would be negative for children's rights. We've worked more closely alongside officials during this period than usual due to the speed of change but also to ensure that children's rights were being actively considered as part of their decision making processes.

We wrote to the Government to offer our assistance and expertise in considering children's rights earlier in the decision making process. We suggested that members of the Children's Rights Advisory Group including us could meet with officials to discuss proposals and talk through the implications for different groups of children, to inform their thinking. This would then form the substantive content of the CRIA in an efficient way of working.

Despite this, there were still some decisions and guidance that we didn't feel were strong enough to protect all children's rights. Examples of this include guidance about live-streaming which prevented children from having individual live-streaming support, and didn't consider how children with Additional Learning Needs could get the personalised support they need to learn.

- We fed in issues and potential children's rights breaches highlighted through our Investigations and Advice service to officials on a weekly basis to shape guidance and decisions as well as liaising with the relevant local services to make changes for children where guidance or advice had not been followed correctly.
- We gave written evidence on a host of things including exam delays, school reopening and online learning, mental health support and children living in poverty.
- Our strong arguments and interventions led to some plans, which we felt would have impacted negatively on children's rights to services, to be shelved.
- In response to requests from local authorities we also published our own [CRIA tool](#) for any public body to use in their work. Although not all public bodies are required to use CRIA, they can be a useful tool to prompt decision makers to stop and think about the implications of their plans and how to ensure they have the most positive impact possible on children and young people.





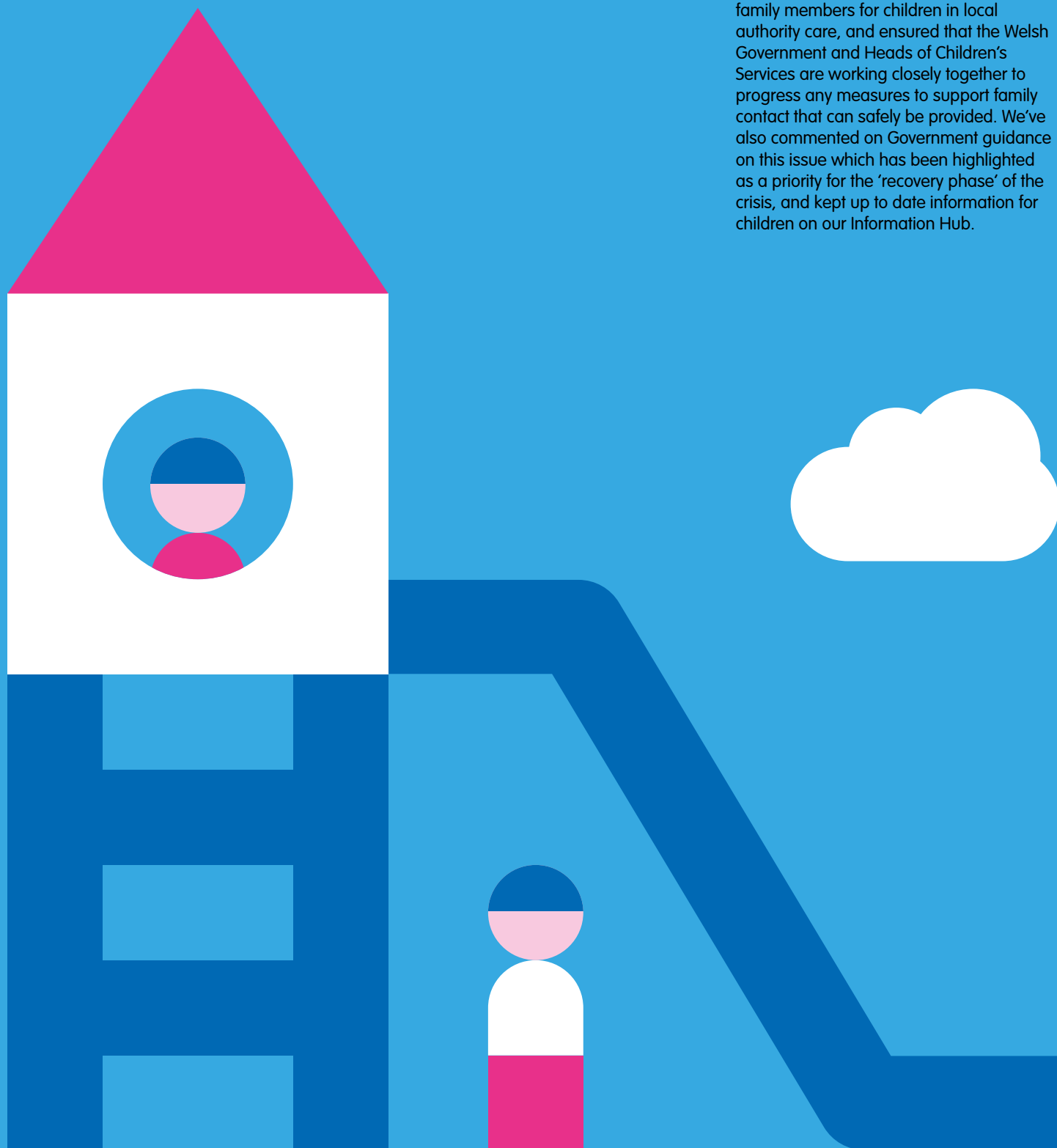
Explore alternative and creative solutions for children to enjoy their rights to rest, leisure, recreation and cultural and artistic activities.

