

A large blue circle is centered on the page, containing white text. Surrounding this circle are several stylized, colorful hands (green, pink, blue, orange, red) reaching out from the edges of the frame. Each hand is accompanied by small blue motion lines, suggesting movement towards the center.

Our future, our voice: babies, children and young people of Gwent 2023/24

Director of Public Health
Annual Report



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University Health Board

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Foreword

What we hope to achieve

Each year Directors of Public Health produce an annual report that tells the story about the health of their population. These reports are traditionally quite formal documents. This year, following the past four years, I wanted it to be different. For it to be written by the children of Gwent about the children of Gwent. This is another opportunity to hear about the impacts of the pandemic and to understand what health means to our young people.

This further contributes to the work we are doing to tackle inequalities towards a fairer, safer, stronger and healthier Gwent as part of our ongoing Marmot Region work. With this report we are amplifying the voices of babies, children and young people. I wanted to understand the legacy the pandemic has left and the impact on our children.

Our report will share personal experiences from children and inspire thought on what we can do to make Gwent a place where our babies, children and young people can flourish. The report culminates in an open letter, collated from what has been shared. This will inform the Babies, Childrens and Young People’s Strategy we will be developing over the coming months. ■

Tracy Daszkiewicz,
Director of Public Health, Gwent



“ There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children.”
Nelson Mandela

Introduction

In February 2020, the Covid-19 Pandemic touched every part of our lives: changed the way we accessed education, work; even work stopped for some.

Our social connections went online; bringing lockdowns, babies were born to the quiet of no visitors; children learnt on screens instead of in classrooms; technology arrived just in time to move office-based work to meeting platforms; the lasting impact of losing special people from our lives without a chance to say goodbye.

We saw the impressive commitment of many professions and the pace of groundbreaking advancements in vaccinations. Like us all, children and young people faced a change to the world, as we knew it, were faced with isolation from peers and disruption to their routine that determines predictability and safety.

Though we are no longer in the heightened response to the pandemic, we continue to witness the enduring impact on our babies, children and young people across Gwent. This year's Director of Public Health Annual Report is handed over to them, a place to tell their story, a space to serve as a memoir to their childhood, a childhood spent in an extraordinary time.

Around 12,000 babies were born in Gwent during the pandemic.

(March 2020 and March 2022).

Pregnancy and the Pandemic

There are many joys during pregnancy; seeing your baby on the ultrasound for the first time, attending classes to prepare for your baby and holding the little one in your arms surrounded by people you love during the birth and visitors joining you to share this special time. Sadly, during the pandemic this joyous experience looked very different.

Throughout the majority of 2020, partners couldn't attend antenatal or ultrasound appointments and were only allowed in the delivery room once labour began and to stay for an hour post-birth. Hospital visits from partners were also stopped during this time.

Helping our little ones grow

As your baby grows, they will reach natural stages of development both physically and mentally which may require many different interactions and support from friends, families and sometimes NHS services.



"I felt nervous and lost for what I would say six months of her life. I felt I had failed her... I couldn't give her the same experience her brother had."

"I had to attend scans alone, which caused me a lot of anxiety. It took a lot of excitement out of the experience and filled me with so much worry, that if anything was wrong, I would be on my own. Staff within the maternity department were very reassuring throughout the process. But I still couldn't help feeling upset for my husband who wasn't able to be part of the experience and I still to this day feel he missed out on so much, because of the restrictions that were in place during that time.

My husband wasn't able to witness the birth. I remember feeling so scared but had the comfort of two lovely midwives who held my hand rubbed my knee and gave me support by telling me I could do this.

I remember being surrounded by a face of masks, but my husband wasn't with me. Due to restrictions in place me and my husband weren't allowed to visit her together and our nearly 4-year-old at the time wasn't allowed to meet her until she came home.

When she came home, I felt worried about others meeting her because I wanted to keep her safe. I felt nervous and lost for what I would say six months of her life. I felt I had failed her because I couldn't give her the same experience her brother had." Kayleigh, aged 33, Newport.

The Covid-19 lockdown restrictions meant natural social interactions for some babies never happened.

Babies and children were unable to access their normal activities such as nursery, play groups, extracurricular activities and school. It will take time to understand the full impact of the pandemic on children's health and development, in particular their communication and social skills.

The consequences of lockdown and separation impacted both parents and children's wellbeing, with some expressing the pressure during this time impacted their mental health. During the pandemic,

many support services moved to virtual and phone contact. As a result, vulnerable children were less visible to professionals and services. The usual safety nets were reduced and potentially more children were at risk from unidentified harm.

From the classroom to home learning

From 20 March 2020 until 21 April 2021 nurseries, schools, colleges and universities were closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Children and young people experienced disruptions with home-based learning and the cancellation of GCSEs and A-Levels examinations. Transitions from primary →

→ to secondary school was really challenging for many children.

Moving to home learning was tough for many; with little to no preparation time, reduced interactions with teachers and peers, the need for parents to take on a teaching role and having to quickly adapt.

Children's opportunity to "play", particularly outside and with their friends, was significantly impacted. Playgrounds across Gwent were chained up and had signs with "do not enter". Many children didn't have access to any green space such as a garden.

Some disabled children and young people, identified as clinically vulnerable, had to shield for long periods of time. This along with reduced access to support networks and community activities, impacted their mental health and personal wellbeing.

Children's mental and emotional wellbeing

"On the first day of high school, we had no transition and kind of just put into a school we didn't know. A one-way system was put into place and was very confusing. It took a while to get used to it all having to wear masks and all."

Cwmbran High School,
Pupil, age 15

has been widely reported as being negatively affected during the pandemic. With the limited opportunity for social interactions children and young people experienced increased anxiety and loneliness during the pandemic, and for some, these effects continue even now. ■



"Restrictions meant I had no celebration from family for my child, I had no visitors, baby shower, nothing. I was filled with so much loneliness during the Covid-19 part of pregnancy and after my daughter was born.

I do believe that the impact on my mental health has affected my child, she has always been a more anxious, sensitive child who struggles being away from me. We spent so much one on one time during her first year of life at a time when I was receiving little support, and my mental health was declining. It saddens me to think this has directly caused my child to struggle socially and with her mental health at such a young age.

We were unable to consistently attend baby groups which are imperative for social development. My daughter, although she has attended nursery and is well developed in all areas of development, her social development is not quite where it should be. Once lockdown restrictions eased my daughter became nervous around crowds or even in soft plays, this anxiety has never really gone away.

Unfortunately, I did not have a positive experience. The only positive was my little girl that I was lucky enough to gain in such a terrible time."
Kira, aged 30, Caerphilly.



"I do believe that the impact on my mental health has affected my child, she has always been a more anxious, sensitive child who struggles being away from me."

"Throughout Kira's pregnancy, stringent regulations left me feeling like an outsider, unable to partake in any appointments or significant moments."

