PLANT YNG NGHYMRU
CHILDREN IN WALES

Children in Wales Member's Report 2022

The Impact and legacy of COVID-19

Introduction

The focus of our research was to gain an insight into how our member organisations have responded to the effects of COVID-19, and their ability to maintain engagement with children, young people and families over the past two years. Building upon the findings from our previous study conducted in May 2020, we wanted to achieve an understanding of the methods and strategies adopted throughout the pandemic, and how service users have responded to different engagement techniques, and which were likely to be retained into the future. We also hoped to gain an insight into any ongoing challenges relating to the effects of COVID-19 that our member organisations are currently facing, and how they could be better supported.

Methods

This research follows our 2020 member's survey, the purpose of which was to gain an insight into the immediate challenges our member organisations were facing as a consequence of COVID-19, and to gather their input to inform both our priorities and decisions being taken by policy and government leads. For this research we adopted a mixed-method approach. Using the Microsoft Forms platform, from the 24th January 2022, we issued a survey to our member organisations and wider constituents. Between February and March 2022, we also conducted one-to-one interviews with representatives from a cross section of our member organisations. We were therefore able to gather feedback from our members from both the survey and research interviews to inform this report. The timing of this report comes as families are facing unprecedented financial hardships, with rises in energy prices and tax rises predicted to leave Welsh households an average £600 a year worse off, even after measures to assist cost-of-living are applied (Cardiff University, 2022). Members were keen to share with us the impact that the current crisis is having on their service users and organisation, in addition to the effects of the pandemic.

Promotion

Our bilingual survey was promoted through

- Bi-weekly e-briefings
- A dedicated email to our database contacts
- The news section of our website
- Our Twitter pages

Questions

The survey questions were as follows

1. What have been the main effects of COVID-19 on your organisation?
2. What barriers were you, as an organisation, forced to overcome during the pandemic?
3. What are your organisation's primary concerns at this time in terms of your service users' needs, their wellbeing and

ability to access services?

4. Do you have any concerns regarding your organisation or service, or the wellbeing of your staff?

5. What methods/strategies did your organisation adopt in order to cope with the new challenges brought on by COVID-19, to ensure that you were able to maintain engagement with children, young people and families

6. Which of these methods/strategies, if any, will your organisation continue to use as a regular means of supporting children, young people and families in the future?

7. Were any of these methods/strategies tried, but found to be unhelpful/ineffective in supporting children/young people/families, and why?

8. Did your organisation receive any additional financial support to help cope with any new challenges brought on during the pandemic?

9. In spite of its many challenges, did the pandemic allow for any opportunities for learning (for example, were you as an organisation able to support children, young people and families in a more personalised way once face-to-face interactions with service users were forced to end, or were reduced due to COVID restrictions, or were you perhaps made aware of pre-existing needs of your service users that you weren't aware of before)?

10. Are there still challenges/barriers that you are currently facing as an organisation relating to the effects of COVID-19 with which you could be better supported?

11. As 2022 begins, what are the main issues you are concerned about?

To keep our research interviews as concise as possible, we asked our interviewees a selection of the questions drawn from the online survey.

1. What have been the main effects of COVID-19 on your organisation? (negatives and positives)

2. What are your organisation's primary concerns at present in terms of your service users' needs, their wellbeing and ability to access services?

3. What methods/strategies did your organisation adopt in order to cope with the new challenges brought on by COVID-19, to ensure that you were able to maintain engagement with children, young people and families?

4. Which of these methods/strategies were found to be most and least helpful, and which are you likely to retain as we gradually ease COVID restrictions?

5. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Responses

Respondents had the option of providing the name of their organisation or remaining anonymous. They were however required to provide the type of organisation or sector they worked in (such as Local Authority, health sector, family services, third sector, youth services or schools/education) and the local authority area in which they were based. Half of the questions asked were multiple choice.

Of the respondents who chose to provide the name of their organisation, we received responses from the following:

NYAS Cymru

Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids' Clubs

Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board

EAGALA

Child Poverty Action Group

Welsh Refugee Council

TGP Cymru

Barnardo's Cymru

Faith in Families
Llamau
Early Years Wales
Ysgol Gyfun Gwynllyw
Save the Children
Homestart Cymru
Mudiad Meithrin

Children in Wales would wish to thank all of our respondents for taking the time to complete this survey and those who agreed to take part in our interviews.

Background Research

Whilst there is a growing body of literature concerning the effects of COVID-19 on children, young people and families, there is widespread concern that the full impact of living in lockdown and the pandemic more generally may not be seen for some time. Despite any delay, from the information we gathered from our member organisations, many had already seen an increase in the rates of poverty, deprivation, worsening mental health and delayed child development amongst their service users and across the sector. These issues have been further exacerbated by the current 'cost of living crisis', fuelled by increasing food and fuel prices, and everyday essential items.