What happened in Wales?

- Due to the lockdown children's opportunities for leisure and play activities were severely restricted due to the closure of libraries, play parks, leisure centres; and all sports clubs, youth and play services.
- There was some inconsistency about which parks were closed even within one local authority area, and some were slow to reopen after they were allowed to do so. Some library services also remained closed even when the guidance had changed; we know libraries are a key support for children especially those from low income families.
- Many youth services continued to provide support – mainly online and over the phone, but also in person.
- Many schools and other organisations like the Urdd, Play Wales and Natural Resources Wales used innovative ways to support play and exercise. For example the Urdd's digital eisteddfod - Eisteddfod T - ensured children could access their rights to play and leisure and also their rights to take part in activities in their own language.

What did we do?

- Made lots of videos for children and parents/carers with ideas on how to relax and play in the home/garden at no cost with things found around the home
- Promoted ideas and resources from other organisations like Play Wales and mental health organisations.
- Wrote to the First Minister on 6th July 2020 to express concern that play areas in parks were not being opened as quickly as services for adults like pubs. Play parks were included in the next set of relaxations of restrictions by the First Minister.
- We've raised issues around contact with family members for children in local authority care, and ensured that the Welsh Government and Heads of Children's Services are working closely together to progress any measures to support family contact that can safely be provided. We've also commented on Government guidance on this issue which has been highlighted as a priority for the 'recovery phase' of the crisis, and kept up to date information for children on our Information Hub.





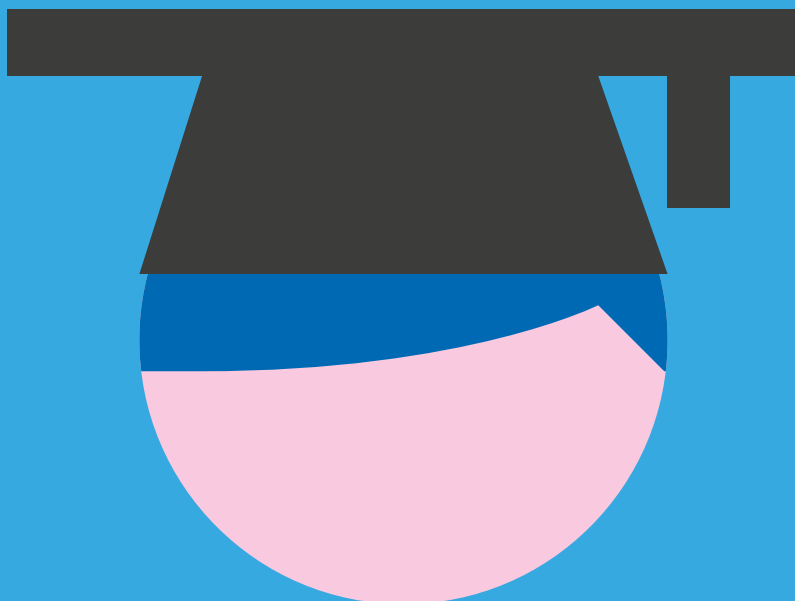
Ensure that online learning does not exacerbate existing inequalities or replace student-teacher interaction.

What happened in Wales?

- The Government acted to make money available to local authorities to distribute digital devices and ensure that families had access to broadband. Thousands of devices were given out but throughout the pandemic we heard about individual children who did not have access to online learning or who had very limited access as parents and older siblings needed laptops, phones or tablets most of the time.
- Through our survey we found that almost every child and young person had some contact with their school or college after buildings closed to most pupils
- Lots of children and young people found it difficult to understand the work sent to them and 12-18 year olds responding to our Coronavirus and Me survey were reporting particular worries: only 11% of this age group said that they did not feel worried about their education and 54% were worried about falling behind.
- The Government published guidance to support online learning. We asked them to set minimum expectations of their school or college that every learner should have, but they did not do this.