"Throughout Kira's pregnancy, stringent regulations me feeling like an outsider, unable to partake in any appointments or significant moments. The restrictions intensified my feelings of disconnection and powerlessness from the pregnancy process.

Enduring this tumultuous period has significantly impacted my mental health, fostering feelings of isolation, undervaluation, and neglect by the healthcare system. It emphasizes the crucial need for a more inclusive approach that acknowledges the emotional needs of fathers during such pivotal life moments."

Rhys, aged 31, Caerphilly.

Crafting this report

Reading and research

To inform this report we reviewed available legislation, data and literature relevant to the children and young people of Gwent. This included a close look at the key articles in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, understanding how the Covid-19 pandemic affected these rights, studying the statistics on the cost-of-living crisis and its impact on childhood poverty rates.

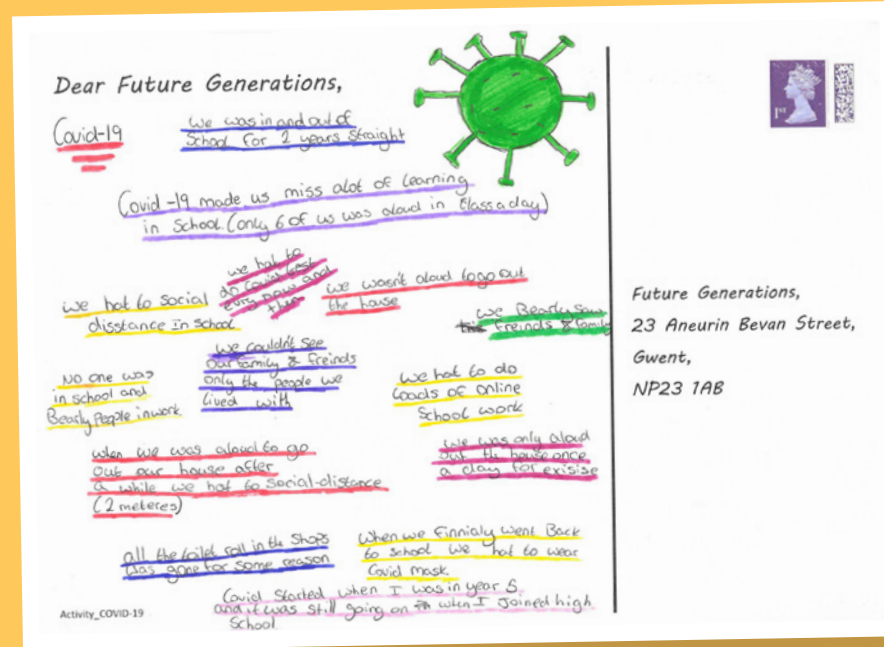


The literature review delved into the direct and indirect harms of the Covid-19 pandemic on expectant mothers, babies, children and families, particularly those already grappling with the wider social and health inequalities.

Partner engagement

We have worked with key partners including, Healthy Schools Coordinators, Youth Provisions, the Gwent Integrated Well-Being Network Team and schools to identify and connect with children and young people to tell their stories through a series of engagement sessions.

These sessions brought together children and young people representative of the vibrant and diverse communities across Gwent from a range of ethnicities, ages and backgrounds across the five local authority areas.



Engaging with children and young people

We engaged with children, aged 7 to 11 visiting 9 primary schools, and 2 youth provisions. Through the medium of art, we asked children to express what 'Health & Well-being' means to them and highlight the people and services who help them stay healthy, this work will form part of the visual artwork for this report. We conducted 2 focus groups with Year 6 pupils from 2 primary schools to gain their insights on the Covid-19 pandemic. We also connected with young people, aged 10 to 18, visiting 2 high schools and 4 youth provisions. →





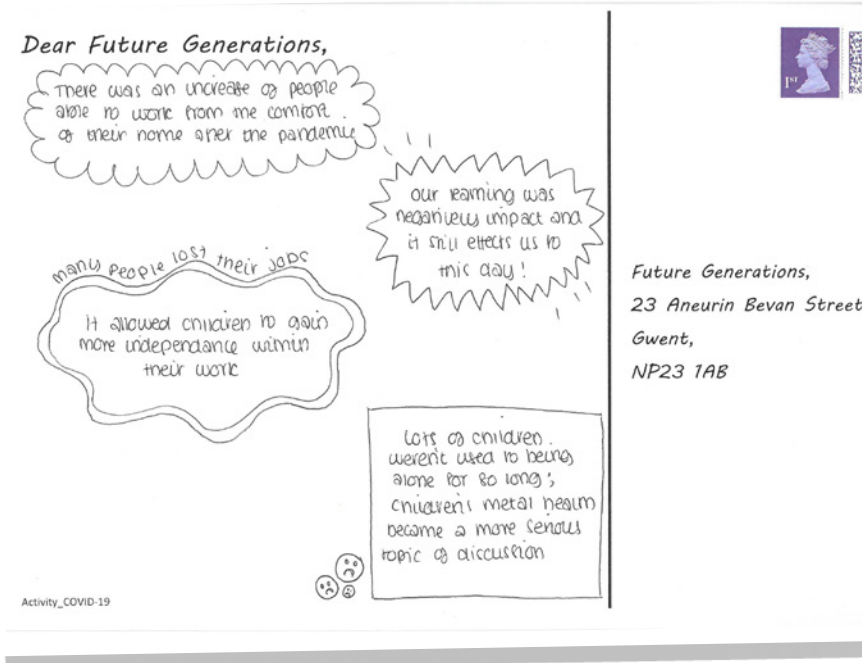
Number of smiles received?

Let's just say we've officially become contenders for the 'World Smiles Collected' record – move over Guinness!



Voices of young people

Finally, 2 young people participated in telephone interviews, expressing their views on the challenges they faced due to missing 2 crucial schooling milestones; the transition from primary school to high school and GCSE examination cancellations.