In May 2022, UK inflation hit its highest level in three decades, reaching 6.2%, higher than the 5.9% predicted by economists (Guardian, 2022). This followed the latest increase in energy prices which added an "eye-watering" £13.24 a week, or almost £700 annually to the bill of a typical household; an increase which will put severe pressure on low-income households who are already being squeezed by rising rent and food costs (Bevan Foundation, 2022). The poorest communities in Wales have been disproportionately impacted and "hit hardest" by the COVID-19 pandemic (Senedd Research, 2022), and financial hardship is guaranteed to intensify as a result of rising inflation.

This report also coincides with the recent UK Government's Spring Statement. According to the analysis from Cardiff University's Wales Governance Centre, the Spring Statement failed to provide targeted support for the worst hit households or to shield public services from rising inflation (Wales Governance Centre, 2022). When conducting our research, the financial hardship of families was highlighted as one of the major concerns of our member organisations at present, reporting that an increasing number of families were unable to cope financially, and there was an escalation in the amount of debt being incurred.

Research published by the Bevan Foundation found that generally, households across Wales have seen their living costs increase, with more than half seeing the cost of food increase and more than six in ten seeing the cost of their utilities rise. The standard of living for families in Wales is drastically decreasing, and has continued to do so since the beginning of the pandemic. One in ten families with two children have had to cut back on food for their children, and nearly four in ten Welsh households (39 per cent) do not have enough money to buy anything beyond everyday items (Bevan Foundation, 2021).

Other research has examined the impact that COVID has had on children's educational experiences. Thorn & Vincent-Lancrin (2022) explored the nature of the educational experience of primary and secondary education students in France, Ireland, the United Kingdom and the United States during the period of school closures, and the effect of school closures on students learning, noting that concerns about students from lower socio-economic background being left behind are "more than reasonable".

These findings are echoed by Reimers (2022). They note the effects of poverty and social inequality on children and young people's educational experiences throughout the pandemic. However they also emphasise that barriers to educational opportunities, such as food poverty and the stress of living in vulnerable conditions, already impacted on opportunities to learn before the pandemic, with COVID-19 enabling these barriers to become more visible.

The importance of school goes beyond education. Schools are also an essential source of health and mental health support, which are protective factors for students' social, emotional, and physical well being (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019, c.f. Hoffman & Miller, 2020). As will be demonstrated in our findings, our member organisations shared widespread concerns for the mental health of children and young people which has been impacted in unprecedented ways by the pandemic and through multiple lockdowns.

Loades et al. (2020) reviewed the impact of social isolation and loneliness on the mental health of children in the context of COVID-19. They argue that factors which are likely to increase the risk of negative psychological outcomes include duration of quarantine, fear of infection, boredom, frustration, lack of necessary supplies, lack of information, financial loss, and stigma. They argue that "social distancing and school closures may therefore increase mental health problems in children and adolescents, already at higher risk of developing mental health problems compared to adults". Indeed, the mental health needs of children and young people are going to be "even more acute in the wake of the pandemic given the social, emotional, and economic stresses that are proceeding concomitantly and are likely to persist for some period of time once the crisis has been resolved" (Hoffman & Miller 2020).

There is a growing body of literature concerned with the effects of COVID-19 on the mental health of children and young people. Between September 2020 and February 2021, James et al. (2021) conducted a survey of over six-thousand young people in Wales between the ages of 8-25. Their study explored factors that promote or support wellbeing for young people during the pandemic, and how these factors differ by age. They found self-reported wellbeing differed by gender, ethnicity and deprivation. Moreover, younger children reported the need for play and to see friends to support their own wellbeing, whilst older children wanted more support with anxiety and reported educational pressures.

Likewise, in 2020 the Children's Commissioner for Wales published the 'Coronavirus and Me' report. This report outlined the findings of the consultation which was launched to find out about the direct experiences of children in Wales. Their worries included concerns about how long the situation would last and fears that they or those they loved would catch COVID-19. Moreover, young people of secondary school age reported more negative feelings than younger children, with 16% feeling sad 'most of the time'. 54% of young people between the ages of 12-18, reported being worried about falling behind with their learning, and 52% reported that they were worried about how the pandemic would affect their exam results (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020).
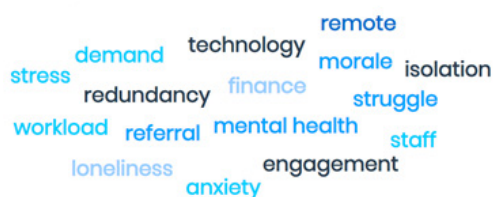
It is also important to note that the challenges that COVID-19 has and continues to present, has not affected all children in the same way. There are disparities in how the pandemic has effected children of different age groups, on emotional, behavioural, financial and developmental scales. For example, the focus of one of our member organisations is that of child development and specifically how poverty impacts and delays development in children, particularly in their most formative years. They are hearing from schools that for many of their youngest pupils in reception, their social and language skills have been massively impaired as a result of missing two very significant years in their development. They reported that many children are not potty trained, still have dummies, don't interact well with other children, and have difficulties responding to boundaries.