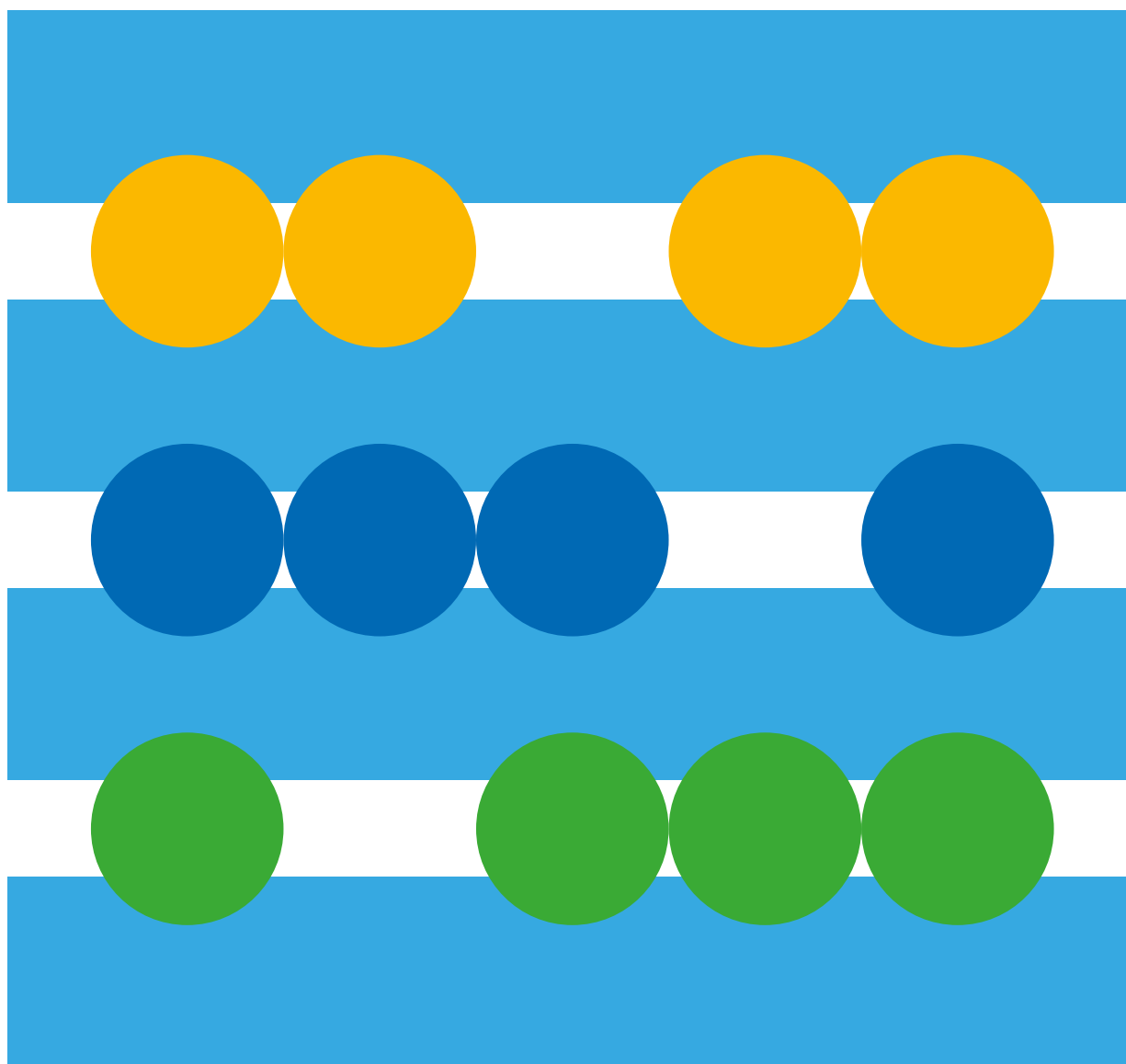
- Support was very varied and seemed to depend on the school or on individual teachers. Clear expectations were not set at a national level and sometimes even children and young people in the same school had very different experiences. These ranged from daily 'live' online lessons in some schools, to other children and parents reporting that they received one weekly email with a list of work and links. Some children and families told us they received no feedback on learning or on home tasks. Where schools did not offer 'live' online teaching many provided some pre-recorded videos of teachers explaining school work or setting home learning tasks. Many schools and colleges provided some individual support to learners that they knew needed extra help – through phone calls, hard copy resources and home visits.
- External exams were cancelled. Many young people were left feeling uncertain about how their results would be calculated. The Government worked with its qualifications and examinations agencies to put in place a system that they hoped would provide fair and stable results for young people based on centre assessments, other data about individual achievements, and data on school or college results histories. As is widely documented this process led to many individuals receiving results very different from what they were predicted to receive, and a widespread feeling of injustice. On Monday 17 August, the Education Minister made the decision to award students with their centre-assessed grades. The process is now subject to an independent review.