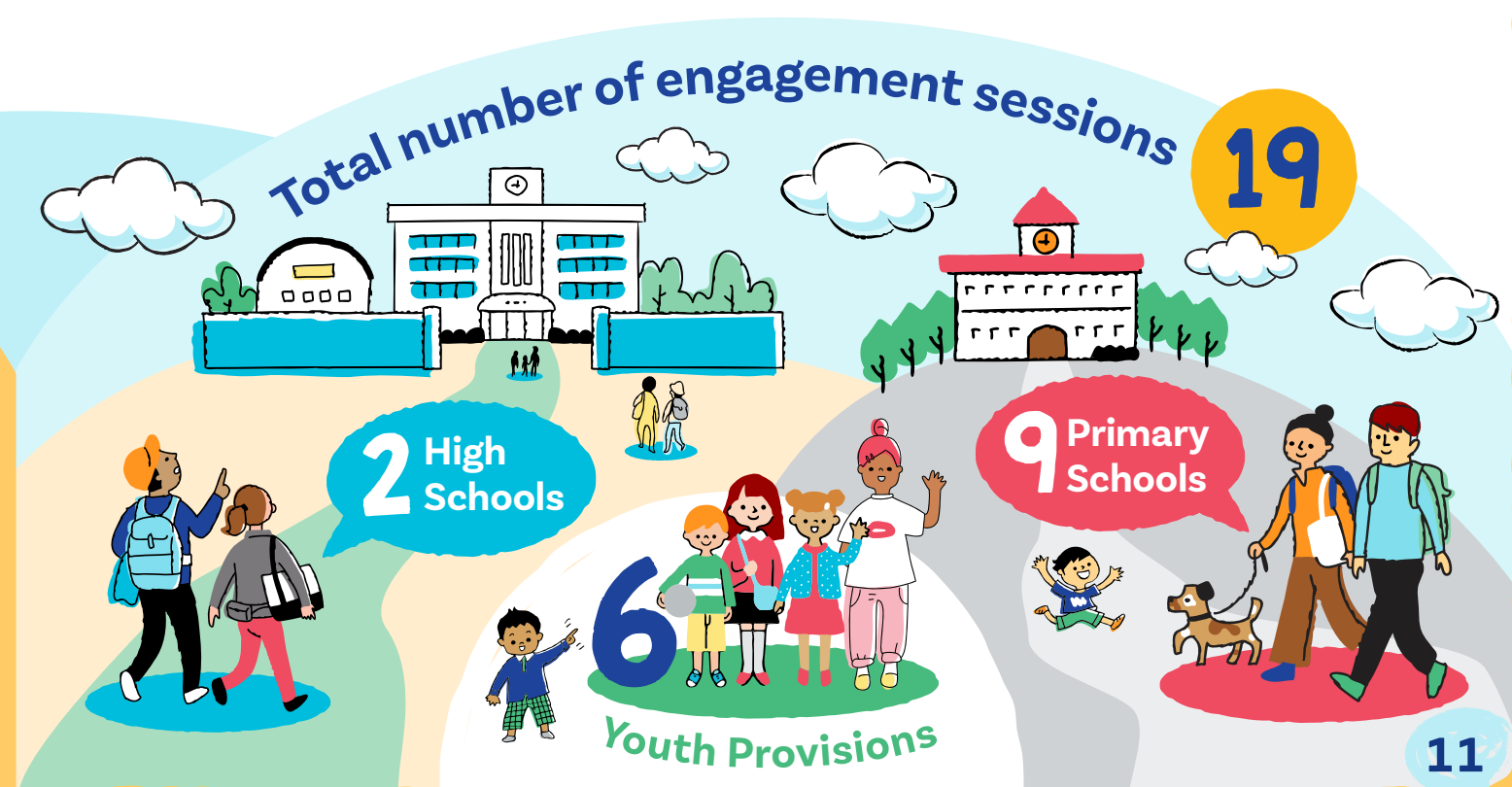


Telling their stories

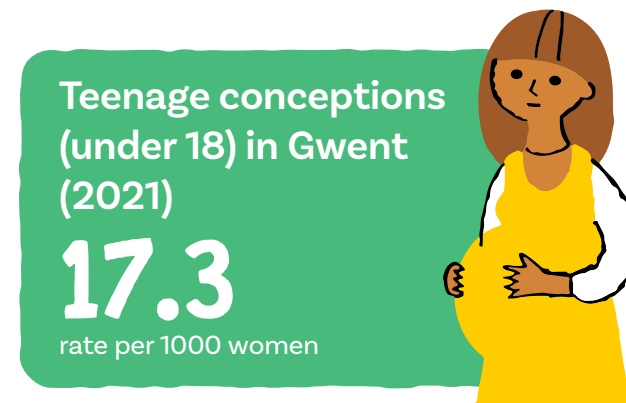
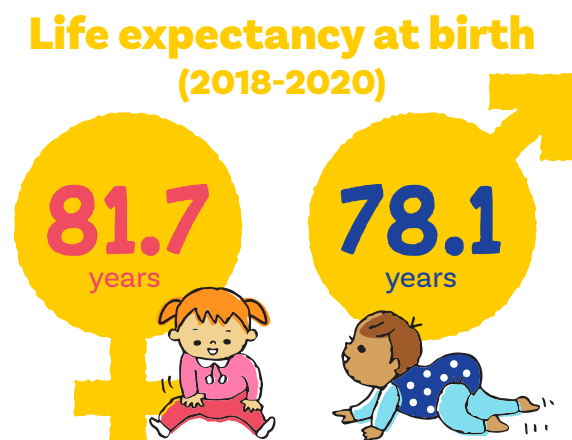
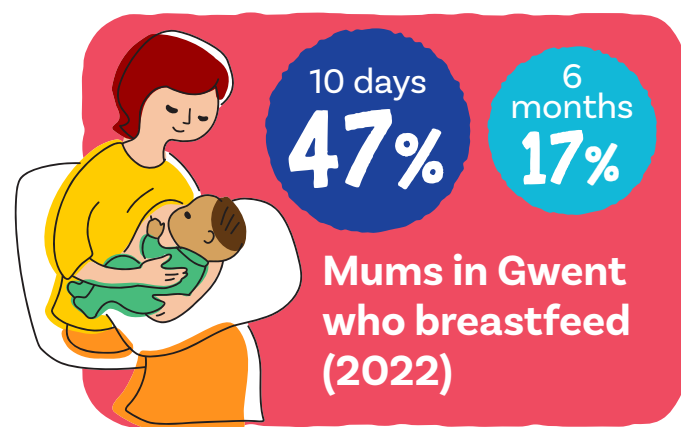
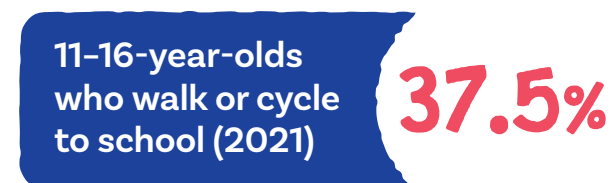
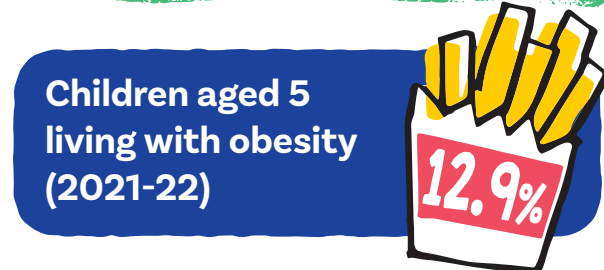
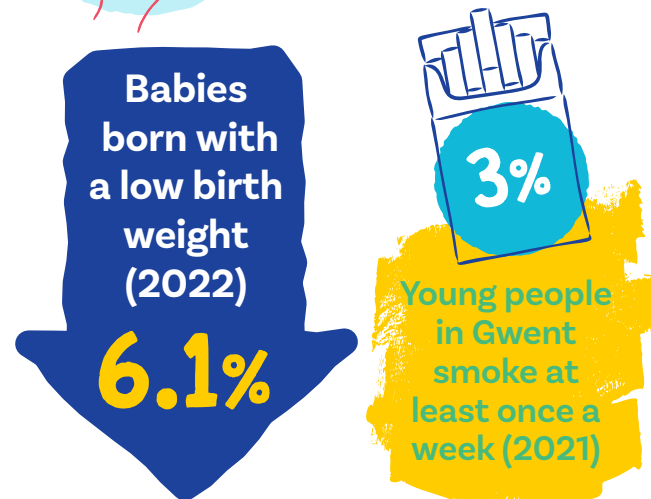
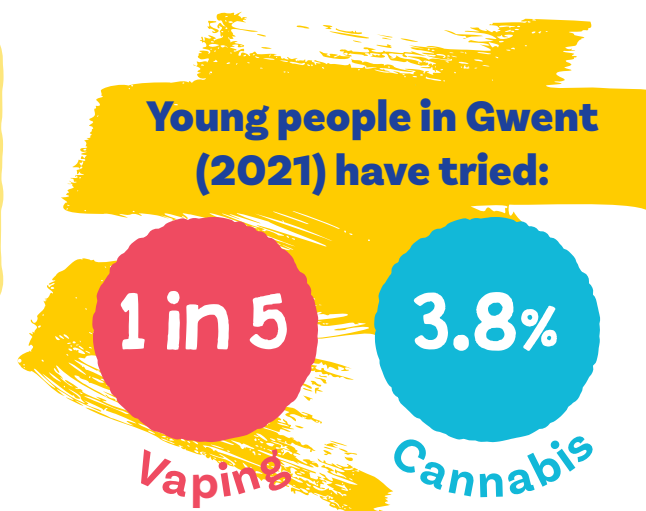
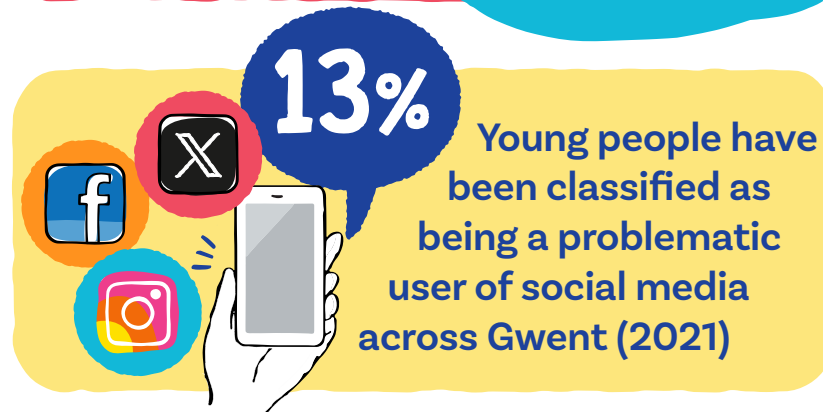
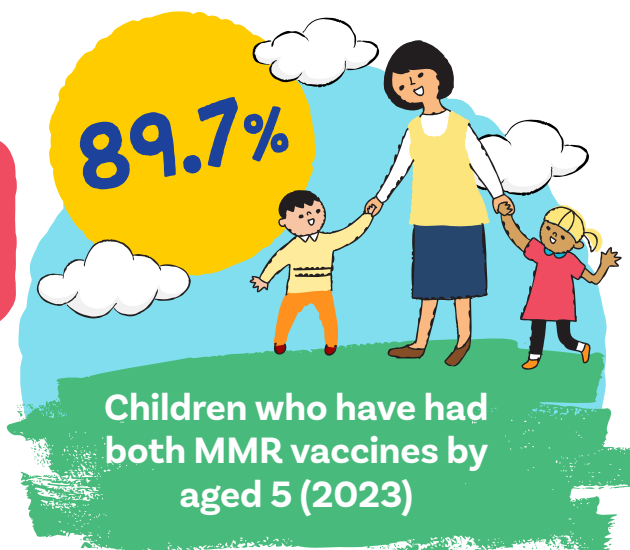
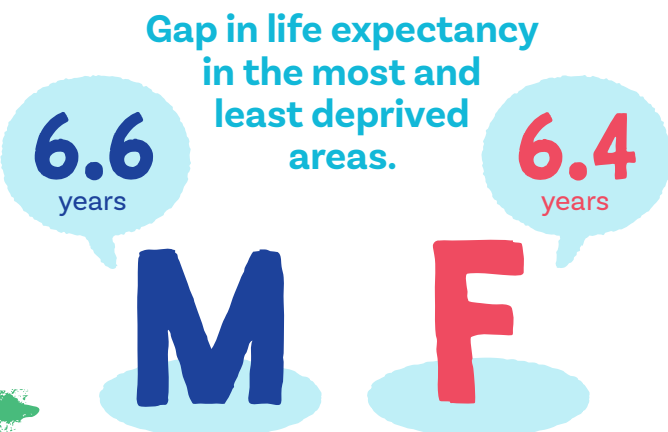
More than 200 artworks and over 150 postcards were created by the children and young people during the engagement sessions which will be used for a time capsule; and some of which you will see throughout this report.

To complete this report, we captured several key themes raised in our engagement sessions and leads an

open letter which represents the voices of children and young people across Gwent. The letter is collated from the perspectives of the children and young people of Gwent, talking about their experiences of the pandemic, the impact it had and what they need in terms of support and development- aimed at parents, families, and services across Gwent. ■



A glimpse into Gwent child health and wellbeing



Covid-19 through children and young people's eyes

2020

20 March 20

Closure of nurseries, school and colleges in Wales closed with in-person teaching remaining open for children of key workers and children considered vulnerable.



“ We stood outside to clap for the NHS, because they worked through the whole pandemic. ”

Young Carers Group, 13

29 June 20

Schools re-open in Wales. Phased approach, with year groups being split into cohorts with staggered start times and breaks.

“ They created bubbles for us to go to school which was alright but I wanted it to go back to normal. ”

Cwmbran High School, 14



Me and my family had all planned to go away for Christmas, but because of lockdown we had to cancel it which was sad.

Marshfield Primary School, 10

19 October 20

Wales announce 17 day 'circuit break' lockdown from 6pm Friday 23 October, until Monday 9 November.

“ School was awful, we had to wear masks and had to keep them on for the majority of the day. ”

Caerphilly Youth Forum, 11



26 August 20

Face coverings in schools recommended to be worn by those over the age of 11 where social distancing cannot be maintained.