This corresponds with research conducted by Tyrie et al. (2021) which focused on ways to identify, address, or mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on children under 5. Experts conclude that certain demographic groups would be most negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, including children with additional learning needs (ALNs) and children from low income families. Meanwhile, they also believed that the social and emotional development of children under 5 would be most negatively impacted by COVID-19, followed by speech and language development, physical development, health, and finally cognitive development.

Finally, research has also shown that many early childhood education and care settings have reported struggling with viability and staffing both during and in the aftermath the pandemic (Ofsted, 2020; Hunnikin et al, 2020, Tyrie et al., 2021). This was also a recurring theme reported by our member organisations. Many claimed their sector is currently facing issues around recruitment, with many struggling to fill vacancies, partly due to the changing landscape of employment as a result of the pandemic.

Findings

Question 1) What have been the main effects of COVID-19 on your organisation?

remote
demand technology morale isolation
stress
redundancy finance struggle
workload referral mental health staff
loneliness engagement
anxiety

More than half of respondents to our survey reported that they saw an **increase in referrals** to their organisation, with only one organisation reporting that they witnessed a reduction. The vast majority of respondents reported that their organisations faced difficulties in **keeping-up with a greater workload and demand for their services,** with one respondent reporting that they had witnessed a 50-60% increase in demand for some of their services, and more than 120% increase in demand for one of their family-support services. Overall, just under half of all respondents claimed that they **struggled to meet the increasing demands** from children, young people and families due to the unprecedented and unique challenges brought by COVID-19.

Challenges that respondents reported their organisations had faced included **maintaining engagement with children, young people and families,** with the vast majority reporting that they experienced an inability to fully maintain engagement through previous ways of working. One respondent from the childcare sector told us that sadly some of their services lost their relationship with some children and families completely. Others had maintained engagement with service users as many **preferred online and remote working**, especially if they lacked confidence when it came to receiving support or where they had children at home.

Respondents also told us that they were particularly concerned about maintaining engagement with **children and young people in unhealthy and unsafe homes** who were already deemed to be in crisis. Other barriers to engagement included **inconsistent access to technology,** a **lack of engagement from some households** and other service users; **financial constraints**, and a **significant increase in workload**.

The difficulties in maintaining engagement with some service users was not only a challenge for our members organisations in terms of providing support, but it also raised concerns about how children, young people and families were doing when they were unable to physically meet them face-to-face. For those who work in the education sector, they expressed worries that they had experienced during periods of lockdown when they were **physically unable to see children and monitor their health and wellbeing,** which led to an increase in safety concerns, particularly if families disengaged or didn't access support.

Respondents from other sectors expressed similar concerns, with one interviewee explaining that whilst they were maintaining engagement with children and young people via virtual meeting platforms such as Zoom, it was difficult to get a full picture on how they were coping. Not only could they not see what was going on outside of screen view, but there were also issues around **confidentiality,** and that they couldn't tell who else may be in the room or listening. Respondents explained that at times when they had been particularly concerned for the safety of a child, they needed to see them in spite of lockdown restrictions in order to undertake a risk assessment.

Staff mental health was a recurring theme from our respondents. Over half of all respondents reported that their organisations faced difficulties in terms of staff mental health, such as significant increases in stress levels. Meanwhile, just under half of all respondents told us that their organisation struggled with **staff shortages** for reasons such as **redundancies** or COVID-19 related illness, and absences from work. One respondent stated that

"The pandemic has brought on a whole number of challenges for our team. It has been difficult to keep up the team morale in a virtual manner, not to mention be able to offer support/empathy to all the [children and young people] that we work with in a virtual manner"

Another told us

"The mental health of our own staff has dipped at points, particularly when restrictions have been high or when struggling with workload and limited capacity... Morale is quite low in the sector and we are seeing a recruitment crisis unfolding where we have lost many qualified staff from the sector who have become disillusioned (with pay / workload / feeling undervalued / working from home and concern for the future)"

These concerns echo what we heard through our interviews, with an **overwhelming numbers of interviewees expressing concern for the mental health of their staff and colleagues**. Interviewees collectively reported that **new ways of working remotely throughout the pandemic had led to a decline in mental health and wellbeing** and feelings of **loneliness and isolation** amongst staff members, especially for individuals who lived alone or for members of staff who were usually engaging face-to-face with service users every day prior to the pandemic. One interviewee also explained that one of the biggest impacts of COVID-19 for their staff's wellbeing was **longer working hours**, with lines between work and home life becoming blurred as children and parents were able to get in touch with staff outside of normal working hours.