12-18 year olds responding to our Coronavirus and Me survey were reporting particular worries: only 11% of this age group said that they did not feel worried about their education and 54% were worried about falling behind.



What did we do?

- Listened to children's experiences of education through our large-scale survey and Investigation and Advice service.
- We raised concerns with local authorities and Government about lack of access to IT equipment and access to broadband for some pupils.
- We also raised concerns with Welsh Government that we had heard from young people. This included concerns about the impact of the changes to education on those receiving education other than at school (EOTAS), such as lack of access to online learning site Hwb, and also worries about completing the Welsh Baccalaureate.
- Following the survey results, the Commissioner met with the all-Wales Directors of Education group, education consortia and most teaching unions to express concerns about inconsistencies in the blended learning offers.
- We expressed our concerns about potential injustices and difficulties with the exams system from May onwards, as is documented [here](#). After hearing from scores of young people and schools in the days after the results, the Commissioner concluded that the fairest way forward for this year's results would be to revert to centre assessed grades and urged the Government to make this decision on UK and Welsh television news. Following the government's decision to revert to centre assessed grades, we continued to call for a fairer appeals system, as we had done before results day. We also called for early planning to avoid similar issues in 2020-21 academic year and are contributing to the independent review of the exams results 2020.
- Responded to the concerns of children and young people missing out on their education by publicly calling on Government to make sure that children could return to full time education as soon as it was safe to do so.

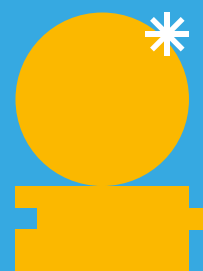


4

Activate immediate measures to ensure that children are fed nutritious food.

What happened in Wales?

- Access to free school meals is a major support to many families in term time. We were pleased that the Welsh Government and local authorities worked to maintain provision of food or payments for food for eligible families in term times and during school holidays. The rate set for Wales was the highest in the UK, as it included a £1 per day allowance for breakfasts too. Some local authorities supplemented the free school meal payments with food parcels for more vulnerable families.



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What did we do?

- We reviewed the provision in every local authority in Wales according to the information on their websites. At first there was a range of approaches and differing amounts being provided despite all local authorities having the same level of provision per child in funding and we alerted the Government to this.
- We raised several cases with local authorities and the Government where families couldn't get to the school to collect free lunches or where they were unhappy with the quality or quantity of these. We urged government to encourage local authorities to move to cash transfers in lieu of free school meals as soon as possible as the most dignified way to provide this support, removing the potential stigma of collecting food or using vouchers in shops. This also ensured that children in asylum seeking families were able to receive this provision too.



Maintain the provision of basic services for children including healthcare, water, sanitation and birth registration.

What happened in Wales?

- Healthcare services remained available to children, although with altered arrangements. There were considerable concerns that fewer children were being brought to Accident and Emergency departments, GPs and hospital specialists than usual.
- Hospitals in Wales ensured that children could have a parent or carer with them if they needed to stay overnight.
- According to data provided to us by Public Health Wales, immunisation rates for children appear to have recovered from an initial dip and remained relatively stable during the pandemic.
- Birth registrations were temporarily suspended in Wales for a number of months as in the rest of the UK and are now in the process of catching up with the backlog.



Hospitals in Wales ensured that children could have a parent or carer with them if they needed to stay overnight.

What did we do?

- We joined media campaigns by Public Health Wales and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) to encourage parents to continue accessing all health services and to continue immunising their children during lockdown
- We met regularly with senior officials in the NHS, health boards and the Government to review data on provision of mental health services and to share concerns that had been raised with our office
- We put clear information about health issues on our Information Hub to inform and reassure families.
- We also raised issues with Welsh Government about the provision of childcare and support for families during the lockdown period.