10 November 20

Wales cancel GCSE and A-Level qualification exams for 2021.

“ I was quite happy about exams being cancelled at first, because I didn't feel prepared for them *due to missing out on the normal prep period*. ”

Croesyceiliog High School, 18

23 November 20

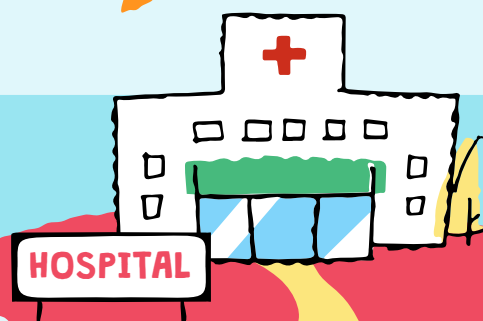
Face covering in schools and colleges; should now be worn in all areas outside of the classroom.

“ Masks hid our faces, our emotions obscured. ”

Cwmbran High School, 15

“ I ended up having to go back into lockdown due to my medical condition – for 6 weeks – and when everyone was in school and going out, I was stuck in. ”

Caerphilly Youth Forum, 15



14 December 20

All secondary schools moved back to online learning from 14 Dec 20. Primary and special schools were encouraged to remain open due to the difficulties associated with home learning.

“ My biggest memory is my dad teaching me maths and literacy. ”

Cwm Primary School, 10



22 December 20

Children and young people that are clinically extremely vulnerable advised to no longer attend school.

2021

“ I got sent to Hwb everyday as my mum was a key worker and couldn't look after us. ”

Cwmbran High School, 13



4 January 21

All schools and colleges moved to online learning until 18 January 2021. Schools and colleges remained open for children of key workers, vulnerable learners and pupils that need to complete essential exams or assessments.

Covid-19 through children and young people's eyes

2021

18 January 21

Wales announce additional £40m for universities to support students facing financial hardship, helping those most affected by the pandemic.

1 February 21

Wales announce £9.4m for Mental Health and Wellbeing support for Children and Young people.



“ I think that the main reason everyone's mental health declined is because they forgot how to communicate properly.

Cwmbran High School, 15 ”

5 February 21

Wales announce schools and colleges to now move to twice weekly testing using lateral flow tests. Phased return to schools for pupils aged 3-7 years old (from 22 February 21).

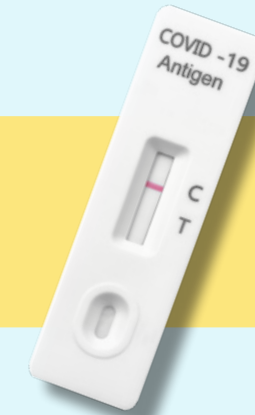


22 February 21

Twice weekly, LFTs at home to all those of upper secondary age. This will start with offering tests to years 11 to 13, and to all further education college learners and those on work-based apprenticeship and traineeship programmes.

19 February 21

Children aged 3-7 and those sitting priority vocational qualifications will begin a phased return to school from 22 February 2021.



“ Covid makes you feel really bad, and you had to do test.

Off The Streets, 10 ”

15 March 21

All primary pupils and those in qualifications years will return to school. All learners will return to on-site learning on 12 April 2021.

“ There was some sadness going back to school as less playing and spending time with family.

Llswerry High School, 13 ”

31 March 21

Relaxation of restrictions and further confirmation that all children and students will return to face-to-face education in Wales.

“ I was joyful to see my friends. I was a little apprehensive at first, but as time passed, I settled. It was a lovely feeling being with my friends.

Marshfield Primary School, 10 ”

4 August 21

JCVI advises the roll out of the Covid-19 vaccine for young people aged 16-17 years old.



“ Scientists found a vaccination, it did not get rid of covid, but it prevented it.

Llswerry High School, 12 ”

19 July 21

JCVI advises the roll out of the Covid-19 vaccine for children aged 12-15 with severe Neurodisability's and those aged 12-17 that live with an immunosuppressed person.



22 December 21

Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation advises the roll out of the Covid-19 vaccine for children aged 5-11 years old that are in a clinical risk group or living with someone who is immunosuppressed.

“ I didn't know what it (the vaccine) was, but when my mum told me it was to help people, I was happy to have it because it would help stop covid.

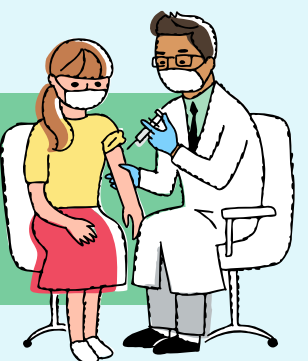
Marshfield Primary School, 11 ”

14 February 22

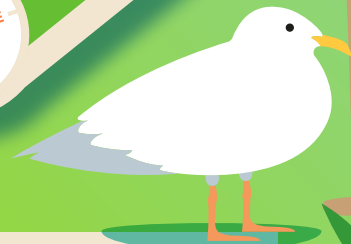
JCVI advises the roll out of the Covid-19 vaccine for children aged 5-11 years old.

“ I didn't want to get a needle in my arm. My family got theirs.

Marshfield Primary School, 10 ”



2022



Have you ever asked yourself 'if Covid-19 was an animal what would it be?'

Get ready for a wild ride! Join us on an adrenaline-fueled journey through the Covid-19 Zoo Safari, where we'll be venturing into various habitats crafted by the imaginative minds of children across Gwent.

They've transformed their pandemic experiences into animal forms, and trust us, this safari is not for the faint-hearted.