The issue of **recruitment** was mentioned by several of our interviewees as another major impact on their organisations. One interviewee for example told us that recruitment is still a big issue they are currently facing and that they have several vacancies yet to be filled, which has resulted in an increased workload for existing employees. Participants explained this is due to the changing landscape of employment, and that the pandemic has led to many staff members either, revaluating their life choices or questioning whether this is the kind of work they wanted to be doing. In other instances staff have retrained, started their own businesses, or taken early retirement.

Several respondents also reported that they had been **significantly financially impacted** throughout the pandemic. One respondent whose organisation has over seven-hundred retail shops explained the impact that this had on the organisation's funds. As non-essential retail was forced to close during lockdowns, this had a significant effect on the organisation's financial resources and has meant the organisation has faced significant constraints.

It is important to highlight some positive outcomes reported by respondents. Several reported that their **relationship with the Welsh Government has become a lot closer** since the pandemic began. Others reported that the pandemic has provided an **opportunity to build stronger relationships with other organisations in their sector**, and opportunities to work collaboratively and to build new partnerships. Moreover, one respondent from the childcare sector told us that, as their childcare facilities remained open for key workers, **nursery staff reported that it felt good knowing they were supporting key workers in this way**, and parents were grateful that their children were still able to go to nursery while they worked on the front-line.

New ways of working remotely, as well as meeting virtually or attending training courses using online platforms allowed for a **significant reduction in travel**, enhanced time efficiency, and allowed staff to **reduce their carbon footprint**. Similarly, respondents reported a significant reduction in the amount of printed resources they produced, and that these have now been provided for service users in an online format, which is another example of **more sustainable and eco-friendly ways of working**.

Question 2) What barriers were you, as an organisation, forced to overcome during the pandemic?

The main challenge for respondents was the **transitioning to working remotely from home in line with COVID-19 guidance**. The first priority was getting staff working from home immediately and safely, including making sure everyone had the necessary equipment to work effectively. Respondents told us that whilst staff worked tirelessly to ensure that service users continued to be supported throughout the pandemic, new ways of working and not being able to meet service users face-to-face led to many other additional challenges and concerns.

As previously mentioned, respondents reported that **staff mental health and wellbeing** suffered greatly as a result of remote working. This was not only due to working remotely for extended periods of time, but also feelings of helplessness, as well as

loneliness and isolation. Staff could see the financial and psychological impact that the pandemic was having on families, which itself had an **emotional impact on staff**. Given the nature of the services that our member organisations provide, virtual and remote styles of working also impacted how our members were able to communicate and support children, young people and families.

One particular barrier was the **lack of IT resources for the children, young people and families** that our member organisations support. Supporting their service users virtually was only possible if their service users had access to the right technology. Respondents reported that the **mental health of children, young people and families** were severely **impacted by limited access to technologies, challenges with broadband, not being able to afford to 'top-up' mobile phones**, and difficulties in accessing support through virtual means of communication.

Respondents also reported that this posed unique challenges as it was **harder to build relationships with new service users** as they weren't able to meet face-to-face, making it longer for staff to build a trusted connection. This posed further challenges for our members who work specifically with **refugees and asylum seekers whose first language was not English.** They reported that it was particularly tough to undertake risk assessments virtually when there were language barriers. These challenges demonstrate how for many people, existing **inequalities were exacerbated by the pandemic.**

The **mental health and wellbeing of service users** was another significant challenge that our member organisations had to help address. Service users were reporting **an increase in anxiety and other mental health difficulties**. Whilst some service users, such as those with poor mental health, often preferred accessing support services from home. One respondent told us that service users who had experienced domestic abuse experienced additional trauma by being in a controlled environment which was very retriggering for them. Another reported that in their supported accommodation, they'd seen a lot of young people, and young women in particular, who had begun self-harming and having suicide thoughts.

Several respondents also told us that they had seen a '**postcode lottery' in terms of the availability and accessibility of external mental health support**. Issues around **safeguarding and conducting risk assessments** were also a significant barrier faced by our members. For one respondent from the education sector, this was particularly difficult in situations where they struggled to maintain clear communication with families.

Another issue that some, but not all respondents reported, was having to **cope with the different approaches taken by the different governments across the UK nations**. For our members who operate across the whole of the UK, there was often confusion regarding the policy changes of the Welsh and UK Governments; what was allowed and what wasn't.