Define core child protection services as essential and ensure that they remain functioning and available, including home visits when necessary, and provide professional mental health services for children living in lockdown.

What happened in Wales?

- Children's social care services, including child protection services, have remained open throughout the pandemic, although much work has been conducted remotely. No regulatory changes have been made to date to change children's rights to access services, except for minor changes to adoption and foster carer assessment processes. Child protection visits have continued in person where assessed as necessary, with virtual visits taking place for all other children to ensure local authorities kept in touch.
- Many disabled children and those with complex needs experienced a drop in support due to schools and residential respite services being reduced or closed.
- Mental health services remained open, with an altered delivery model that was mainly by telephone or video calls. Direct referral mechanisms were put into place that bypassed the need for GPs to make referrals. A 24-hour mental health [helpline](#) that is also available to children, funded by the Welsh Government, was established.

Nonetheless, demand was low in the early weeks of the pandemic and some families contacted us with concerns about access to mental health services. Results from our survey of young people showed less than half of 12-18 year olds (47%) reported that they would feel confident in seeking mental health support from a mental health team in their area. Even fewer (39%) were confident to access counselling services offered through their school. Only 52% of these respondents felt confident to go to their own doctor for mental health support.

- The Welsh Government commissioned a [literature review](#) on the impact of 'mass disruption' on children's mental health and wellbeing, which was published in September. It concluded that UK research suggests the impact of the pandemic has adversely affected the mental health of children and young people, and that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds appear to be at greater risk of falling behind in their education. International research has found high rates of depressive and anxiety symptoms amongst school-age children confined to their homes.

We kept in regular contact with mental health units across Wales and raised issues with relevant health boards and the Government. We also met with some young people in those units (virtually) and we were able to share some of their worries with staff, who responded immediately to this information.



What did we do?

- We monitored all-Wales systems of child protection and mental health support that were rapidly put in place at the start of the pandemic by local authorities and health boards. We did this through active membership of the government's vulnerable children's advisory group that shared data and information, and through regular meetings with Ministers, officials and local authority Directors of Education and Social Services.
- Meetings with the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services increased to weekly.
- We scrutinised and suggested alterations to Government guidance as it was developed during this period and developed child friendly versions for our Information Hub.

- We ensured no relaxation of the statutory requirements in relation to children's social care, safeguarding and special education needs were introduced in Wales. This involved, on two occasions, presenting detailed objections to some suggested changes that concerned us but have not been, to date, enacted.
- We supported and promoted the Welsh Government's #MakeTheCallWales campaign, reminding people that social services were still operating across Wales.
- We kept in regular contact with mental health units across Wales and raised issues with relevant health boards and the Government. We also met with some young people in those units and we were able to share some of their worries with staff, who responded immediately to this information.
- We published information about how children could still access Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) on our Information Hub and wrote to the Chairs and Chief Executives of every health board in Wales to request that they improved the information available to young people about such services. This was particularly important during the crisis when schools and GPs were less available

to advise families. We had positive responses from three of the seven health boards, who highlighted improvements that they had made, and areas they would review. However, we remain concerned that information about who to directly contact for mental health support is still not as accessible as it should be through the health boards' websites and social media. Although we were pleased to see two of the health boards provide contact numbers for families which put them in touch with the teams supporting their child, the majority of health boards provide no direct contact for mental health professionals.

- We published a report about the importance of a '[No Wrong Door](#)' approach to mental health services in Wales, the recommendations of which the Government have promised to take forward. We have also presented these findings to a number of groups including representatives of all the Regional Partnership Boards in Wales, and senior officials in Welsh Government.





Protect children whose vulnerability is further increased by exceptional circumstances caused by the pandemic.

What happened in Wales?

- Local authorities worked with Welsh Government to rapidly put in place a monitoring and support mechanism for children who are not under the care of social care services, but who receive support from their nursery, school, college or community group. These children may face issues at home such as poverty, family conflict, substance misuse and may act as young carers to others. They were likely to be made more vulnerable by the pandemic due to their usual support being unavailable. Schools and colleges used their knowledge of their pupils' home circumstances to put in place systems to keep in touch and provide support.
- The government initiated an internal cross-government group to co-ordinate responses across departments and set up a Vulnerable Children Advisory Group made up of statutory and voluntary agencies to share data and information.
- The success of these measures are largely unknown until the medium and longer-term impact can be evaluated through data such as social care and mental health referral rates, and surveys of children's well-being.

What did we do?