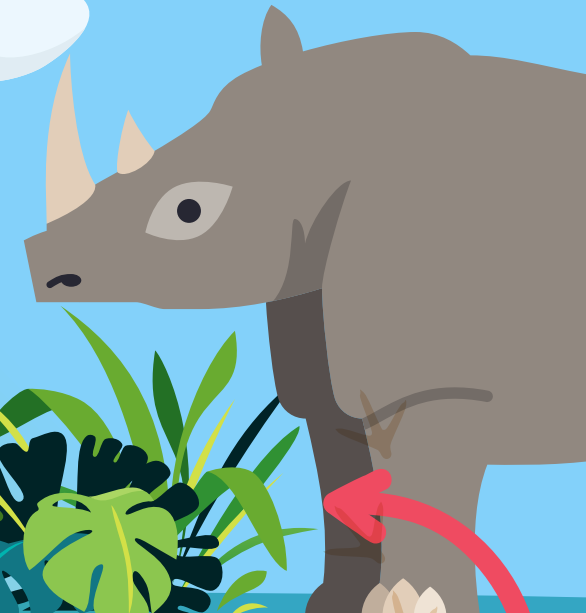
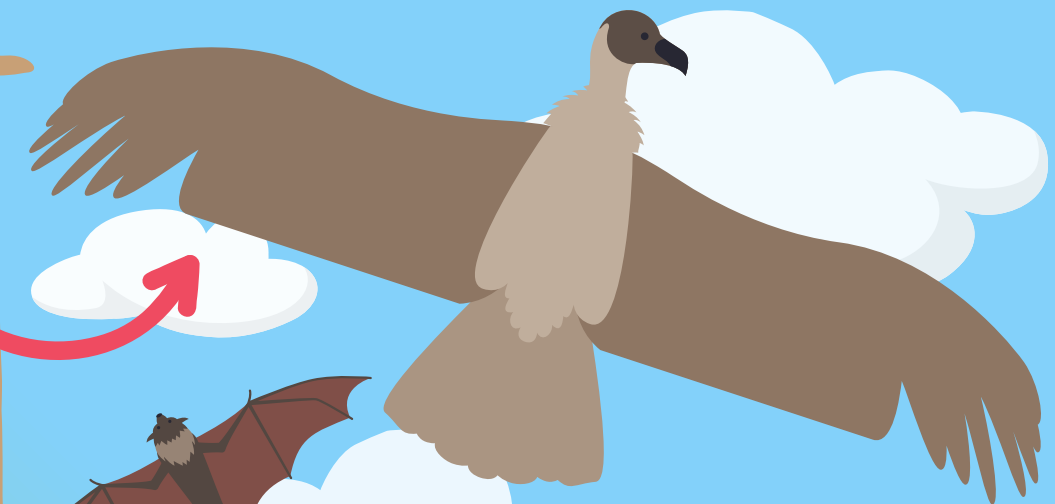
Brace yourself for a thrilling expedition, and remember, some of these critters might just pack a bite! Let the adventure begin!

AIRBORNE ALLIES

In the sky flying with our Airborne Allies habitat you'll find; the Bat that takes flight, much like Covid-19, creating a mysterious start and unsettling the world. The Buzzard, a silent prowler of the woods, echoes the pandemic's lingering dangers. Annoying birds, including Seagulls, join forces to irritate, while the persistent Wasp and Fleas tag along, symbolizing the relentless annoyances we faced. Lastly, the Mosquito, small but deadly, encapsulates the unseen threats hovering in the air during the

pandemic adventure.

- ✦ **Buzzard**; spend a lot of time hiding in the woods, but very dangerous
- ✦ **Seagull / birds**; they are annoying
- ✦ **Bat**; because it flies around the world, like Covid-19, started Covid-19, attacks other animals
- ✦ **Wasp**; keeps coming back and tortures people
- ✦ **Fleas**; takes ages to get rid of one and they're annoying
- ✦ **Mosquito**; small and deadly.



WILDERNESS WONDERS

Don't stay still for too long in our Wilderness Wonder habitat. Here you'll find the Bear that led us into a cosy hibernation, like when we all stayed home to stay safe. With its big stomp, the Elephant showed how germs could spread everywhere, just like the virus, with a cheetah's speed showing how quickly it spread. The other animals, like the vicious nature of Wolves, Tigers and Hyenas symbolised the scary and dangerous aspects of the young people's pandemic journey.

- ✦ **Bear**; we all hibernated
- ✦ **Sloth**; made everyone lazy
- ✦ **Elephant**; it could do a big stomp and it could have spread germs everywhere
- ✦ **Cheetah**; fast like how Covid-19 spread and comes and goes when it wants
- ✦ **Hyena**; eat people and leave the skeleton body on the floor, filthy, carry diseases (like rabies)
- ✦ **Rhino**; horns can kill somebody
- ✦ **Wolf**; vicious.





SNEAKY STRIKERS

In the secretive realm of Sneaky Strikers watch your step with creatures like the Snake, a sneaky serpent, symbolizing the poisonous and surprising nature of the virus. The Cat compared to Covid-19, pouncing out of nowhere, appearing lazy but causing unexpected trouble. The Chameleon, much like the ever-changing Covid-19 strains, hides from sight, making it seem invisible. Meanwhile, the Rat, with its diseases, and the Skunk, notorious for spraying, reflect their nature to quickly spread the disease.

- 🐍 **Snake**; poisonous, sly & sneaky, infecting you by surprise (like a serpent). They come out of nowhere and kill people. Cat; Covid-19 pounced out of nowhere and because it was too lazy to do anything serious
- 🦎 **Chameleon**; changes like Covid-19 strains did and it hides from people and can't be seen - it's invisible
- 🐀 **Rat**; carries a lot of diseases
- 🦨 **Skunk**; because it sprays, and no-one likes them.

MYSTICAL MARVELS

Not all creatures walk this earth, so let's spread a little magic as we enter the enchanting world of Mystical Marvels. Here you'll find overhead the Dragon breathing fire, echoing the widespread impact of Covid-19; whilst the Fluff ball, seemingly innocent, walks around carrying diseases, reflecting the subtle and unpredictable nature of the challenges faced during this crazy time.

- 🐉 **Dragon** breathing; spread fire like Covid-19 did
- 🐼 A **fictional creature** that has long arms and wings; it's mysterious, can fly and has claw like hands that represent the many lives that it has taken
- 🐼 **Fluff ball**; It walks around catching diseases and spreading them



CREEPY CRAWLERS

Watch where you stand in the world of Creepy Crawlers. The Ant is like a sneaky spy that manages to be everywhere like the challenges of the pandemic that are all around us. Bed bugs, which we try to get rid of, are similar to the testing and precautions we do against the virus. The Caterpillar changes, much like how things have changed during the pandemic. Meanwhile, the Spider, with its web, shows how the virus can keep us away from where we want to be. The Scorpion, with its lethal sting, and the Parasite

going inside of you, represent the potentially dangerous and unseen threats that are part of our journey.

- ↳ **Spider**; keeps you away from where you want to be
- ↳ **Ant**; they get everywhere
- ↳ **Bed bug**; because you check for it (testing), you don't want it and try to get rid of it
- ↳ **Caterpillar**; changes like Covid-19 did
- ↳ **Scorpion**; can kill you.



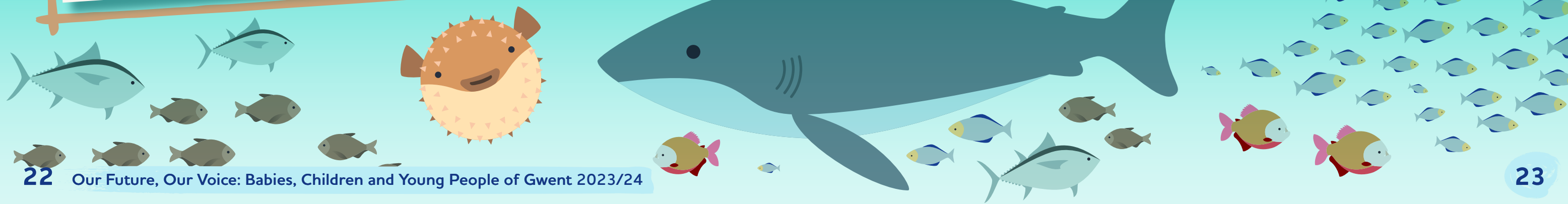
Well, you made it through the Zoo and are back in one piece, just like our children made it through Covid-19, or so we assume. Although we've witnessed the forms that Covid-19 took for some of our children, it is important to check in with them because not everything can be found on the surface. As we shut the door to the Covid-19 Zoo for now, let's hope we never have to open it again!