Finally, several of our respondents also noted as a significant barrier was that other external services where they would usually refer individuals to, were not available as before because they had temporarily closed or were not operating as normal. This had meant that our members had to support these individuals themselves, which has again led to an increased workload for staff. For one of our member organisations, they were in a position where they were taking on **extra work to alleviate stress of partner organisations**. This resulted in them dealing with lots of issues that would have otherwise been previously referred elsewhere, but now their own practitioners were dealing with because other services simply **couldn't cope with the extra demand and related challenges**.

Question 3) What are your organisation's primary concerns at this time in terms of your service users' needs, their wellbeing and ability to access services?

Our members' primary concerns are related to the **mental health and wellbeing of their service users** and **the increasing financial hardship** of children, young people and their families.

Upon reflection, whilst this report is primarily focused on the effects of COVID-19 on our member organisations, this research has allowed us to gain a helpful insight into how our members and their service users are feeling about the ongoing **cost of living crisis**.

Over half of respondents expressed concern for the **financial hardship of children, young people and their families** (for example reduced income, food poverty, affording school uniform, essential items and paying household bills). Members are also increasingly concerned about the **ever-growing demand for their services** and the **severity of need within referrals**. Furthermore, our members expressed concern for their **capacity to cope with these increases**, along with **staff burnout and exhaustion** from what has been an incredibly difficult two years.

Our survey responses tell us that the vast majority reported that their organisations are concerned about the mental health and wellbeing of their service users worsening as a result of the pandemic, with more than half of respondents also expressing concern for their service users' **ability to access necessary mental health services**. Several of our members highlighted **worries for what many children and young people will have witnessed over the last two years**, particularly as a result of spending prolonged periods of time in the home, especially if they were from a violent home where there is a prevalence of domestic abuse. Over half of respondents were worried about parental/family member stress, anxieties and worsening mental health as a result of COVID-19. One respondent stated

> ### "Focusing purely on the sector that we support (out of school childcare) our main concerns are around mental health, as staff working in the sector will need to have the resources, knowledge and ability to signpost, to be able to recognise and meet the needs of the children in their care and their families"

A respondent who works in the education sector told us that one of the biggest issues for students is **anxiety**, especially as their education has been disrupted. Many who have suffered with their mental health, **haven't wanted to return to school** once restrictions eased and schools reopened. Whilst school-based counselling service are available more frequently due to significant increases in demand with more pupils making self-referrals for mental health support, **counselling services are typically experiencing long waiting lists**. Teachers were putting the mental and emotional welfare of the students first, because if children are struggling with their mental health and wellbeing, then their education is going to be effected as a result.

Other respondents also expressed concern about the number of **children and young people not attending school**, choosing to stay away from the school environment and possibly being home-schooled or accessing remote learning. This could be the result of a myriad of factors, including vulnerable family members and fear of contracting COVID-19, along with mental health and stress of not having been in a formal learning environment for two years. The **education and learning experiences of children and young people has been disrupted in unprecedented ways**, with one respondent explaining

> ### "The pandemic hasn't just put children back the two years about probably doubled that because of the length of time that they haven't had the support that they've needed"

Meanwhile, respondents told us that more children are presenting with **additional learning needs** as well as very limited social skills as a result **of limited social interaction and mental stimulation**. One interviewee told us that as an organisation, they are **now beginning to see the impact of the pandemic on children at the age of two**. Their limited experiences of socialising during the pandemic or being away from the home and family means they often take longer to settle at nursery. Other concerns included **new parents having babies during lockdown** and weren't able to socialise with friends, family and other new parents. Some parents are also worried about the long-term impact that COVID-19 on their children, especially as those early stages are so important to a **child's development**. However, there is also the issue of children and young people being told they are a **'written off' generation** (Freeman, L., 2021), and other negative discourses surrounding the youngest generations' experiences throughout the pandemic and how this will impact on their future employment prospects.

Respondents expressed concern for children and young people's **relationship with school and their education**, for example, worries about exams, **the pressure to 'catch up'**, and the capacity of parents to support them academically. Staff are particularly worried about their Year 11 pupils who haven't sat an exam before, and **generally students are showing increased apathy**

towards their education and a lack of motivation to learn or succeed in school. They also told us that they are expecting to see a worse academic performance this year compared to last year, which demonstrates that the effects of COVID-19 on children and young people's education is far from being over. Another respondent told us that

> ## "Young people feel they've missed so much education or so much access to the spaces where they had opportunities for learning, such as youth work. It's almost as if there there's an element of wondering whether they are going to be able to catch up and learn and connect with that whole space of education like they could before COVID"

Meanwhile, over half of respondents are worried **about parental/family member stress, anxieties and worsening mental health** as a result of COVID-19. Respondents told us that they were dealing with increasing referrals as more children were being referred by the schools with having mental health issues, and that children who needed to access mental health services are now on **incredibly long waiting lists**, including children that have experienced parental suicide, parents that have been incarcerated, and parents that are dealing with their own mental health issues.