- Shielding letters caused a lot of concern during the early weeks of lockdown. We raised these concerns with government and issues were resolved, including the offer of an ID card for young carers.
- Through our regular engagement with officials, we have repeatedly sought assurances and data on how local authorities and schools have kept in touch with children and young people known to need additional care or support.
- We supported the media campaign of the All Wales Heads of Children's Services to encourage anyone with concerns about a child to make contact with services who were still open and able to support them.
- We've also urged the Government to make progress on work to create new provision of safe accommodation for children with complex emotional or behavioural needs. The Government review of provision concluded in March 2020 and placement sufficiency for vulnerable children and young people remains an ongoing concern in Wales; this needs to be urgently addressed. The Government has asked local authorities to put forward bids for funding to create new provision; we want this to be progressed as soon as possible.





Release children in all forms of detention, whenever possible, and provide children who cannot be released with the means to maintain regular contact with their families.

What happened in Wales?

- On average, fewer than 30 young people from Wales under the age of 18 are in custody but they are amongst our most vulnerable young people, with high levels of learning difficulties, mental health problems and experience of childhood trauma.
- No young people under the age of 18 were released early in the pandemic, despite the UK Government suggesting it may do so.
- Young people living in detention initially experienced a serious reduction in their access to rights such as education, time to relax and socialise outside of their rooms and exercise. They were initially spending 23.5 hours a day locked in their rooms with only 15 minutes for a shower and 15 minutes for exercise. It should be noted that this was not mirrored in Hillside secure children's home.
- Following interventions by the Children's Commissioners in Wales and England and other groups, programmes for young people were adjusted. This was done most significantly in Parc YOI, which houses the largest group of Welsh boys in custody, with increases in education and time out of rooms put into place in small 'family' groups by 31st March. Boys in Parc experienced a reduction in incidents of violence within these small groups, which may be a positive lesson to learn from this period. They were given the opportunity to share their views with the Youth Custody Service and others, including us.
- Some Welsh young people in custody are placed in England, where daily programmes remained very restricted until at least September. We have received assurances from the Head of the Youth Custody Service that this is being reviewed and changed as soon as possible.

What did we do?

- We've kept in regular contact with secure units in Wales (HMP Parc YOI and Hillside Secure Children's Home) to make sure young people in detention had access to their rights, including contact with families and education. In the early stages of the pandemic we assisted Hillside in obtaining Covid-19 tests for young people.
- Early during lockdown, we were concerned about some of the strict measures being used in some secure units. We raised these concerns in a letter to the UK Government's Secretary of State for Justice and with the Welsh Government's Deputy First Minister. We repeated this when further regulatory changes were made that concerned us. Changes were quickly put into place at Parc YOI but have been much slower in many English secure settings.
- As a result of these contacts we are now receiving weekly updates and data from the Youth Custody Service on how secure units are responding to the pandemic.





Prevent the arrest or detention of children for violating State guidance and directives relating to Covid-19.

What happened in Wales?

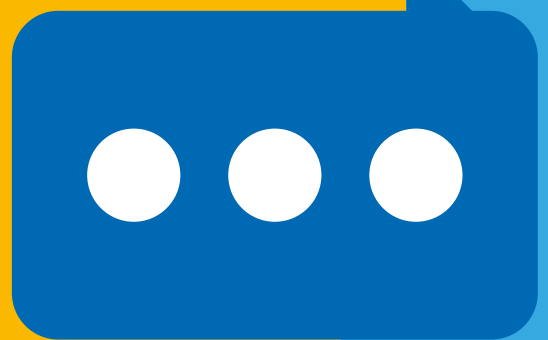
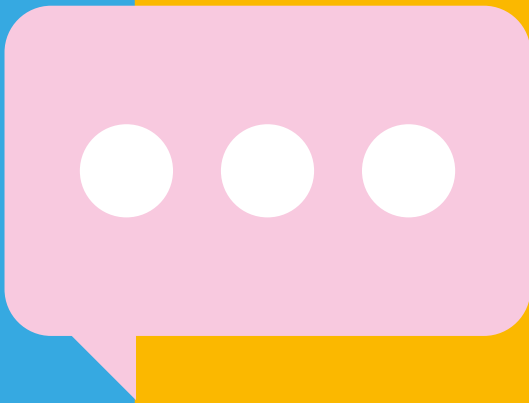
- The enforcement aspect of the Coronavirus Act 2020 did not allow for the issuing of fixed penalty notices to, or prosecution, of children for breaches of the regulations. However, following discussion with our office, research by the four Welsh Police Forces has identified that a very small number of children were either incorrectly reported for consideration of proceedings, or issued with a fixed penalty notice. In each case internal checks ensured at the time that no subsequent process or sanction was progressed.
- At the time of publication of this report the Welsh Government has not made use of the power to detain children (or adults) for health reasons under the Coronavirus Act 2020.



