

A Listening Day, November 2020



Comisiynydd
Plant Cymru
Children's
Commissioner
for Wales

Throughout this pandemic our key priorities have been:

1. We ensure the least disruption possible to the lives of children and young people in Wales whilst protecting their right to good health.
2. That children's rights be considered as a whole and must play a central role in decision making by governments at all levels, including public health officials.
3. That guidance and procedures relating to children and young people are constantly evaluated and evolved based on the views of children and young people.

Driving all our work has been the views and experiences of children and young people, with whom we directly engage, and their families, who make contact via our independent advice and support service.

Background

When the Welsh Government announced in October that learners attending years 9 — 13 of secondary schools and students at further education establishments would have to learn at home for an additional week after October half term, our calls on the Welsh Government were as follows:

- Whilst accepting that Government has to make some very difficult decisions at pace, there must as part of this be proper and proactive consideration given to children's rights in making such decisions.
- The assessment on the impact of decisions on children's rights must not solely centre around their right to health but others too, including broader health and wellbeing rights, their right to education, to social and cultural activities, to family life, to clear and accurate information and to be involved in and understand decisions being taken.
- Potential negative impacts such as disruption to education should be mitigated at a national level, so that there isn't a postcode lottery across Wales for children's access to education and other key support services.

In his response to this, the First Minister confirmed, amongst other things, that:

"...children's rights have been at the forefront of our thinking, informed by a Children's Rights Impact Assessment.... In designing the firebreak, we tried to keep disruption to education to a minimum, while knowing that, to have maximum impact, the cumulative impact of the restrictions had to be as deep as possible."

Our listening day: 13th November 2020

We were keen to hear directly from young people about the impact of the firebreak restrictions on them, in order to inform our advice to Welsh Government for any future measures. We decided to host a listening day. The purpose was to provide a safe space for learners from years 9 to 13 to share with us their experience of staying home for another week of learning and about other areas of life during the firebreak, including keeping in touch with friends and family, mental health support, and activities like sport. Here are the questions that guided our discussions:

1. What were the arrangements in school/college for your learning?
 - a. Type of lessons: live or pre-recorded lessons, google classroom, email instructions.
 - b. Arrangements for digital access — do you know if everyone had laptops/tablets?
2. How was the learning for you?
 - a. Different or similar to experiences last term?
 - b. Motivation throughout the week?
 - c. Engagement with and feedback from teachers?

3. Did you understand the firebreak rules? How did you find out about them? How are you experiencing the rules now that the firebreak is over?
4. How has the term been so far in your school/college? Have you had to self-isolate as a class/year group? How are the Covid rules affecting things? Any comments on exams arrangements?
5. How did the firebreak affect other areas of your life? (prompt with: keeping in touch with friends and family, clubs and sports).
6. Do you have any comments on support and information for young people at the moment?
 - a. Do you feel that you and your friends know how to get help with things like mental health and advice?
7. What is your advice for government if they decide to do another firebreak?

We heard from 55 young people who study in north-west, north-east, south-west and south-east Wales and sessions were held in their preferred language. These sessions were attended by school pupils (two Welsh medium and one English medium school), college students, young people with caring responsibilities, care experienced young people, members of four youth forums. We also held a session with our youth advisory panel, including young people who attend over 15 different schools and colleges in Wales, and a home educated young person. The Commissioner attended all of the meetings, along with members of her team.

Note: Although most of the sessions were completed in one day, a couple of them were held later in the week to accommodate school and group timetables.

What we heard during our listening day

The following anonymised summary of experiences provides an immediate snapshot of young people's experiences of education post October firebreak.