The vast majority of respondents are concerned about **parental employment prospects and their financial situations; employment uncertainty and instability, and long-term unemployment**. Respondents told us that **poverty** has and continues to significantly affect the families they support, with some telling us that families are 'simply not coping', Meanwhile the stresses of financial worries, mental health, fear, anxiety and children's anxiety have had a devastating impact on family life within the home. Our members told us that over the last two years they have seen **unprecedented rises in levels of poverty and increasing rates of families being unable to cope financially**, along with **escalation in debt and families having to choose between fuel and food**. Financial hardship and poverty, according to our members, was exacerbated by **the removal of the £20 Universal Credit uplift**, rising fuel and energy costs, along with parents and family members who were made redundant or were working zero-hour contracts prior to the pandemic.

According to one interviewee, families are having to choose between heating and eating, and **parents are pushed into situations where they are choosing to feed their children and not themselves**. Another interviewee told us **that more children are now eligible for free school meals due to financial hardship at home**. More families are accessing food banks, and members report seeing increasing numbers of families where children haven't been fed or are hungry and cold. One interviewee even reported seeing more children sneaking food home for their families, and aware of children in cold homes where they're sharing one bed just to keep warm.

> ## "What we can see," they told us, "is that the children and families that were already in crisis prior to the pandemic, who were living in poverty or adversity have slipped further behind their counterparts who were in safer places"

Respondents also expressed concern for their service users suffering from **disruption to social and emotional relationships**, such as school, friends, family, teachers, and other supportive adults. Several of our members expressed that there were **stark inequalities in the experiences that children have experienced at home during the multiple lockdowns**, and many have had poorer experiences to what they would have had if schools had remained open.

Meanwhile other respondents explained that there have been difficulties for both themselves and their service users in building sustainable social and emotional relationships. As previously mentioned, there have been difficulties across the sectors in **maintaining engagement with some families**, which in turn has led to barriers in building safe and trusted relationships between service providers and service users. Other respondents also mentioned that service users are struggling with **anxieties relating to relationships**, as well as connecting face-to-face again and reintegrating back into the community. There are also concerns about young people not having a support network and making sure that they are integrated within the community, something which is difficult to do virtually.

Concerns were also raised for **the safety of children and young people**, including increased safeguarding concerns and **online risks**. One respondents told us that, whilst children and young people's access to the internet and relationship with technology has been a growing concern year-on-year prior to COVID-19, it is now evident how much time they have spent on mobile phones, social media and game consoles during the pandemic and in particular through periods of lockdown. **Children and young people are showing what they described as an 'obsessive' relationship with mobile phones and game consoles** which they believe

has had a severe impact on their attitudes towards their education and capacity to learn. Another respondent told us that they have witnessed a **huge increase in online exploitation** throughout the pandemic, with children spending more unsupervised time online.

Question 4) Do you have any concerns regarding your organisation or service, or the wellbeing of your staff?

The majority of respondents said they were worried about **the emotional and mental health impact of the pandemic on their organisation's staff**, for example, increased stress and/or anxieties, hesitancy or fear about returning to the workplace after a long period of working from home, as well as significant increase in workload. Feedback from one respondent stated

"as a staff member I observed significant stress, strain and distress within the early to middle part of Covid - child care, elderly relatives/family members being unwell and unfortunately dying from Covid"

Half of respondents also told us they were concerned about **staff's personal responsibilities**, such as childcare or caring for an elderly relative.

Meanwhile, almost half of respondents expressed concerns for their organisation's ability to **access sufficient funding**. Finally, over a quarter of respondents admitted that they were worried whether their organisation has and/or will return to providing the same level of support for their service users as before the pandemic. One respondent told us

"There is so much work to do coming out of a pandemic. One-year funding from the Welsh Government is not good when these problems are going to continue for quite a while"

Moreover, according to another respondent,

"As a third sector organisation, our ability to maintain sufficient support for the sector we represent hinges on our ability to continue to employ current staff (and ability to employ additional staff to meet increased demand for business support/ training). Our funding is often short term and when received (although obviously gratefully received) funding tends to remain static over years, which doesn't reflect increases in on costs, living costs and salaries. We work hard to source funding to meet our funding target every year, but the time searching for and applying for this funding takes time away from supporting the sector itself"

Other respondents reported concerns around the impact of **rising living costs on staff members and the inability of organisations to cushion the impact** due to restricted funds and an **inability to increase salaries to cope with these rising costs**. Funding also effects the organisation's needs to properly meet the needs of their service users due to the poor levels of funding that they receive, Other respondents told us that funding was already a concern year-on-year, but that they are **now facing even more financial constraints**.

