

Senedd Cymru  
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

Ymchwiliad i effaith argyfwng Covid-19 ar  
blant a phobl ifanc yng Nghymru

COV 104  
Ymateb gan: Lleisiau Bach Little Voices

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Welsh Parliament  
Children, Young People and Education Committee

Inquiry into the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on  
children and young people in Wales

COV 104  
Response from: Lleisiau Bach Little Voices

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1. Lleisiau Bach is hosted at Swansea University by the Hillary Rodham Clinton School of Law and the Morgan Academy and at Bangor University by the School of Education and Human Development. It is associated with the work of the Observatory on Human Rights of Children which has separately submitted a response in this inquiry, emphasising the need for effective child rights impact assessment.
2. Committee Members may recall engaging with children involved in some of the Lleisiau Bach projects in the course of the Committee's inquiry into the impact of the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011.
3. The National Lottery Community Fund which supports the Lleisiau Bach Team has agreed to extend our current programme by 3 months to 30 September 2020 so we can turn our experience and resources to support Coronavirus action for children at home and in schools or community settings.
4. There are many ways in which the pandemic and associated restrictions are affecting children's lives and life chances. Almost every aspect of implementation of the requirements of the UNCRC and Optional Protocols to which Welsh Government is required to have due regard is engaged in this situation. We endorse the plea made by others including the Observatory and the UNCRC Monitoring Group for consistent and effective child rights impact assessment as a systematic part of the process of decision-making, even in emergency conditions.
5. As part of due regard to the requirements of the UNCRC, we urge that careful attention be given to what actions adults will take to ensure children's voices are heard in such decision-making processes that have a huge impact on their everyday lives. The return of children to school settings offers both challenges and opportunities in this regard.
6. Well-being is a fundamental factor in the success of the proposed school return. During these times, children need to be empowered to feel they have a sense of belonging to the situation. Our experiences of empowering children as researchers in schools across Wales in the last 10 years has

shown that children want, and can successfully co create, manage and act on solutions to child-initiated issues/problems.

7. With so many new rules and actions aimed at virus control inevitably being 'done to' not 'done with' the children, children may experience reduced opportunities to contribute to decisions being made that directly affect them in their school environment. It is important to acknowledge children's own understanding of their 'wellbeing' and for schools to respond in ways that respect children's human rights as set out in the UNCRC. This raises questions about how staff and other adults will prioritise listening to the pupils and act in practice on children's wants and needs.
8. We have written to the Cabinet Secretary for Education following her announcement on 3 June about the opportunity for children to 'check in, catch up and prepare' in schools from June 29 and to offer practical support at this crucial stage, based on a decade of experience in delivering Llaisiau Bach projects. These projects, as Committee Members may be aware, empower children from age 7 - 18 as researchers and change agents within the framework of the UNCRC.
9. The Cabinet Secretary identified three priorities informing Welsh Government thinking about return to school: protection from disease, continuity of learning and mental health. We have made the following suggestions to support action on these priorities and would like also to draw the Committee's attention to these suggestions.
  - Protection from disease: The necessary restrictions on children's freedom of movement inevitably deprives children of choice: as the Cabinet Secretary said, they will 'only be with some of their friends', working in small and socially distanced groups. Consistent with Articles 12 - 16 UNCRC, effort should be made to counterbalance these restrictions by giving children such choice and control as is consistent with their and others' safety.

The proposed class size for return to school is ideal for use of the Children as Researchers method, in which typically up to 8 children form a team to research issues that are important to them, within the broad canvas of the UNCRC. The method gives children choice which we have seen repeatedly exercised to research and take forward recommendations on matters that match readily both to curriculum outcomes and societal need: as diverse as changes to their school environment, plastics pollution, loneliness in older people, disabled access in the community, maintaining mental health, road safety and many aspects of health and well-being.

The 'check in, catch up and prepare' period presents an opportunity to restore to children access to their basic civil and political rights through undertaking a project. The Llaisiau Bach Team can advise on how this

can be done by school staff working together with parents and carers through a mix of face to face, online, school and home-based activity.

- Learning: During enforced absence from school, children will have had widely differing experiences depending on their family, social and economic circumstances, ranging from assiduously supported and well-informed home-schooling to the opposite extreme of no learning support and increased exposure to domestic stress and deprivation. This carries additional disempowerment of those children who are least advantaged. Our experience of conducting projects with children living with additional barriers to participation, including looked after children, disabled children and children excluded from mainstream school, suggests that engaging in a project can help to increase such children's skills, confidence and sense of being taken seriously.
- Mental health: Fear, loneliness and loss are part of the social impact of the Coronavirus and the necessary restrictions. Children are not shielded from media headlines, scare stories and misinformation, as we have seen in several of our projects where children wanted to understand better issues like terrorism, kidnapping, climate change or simply why what's in the news is in the news. Some have chosen to explore issues experienced by their own peers, including diabetes, mental health, wheelchair access and displacement.

Giving children choice as to what to investigate, supporting them to make their own case for change and enabling them to engage meaningfully with relevant decision-makers and influencers is a way not only of restoring access to their rights but also of bringing about change that is good for them and their communities and, importantly, building a sense of personal possibility and empowerment which is a crucial part of good mental health.

10. We are working swiftly to make publicly available resources and guidance for running a Lleisiau Bach project in the changed circumstances post-lockdown. We will be reaching out to education authorities and consortia and to some school to offer distanced mentoring support. If schools wish to integrate a project in their activities during the proposed 4-week pre-summer vacation period, we will support so far as remaining resource allows. We will review and reflect on take-up and experience and will be pleased to report further on results to the Committee should that be helpful.