AQUATIC AVENGERS

Scuba masks on as we take the plunge underwater for our next habitat, the watery world of Aquatic Avengers. Fish, like the many challenges of Covid-19, swim together in a sea of complexity. They sometimes find themselves in a bit of a squabble, similar to the disagreements we faced during this tricky time. The Shark, part of a 'school' like our own schools that temporarily closed, adds an underwater twist to their pandemic adventure. Much like the virus, the

Puffer Fish, if not handled properly, can be dangerous and even harmful, echoing the need for caution in our journey.

- ↳ **Fish**; loads of them and they kill each other
- ↳ **Shark**; killed everyone off. A group of sharks is called a 'school' and there were school closures
- ↳ **Puffer fish**; if you don't cook it properly, it can be poisonous and even fatal. It also has spikes that are dangerous.



POSTCARDS FROM THE PANDEMIC (YOUNG PEOPLE)

Imagine this: young people across Gwent are gearing up for their GCSE exams, daydreaming about prom, planning parties with friends—when suddenly everything comes to a screeching halt. No more school, no more hanging out with friends, and for some, no chance to sit those important exams.

The pandemic and lockdown threw our young people's lives into a tailspin. We wanted to capture their thoughts and emotions about how their world changed. So, we decided to create a time capsule filled with postcards from the pandemic—personal messages from young people across Gwent sharing their experiences.

This collection was our way of immortalising their stories, ensuring if we ever face another crisis, we can learn from their resilience and provide support to future generations. Here are just a few of the many experiences we gathered.

When Covid -19 first hit I was just leaving primary school and starting high school. I was looking forward to having my year 6 leavers assembly but due to covid that never happened. It broke me we had to our leavers gathering on the school field where we had to sit 2+ meters apart. It just didn't feel right.

On the first day of high school, we had no transition and kind of just put into a school we didn't know. A one-way system was put into place and was very confusing. It took a while to get used to it all having to wear masks and all. This was down to covid.

Cwmbran High School, Aged 15



My lockdown experience was very hard at times as halfway through my mum had a stroke. The first half of lockdown was quite fun covid wasn't too serious, but my mum was still going to work, and I was basically living with my nan as my stepdad was working in London. My mum then had a stroke, and the NHS were very helpful as it affected my entire family's mental health. Trying to live during the pandemic with my mum in the condition she was in was very difficult. I ended up switching between houses which was difficult due to covid.

The hospitals were very supportive of our situation. Not having school was kind of useful as I could do work where and when I needed to once restrictions lifted my primary school was helpful and my secondary school try to help. The Covid-19 virus really affected us once my mum came out of hospital as they were dealing with covid patients meaning they couldn't help us as well or provide resources and appointments. The NHS are now trying to help us a lot more than they were before and moving things a lot faster.

Monmouthshire Young Carer's Group, Aged 12

I found many pros and cons during my time of the covid pandemic during the covid pandemic I really disliked being away from school. I missed my friends seeing family every week and being active. I really fell out of shape, and I got very lazy. By the end of lockdown, I lost my passion for my favourite sport which once again football, but I ended up quitting my football team. I feel not having face to face learning made it difficult to understand the work I was doing.

But I did enjoy the comfort of my sofa and pyjamas all day and as I finished my work quite quickly, I got to play a lot more video games but for a while I also started to not like playing video games anymore. By the end I had lost all of my confidence and I feel I would be much more confident if it hadn't happened. I believe as I did my homework lockdown didn't really affect me as much as it did other people.

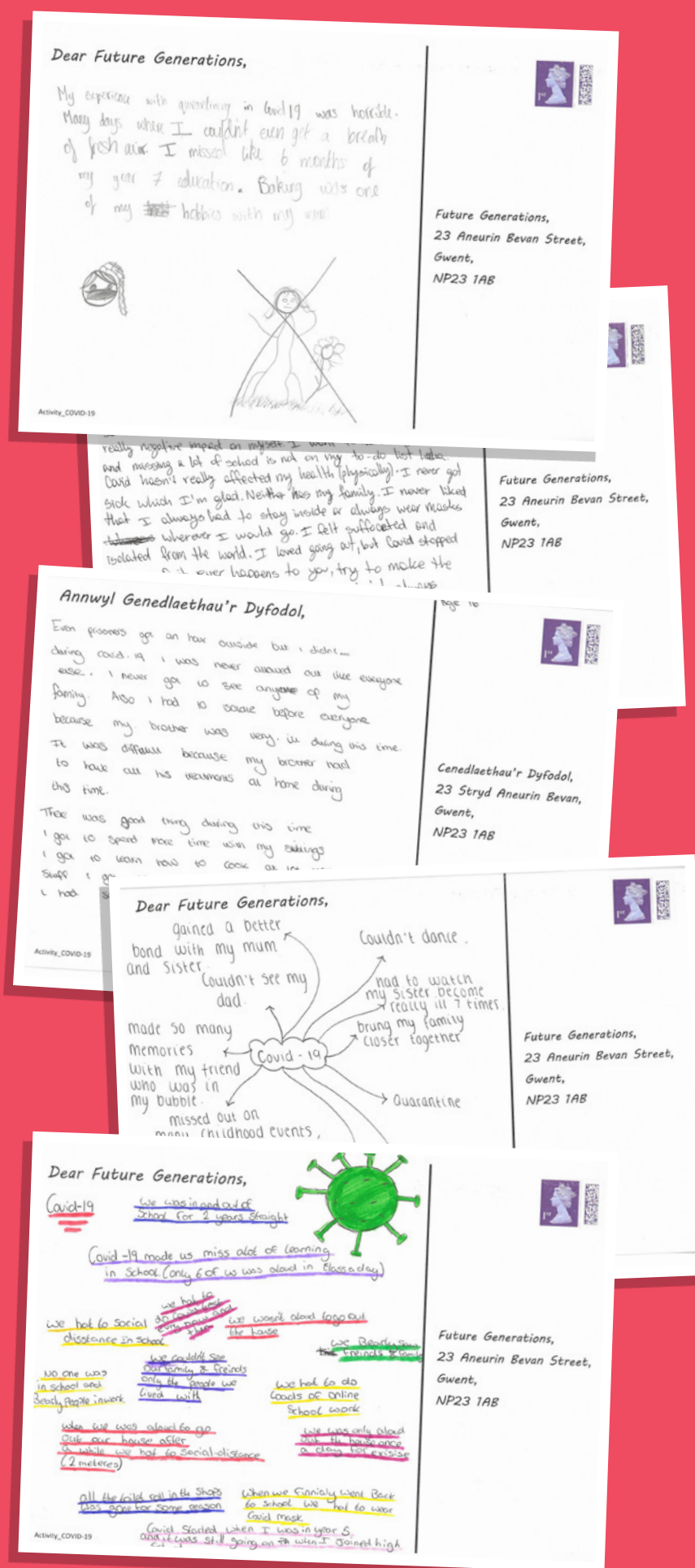
Lliswerry High School, Aged 14

POSTCARDS FROM THE PANDEMIC (YOUNG PEOPLE)