Questions 5 and 6) What methods/ strategies did your organisation adopt in order to cope with the new challenges brought on by COVID-19, to ensure that you were able to maintain engagement with children, young people and families? AND Which of these methods/ strategies, if any, will your organisation continue to use as a regular means of supporting children, young people and families in the future?

The most popular methods/strategies adopted to cope with the new challenges brought on by the pandemic and which were used by 100% of respondents were the use of **online meetings and/or consultations using online platforms** such as Zoom,

Microsoft Teams or Skype.

The second most common methods/strategies adopted by respondents to the survey was a **greater use of phone calls, text messaging and/or email** to communicate with service users. Almost half of respondents told us they adopted greater use of **social media** to communicate with service users, and published **information bulletins**, newsletters, and tailored pandemic resources. The majority of respondents claimed they had provided **online activity packs, educational resources, and/or mental health and wellbeing materials** for children and young people. Finally, over half of respondents adopted the use of interactive webinars, pre-recorded sessions, individual tailored resources and online training.

All respondents reported that they will continue to conduct meetings and/or consultations through using online platforms. The vast majority of respondents told us that they will continue to use phone calls, social media, text messaging and/or email to communicate with their organisation's service users. More than half of respondents will also continue to provide information resources to their service users, as well as online activity packs and/or mental health and wellbeing materials for children and young people. Finally, other methods which half of respondents will continue to use include providing interactive webinars, pre-recorded sessions, individual tailored resources and online training.

Respondents reported that

"We have found that online delivery of training and webinars has increased the scope of our support and impact and made it easier for play-workers to attend in the evenings after they finish work, without adding in travel time. We plan on a mixture of face to face support and remote support going forward, taking into account individual preferences and what makes the most sense in terms of time, finances and capacity". Meanwhile, "We've found that going online makes our services more accessible and inclusive for many groups who would otherwise struggle to participate"

Along with these methods and strategies, our interviewees were able to provide us with an insight into other measures they took to maintain engagement with children, young people and families. These included:

- WhatsApp – lots of young people reportedly really liked communicating via WhatsApp because it's fast and effective, however interviewees raised concerns they had regarding GDPR, age and consent and what this means if you're providing a confidential service to children and young people
- Daily helpline to support children and young people's mental health and wellbeing
- Virtual youth clubs and forums
- Providing practical toolkits for children and young people to deal with low mood and anxiety, including creative packs and wellbeing packs
- Connecting children and young people with one another so they could support each other
- Support from commercial entities and local governments to provide children, young people and families with laptops, tablets, mobile phones, data credit and Wi-Fi dongles
- Using funding to provide families with furniture and clothing
- The use of the online-platform Padlet
- Online consultations
- One organisation featured in a Panorama programme around domestic abuse to get the message out that their services were open
- Set up a confidential wellbeing phone line for staff and made sure their psychology team were available to teams and individuals working with people
- E-learning modules and online training for staff
- Delivering food parcels to service users, as well as medicine and any other essential items families needed
- Those in the education sector used Google Classroom, and home-visits for individual pupils that staff were particularly concerned about in terms of familial relationships/poverty/mental health
- Sending out sunflower seeds so that families could grow plants
- Cookery classes and providing ingredients

- Making people aware of the services that were available and were still running
- Becoming more integrated within the community and working with other community organisations and agencies, such as food banks

Question 7) Were any of these methods/strategies tried, but found to be unhelpful/ ineffective in supporting children/young people/families, and why?

Not all of the methods and strategies adopted by our member organisations were found useful and therefore won't continue to be adopted in the long term. For example, one respondent's organisation initially adopted the use of information bulletins, newsletters and tailored pandemic resources, but these were found to be either unhelpful or ineffective in supporting their service users' needs. One respondent noted their lack of success in providing online activity packs, educational resources, and/or mental health and wellbeing materials for children and young people. According to one survey respondent,

"We were informed that young people were exhausted with receiving too much information in the form of bulletin updates and so on" and "Take up of online resources has not always been as high as we'd hoped"

Likewise, another organisation found the use of phone calls, text messaging and/or email to communicate with their organisation's service users unhelpful or ineffective, as well as the use of online platforms such as Zoom/Microsoft Teams/Skype to conduct meetings and consultations.

One of our interviewees reported that whilst they were able **to improve and increase their partnership work as a result of using online platforms**, they also noted that staff have found the continuous use of online meetings quite tiring. Moreover, whilst it's created flexibility and means that **staff don't need to travel for meetings, staff have found it repetitive and have missed face-to-face contact with colleagues**.