Experiences of education offer

What worked

- Online offering by schools have improved significantly since before the summer holidays. This was the unanimous verdict of every young person who took part.
 - o Examples included: teachers sharing PowerPoints and videos in advance of lesson; many lessons were delivered live, during first lockdown some pupils felt they weren't encouraged to work — this time was different; followed usual school timetable;
- Schools made suitable adjustments for some, including young carers
 - o Examples included: lessons being recorded to enable pupils to go back and listen at more convenient time
- Continual improvement of offer by some schools
 - o Examples included: pupils being invited to complete an online survey to feedback on online learning during firebreak
- Freedom of being able to work at own pace
- Being able to use other devices such as Xbox to access lessons
- Schools checking that every pupil had an electronic device before half-term
- Swift feedback from teachers to work submitted online

What didn't work

- Workload overwhelming
 - o Examples included: young people staying up late to complete workload
- No consistency between work being offered for different subjects
 - o Examples included: 'our history teacher set twice as much work as our other subjects'.
- Some schools haven't evaluated online learning offer
- Some teachers didn't understand how to use the technology properly
 - o Examples included: teacher 20 minutes late for lesson; not responding to messages asking for support / assistance
- Some parents lacking skills to help
 - o Examples included: parents unable to provide support with work nor technical issues; technical issues resulting in pupils missing lessons; poor internet access
- Many preferred to be at school to interact with teachers and other pupils. Many commented that although the online offer was much improved, it didn't compare to being in school or college.
 - o Examples included: discussions around topics were missed; tiring being online for long (6 hours); pupils being asked to put camera and mic off during session, so all they were doing was listening with no interaction
- Distractions at home affected learning
- Some weren't aware that certain groups of pupils were allowed in during the firebreak: this wasn't clearly communicated
- Lack of consistency with some social distancing rules
 - o Examples included: pupils sharing a desk all term then asked to sit one per desk after firebreak, leading to confusion about what's safe and what's not safe
- Some disagreed with suggestions in the media of having to wear masks in classroom

Suggested improvements from young people

- More consideration given to increased caring responsibilities facing some young people
- To build in fairness into the system, they should consider alternating year groups that are asked to stay home in future 'firebreaks'
- Teachers should ensure consistency in level of work provided and support given
- Keep as many children in school as possible
- Ensure lessons are available online for those who have to self-isolate
- Live lessons would be good
- Suggestion that one year group be allowed in on a different day to enable all students to have an opportunity to see, speak, ask questions to their teachers at least once a week
- A request to enable an individual to self-isolate rather than whole year-groups
- Real need to focus on mental health because home life not an escape for everyone
- A request for urgent clarity on what assessments will look like this year
- Suggestion that critical school years be prioritised i.e. that years 11 — 13 be allowed in to school as opposed to years 7 — 9
- Information alerts should be posted on Hwb for all pupils (and schools) to see — young people would know that the information on there is not 'fake news'

Other life experiences

What worked

- Lots of social activities taking place online now
- Smaller lockdown — two weeks — was preferred by some

What didn't work

- Some rules difficult to understand
 - o Examples included: before the firebreak, why could children mix in schools but not in clubs; football training had restarted but not netball training; concern about social bubbles for care experienced young people especially thinking ahead to Christmas; bubbles in colleges and other bubbles at home — questioned how that was safe
- Some missed social aspect of after-school activities and general opportunities to socialise with friends and family members
- Some real concern about impact this was having on their mental health

What could be improved – suggestions from young people

- Clarity about whether there'll be other firebreaks
- Clarity about when people will be able to spectate sport (mentioned as a means of improving mental health)
- Consistent rules everywhere about things like mask wearing

Who else needs to listen in on our listening day

This was not intended to be a comprehensive review of experiences. Instead, we wanted to gather a snapshot of views from young people living in different circumstances and different corners of Wales to ensure those were heard during such fast-paced decision making by our government. From experience, we know that hearing direct experiences can change the course of decision-making.

We hope this sample of views gathered in a short period of time by the team provides an insight into reality for Ministers, government and public health officials. Young people in this country have a right enshrined in legislation to be heard and have their views taken into account when decisions are made about their lives. We urge decision-makers to listen and to consider their views during deliberations around potential future firebreaks. Our three priorities remain:

1. We ensure the least disruption possible to the lives of children and young people in Wales whilst protecting their right to good health.
2. That children's rights be considered as a whole and must play a central role in decision making by governments at all levels, including public health officials.
3. That guidance and procedures relating children and young people are constantly evaluated and evolved based on the views of children and young people.