We wrote to all police forces in Wales on 1 April to ask for reassurance that children under 18 found in breach of lockdown measures would have their welfare checked.

What did we do?

- We wrote to all police forces in Wales on 1st April to ask for reassurance that children under 18 found in breach of lockdown measures would have their welfare checked rather than simply ordered to go home in case they were escaping difficult circumstances. This assurance was received in early May.
- We have kept in touch with the police and they have provided data on changes to child abuse, child trafficking, children missing and children being arrested during the pandemic.
- We checked the laws and reassured parents who were concerned about children being detained for health reasons.





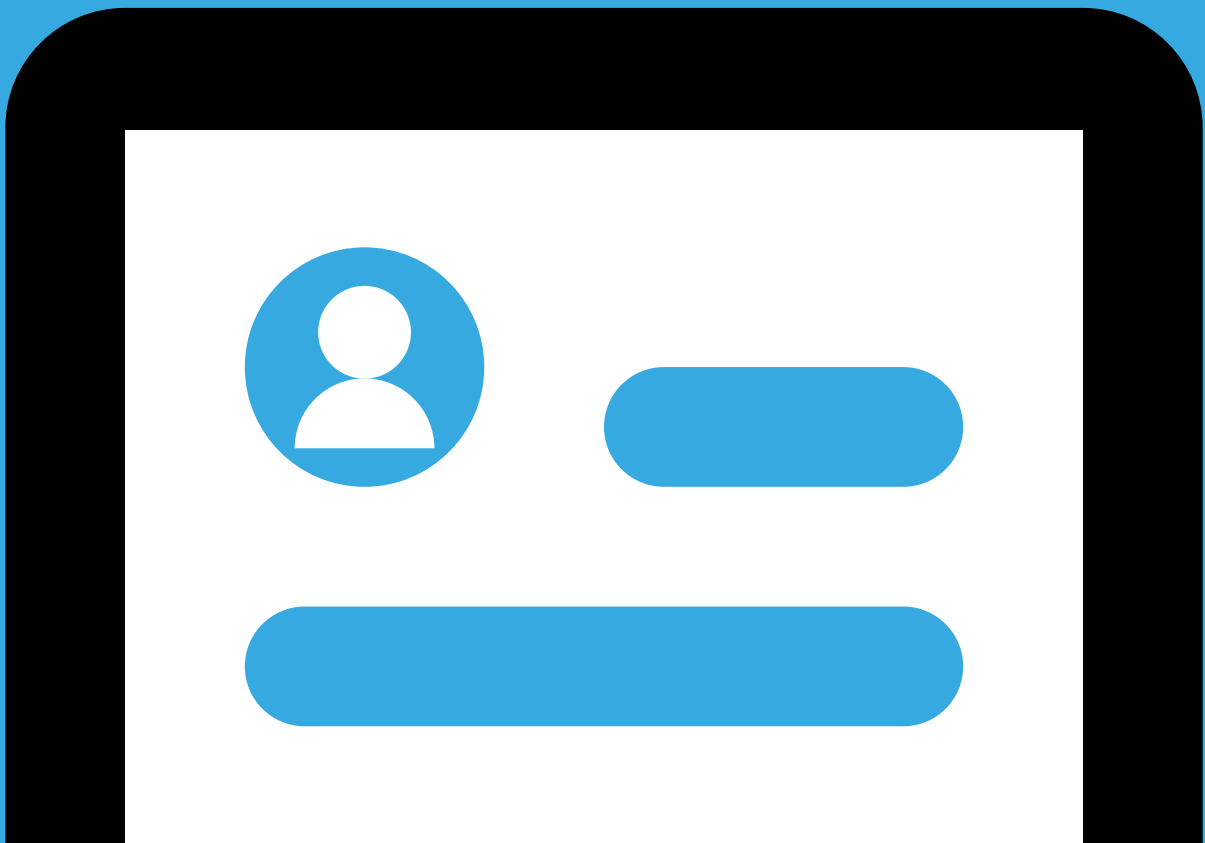
Disseminate accurate information about Covid-19 and how to prevent infection in languages and formats that are child-friendly and accessible to all children.

What happened in Wales?