Members also reported that working virtually was particularly difficult when working with children as young as five and with some disabled children, and also proved challenging to monitor body language and ensure children were safe. One interviewee highlighted that virtual communicating with children and in particular vulnerable children wasn't always useful because they might not feel safe confiding in an adult or disclosing sensitive information because of who could be listening in the background. Respondents emphasised that ensuring children and young people have privacy was fundamental to the work they provided to support them. Moves towards face-to-face working had been increased since restrictions were eased.

Question 8) Did your organisation receive any additional financial support to help cope with any new challenges brought on during the pandemic?

Responses to this question in the survey were mixed, with roughly equal numbers responding 'yes', 'no' or 'not sure'. One respondent reported that

"We were able to receive an additional emergency grant from WCVA to support with purchasing IT equipment for the children and young people that we work with to enable them to access and connect with education and their family members during lockdown... We [also] had additional funding from Welsh Government"

Funding was used by one organisation

"To continue our work to support the out of school childcare sector"

Another organisation used its funding to

"purchase laptops and tablets for care experienced young people"

Several organisations received donations from commercial entities such as Vodafone, John Lewis and BT to provide phones, laptops, tablets, furniture and clothes for children, young people and families. Meanwhile others received donations from local government, including laptops and Wi-Fi dongles. Another organisation received funding from Children in Need to deliver activity packs.

Question 9) In spite of its many challenges, did the pandemic allow for any opportunities for learning (for example, were you as an organisation able to support children, young people and families in a more personalised way once face-to-face interactions with service users were forced to end, or were reduced due to COVID restrictions, or were you perhaps made aware of pre-existing needs of your service users that you weren't aware of before)?

Over 70% of respondents answered 'yes' to this question, with the remainder answering 'not sure'. Examples of how the pandemic allowed for any opportunities for learning included:

- How to use time more effectively
- How to stay connected through virtual meetings and encourage team members from all over Wales to reach out to one another
- Webinars/ network events/ training sessions are better attended now being delivered on line and much more accessible for those with access to IT
- Many young people are more comfortable participating online, especially if it is done in an inclusive and well-considered way
- Allowed for the expansion of services
- Less need to travel in order to attend meetings, thereby reducing carbon footprint

Question 10) Are there still challenges/barriers that you are currently facing as an organisation relating to the effects of COVID-19 with which you could be better supported? And Question 11) As 2022 continued, what are the main issues you are concerned about?

Over 70% of respondents answered 'yes' to this question, with the remainder answering 'not sure'. The majority of our members reported that the main challenges facing children, young people and families at present were rising **rates of poverty** and **worsening mental health and wellbeing**.

Some examples of how our members felt they could be better supported include:
- Ability to improve connectivity with service users, as many young people are still experiencing IT poverty
- Help in supporting those struggling with their mental health as waiting lists are too long
- The need for longer-term funding pots to address specific issues and challenges, as well as a commitment to additional funding in the next financial year

Financial difficulties were noted as a concern for members themselves, with the need for long-term funding to help meet service users' needs, particularly as referrals have increased due to the increasing complexity of needs that service users are presenting with. **Recruitment** is also an ongoing concern for our member organisations, with many struggling to fill current vacancies. The issue of recruitment is even more difficult for those organisations who provide their services through the Welsh language.

Other concerns were raised regarding the wellbeing of the staff who have continued to do their best to support service users throughout the pandemic, dealing with **increases in workload and stress**, whilst also managing issues of working from home, home-schooling for their own children, family illness as a result of COVID-19 and even family bereavement. Members also told us that they are finding generally returning to working in normal work systems somewhat challenging.

Respondents also said they were concerned about their general **ability to stay connected to service users and their ability to maintain the services that they previously provided**. Finally, respondents expressed concern for issues relating to **children and young people's relationship with education and the need to 'catch up'**. According to respondents, many children and young people say they are worried about trying to cover the work they have missed in school, such as extra lessons and extra homework. There is also the possibility that more children and young people experiencing performance anxiety and general anxiety relating to exams and coursework.

Conclusions

Our report highlights the unprecedented challenges faced by our member organisations throughout the past two years, but sadly also demonstrates that many of these challenges brought about by COVID-19 are still prevalent, impacting on the delivery of services and the recipients of those services. This has been further exacerbated by the ongoing cost of living crisis.

From what we have gathered, although there will be a delay in seeing some of the effects of the pandemic on children, young people and families, our member organisations are seeing increased rates of poverty, deprivation, worsening mental health and delayed child development across the sector.

As we move forward with the rollout of vaccines and the end of social restrictions and lockdowns, mental health services are under significant pressure, and those in need of support are facing extremely long waiting-lists. Evidently what must be acknowledged from our findings is that the effects of the pandemic continue to disproportionately impact on the lives of those who are the most vulnerable.

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