- The Welsh Government made some efforts to communicate directly with children. A number of Ministers made videos and the Education Minister did two Q&A sessions with children: one on social media on the day schools closed, and one later in lockdown on national television which we helped facilitate.
- In our view, some information could have been clearer and more accessible to children and young people. This includes information about exams and how young people could appeal or complain about their results and information about staying safe on public transport.

What did we do?

- Created an Information Hub for children and their families, updated daily at the start of lockdown with relevant, accessible information.
- Took part in the accessible communications working group hosted by Welsh Government, to advise on how best to communicate with children and young people in Wales.
- Created our own child friendly versions of Government guidance to give children clear information on what they could expect from public services.
- Used our survey to find out how children were accessing information about Covid-19 so that we could ensure that Government and others reach children with information in the ways that they want to receive it.
- Created an information sheet about face coverings when a decision was taken by Welsh Government to make them compulsory in some education settings.





Provide opportunities for children's views to be heard and taken into account in decision making processes on the pandemic.

What happened in Wales?

- The Government was a partner in the 'Coronavirus and Me' survey and have stated that a number of decisions they have since made have been influenced by the survey. This includes the decision to re-open schools before the summer and to provide extra funds for education catch-up and support in the autumn term.
- The First Minister took part in a scrutiny session with the Youth Parliament during the pandemic.
- However, the majority of policy decisions were taken very quickly and children and young people were not given the opportunity to be consulted on them.



We led the work on 'Coronavirus and Me', where nearly 24,000 children and young people shared their views

What did we do?

- We led the work on '[Coronavirus and Me](#)', where nearly 24,000 children and young people shared their views, which have helped shape decisions at a local and national level. Our work included hosting the survey, conducting all analysis and writing the resulting publications. We funded all survey costs from savings made from cancellation of some of our activities and events due to Covid-19 restrictions. We will be following up with Government and local authorities to find out how the survey information has been used to inform decision making.
- We assisted the Welsh Government to host a [live press conference](#) with questions from children and young people for the Minister for Education
- We [supported](#) young people from Wales to ask questions to scientists who contribute to SAGE, the scientific advisory group who advise the governments across the UK.



And about us.

At the same time as schools closed, we also closed our office in Swansea. Some of us are carers, many of us are parents, some of us have been shielding but our work continued from our homes. Here's what we're proud of:

- We've managed to keep our independent investigation and advice service open every day
- Our bilingual phone line has remained open every day
- We've all kept working on our day-to-day work, our project work and new pieces of work emerging as a result of the crisis
- We've kept in touch via virtual 'Fika' every week (a brief coffee and a catch up every Monday morning) with some of these sessions being 'Ffica Cymraeg' to help staff maintain Welsh language skills.
- We've kept held virtual weekly and monthly meetings of our management team
- We've held virtual meetings of our Advisory Panels and Audit and Risk Assurance Committee
- We've engaged with some children and young people through live-streaming and we're planning how to increase our live engagement work throughout the Autumn term
- We've managed to facilitate successful internal and external audit processes – all remotely
- Our wellbeing warriors have checked in with all staff, making sure morale and wellbeing of staff are protected.

Next for us

As we write this, many aspects of our lives are more similar to how they were before March, with schools returning, shops opening, bubbles of families and friends forming. Yet, we remain in a pandemic. Our focus on protecting children's rights and welfare remains a priority but we're also starting to look at lessons to learn – both positive and areas for improvement. Over the next two months, here's what we'll be doing:

1.

Continued to hold government and others to account, listen to children and young people and those who care for them and speak out where necessary.

2.

Publish a series of briefing papers, looking in more detail about how the pandemic has affected certain groups of young people. These briefing papers will highlight what needs to happen to protect children and young people from further negative impacts resulting from the pandemic.

3.

Use our legal powers to review how the Government has reached some decisions during the pandemic. These are the decisions not to take forward key planned pieces of work: guidance on protecting children's rights when they are educated at home and in independent schools.

And in the longer term:

As the Commissioner stated in a [blog](#) in May, the pandemic has reinforced to everyone that our society was already a challenge for many children and young people. Some examples that have hit the headlines include how little money people on Universal Credit have to live on each week and that children who get free school meals might go hungry in the holidays. In addition it has shown that some children and young people don't have access to the digital technology they need to do modern school work, and schools' everyday role in supporting their pupils. It has highlighted the stress of school and everyday life for some young people who found being at home easier and how much some children enjoy having their parents around more when they don't have to commute to work. It has also raised questions on how exam-oriented our education system can be.

The Commissioner and her team will urge government and public services to consider the lessons to be learned from this period and ensure that these valuable insights are not lost as priorities are set and services delivered over the next months and years.



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