When covid started I among many others thought that it was a novelty, we got to stay off of school and didn't have to get up early in the morning. However, it quickly led to a massive lack of motivation from me, and because of the isolation from my friends I fell into depression. Before lockdown I was happy, outgoing, loud and after I was depressed, anxiety at an all-time high and my physical appearance had taken a massive toll.

I never left my room let alone my house despite the allowance of 30 minutes exercise outside, so I therefore also put on weight. The way I viewed myself was extremely poor and I took no photos of myself throughout all lockdowns. I was in year 7 and now I'm in year 11 any my life is still disrupted. As bad as this all was lockdown also taught me how to deal with my mental health, I coached myself through panic and anxiety attacks and now even though they are rare I can calm myself down and stop them within about 4 minutes. Covid-19 shaped who I am now and changed who I was.

Cwmbran High School, Aged 15



During lockdown my experience was interesting with some positive and negative. It was interesting because it was new and I got to experience something new, the positives were like I got to play a lot of games with my friends and spend more time with who I live with. But the negatives are I can't meet with people, and I lose out on my education. I did spend most of my time upstairs in my room and I didn't spend much time with the people I lived with which I now regret because spending time with family is important. If this type of lockdown happens again, I would spend so much more time with family than upstairs.

I would say that my lockdown experience was mixed with pros and cons, and it was just an interesting experience all together. My advice to everyone about lockdown would be spend time with family because you don't know if anything will happen to the next day.

Cwmbran High School, Aged 14

Covid - 19 in 2020 was horrible and had a huge effect on many people all around the world. There was a lockdown, and many children lost a years' worth of their education and went to home learning.

Through the lockdown you would barely have any contact with your friends and family for ages in real life. After the lockdown it was hard to start talking to people again and being in public.

A lot of people including myself suffered with anxiety after the virus, especially Health anxiety and still suffer now years later. Many people got sick that I knew making me worried and upset. A lot of people died, and it was scary. The masks made it hard to breathe and were annoying. I gained a lot of weight after not going outside and having more time to stay in and eat and sleep. I was stressed about my schoolwork and not knowing anything when I went back.

Caerphilly Youth Forum, Aged 13

To @Gwent

Subject How we can get it right for our babies, children and young people?

Hi Gwent 🙋

My name is Jo and I'm 17 years old 😊 and I lived through a pandemic. I wrote this email because it was a strange time for me, I felt many different things and I want to share this with people and show how it has impacted young people and children like me across Gwent. Maybe this could help if we ever had another pandemic, or maybe it would help for thinking about helping young people and children like me in general.

😭😭 **My pandemic** 😭😭

When we first went into lockdown and my school closed, I remember feeling really confused, no one really explained to me why we were not allowed to go to school or see my friends, I felt like that for weeks. I was getting ready for my GCSE's, I really wanted to be a vet so worked really hard at science. They ended up cancelling GCSEs, at first, relief hit, but the grades I got were just predictions. No real sense of earning them, you know?

🏠 Home schooling was tricky, we had really slow internet and I had to share my laptop with my sister who did home learning too. Online lessons were hard, it was nothing like being in a classroom where I could just shout out a question, after a few weeks I didn't really feel I was learning anything and it felt like my fault, I felt stupid. Mum found it difficult to help us with our schoolwork – she looked really fed-up – I guess all the jobs she had to do got on top of her.

We made sure as a family we spoke more and we did quiz nights on Zoom, that was my suggestion, I was great at the animal questions and my uncle made me laugh because he never worked the camera out, we just saw his forehead. 🙄🤔

Missing my friends!

I really found it hard not seeing my friends especially as the start of lockdown was so warm, 2 of them moved away to make a bubble with their families, but we all joined TikTok and kept in touch sharing funny videos and laughing. It wasn't the same as going to the park or swimming, everything eventually just felt like we were robots living in a virtual world. I actually put on a lot of weight and would get out of breath walking upstairs. I was so down that I never went outdoors for the 30 minute exercise that we were told to do. Eating wasn't great either; one week, Mum came back with no veggies, and the toilet paper was MIA – still not sure why.

We eventually went back to school I had to do a covid test two times a week before going in – I hated putting the swab up my nose! Nothing felt right, at first we had to wear masks (they itched!) and only one of my friends was in my bubble with me, I didn't get to see or chat to my friends like normal. It felt strange to be sitting in a classroom, it was exhausting getting back into a routine, and seeing big groups of

To @Gwent

Subject How we can get it right for our babies, children and young people?

people I developed anxiety. The saddest part is I never got a prom, my grandparents had a frame ready for a picture of it and everything. 💔😭

My 'new normal'

The pandemic feels a bit like a distant memory these days, I wish I could say the same for how it's changed my every day. I recently sat my A-Level exams, they were so tough, and I wasn't very confident with exams, I had to re-sit two exams, but my teachers were really helpful and had us do some study sessions. I'm really anxious about my future uni plans – will I even get into uni with no A-Levels? My dream of becoming a vet feels impossible!

I still struggle going into busy places, I used to love going shopping with friends but now I avoid it, and just shop online if I need something. I've been getting some support from college for my anxiety and my doctor has given me with some anti-anxiety meds – these things have really helped. But with putting on weight and feeling so bad about myself, some days can feel tough, but I remind myself that I am getting there! I'm learning to be kinder to myself.

What we need from you

So, I wrote a little list of things that I feel would help me and other young people and children across Gwent.

1. **Be here for me. I need someone to be patient with me and not judge, giving me a safe place to just be me.**
2. **Take the time to explain stuff to me. I want to understand things.**
3. **Accept me for who I am. Be inclusive, respectful and celebrate my differences.**
4. **Recognise when I need extra support. Help me find it easily in a way that works for me.**
5. **Give me somewhere safe I can call home. Somewhere warm, happy and secure where I can grow up.**
6. **Make time for me. In the pandemic we spent so much time together, let's not lose that.**
7. **Help me develop skills for life: Education that sets me up for success for the future I want.**
8. **Give us spaces to hang out and play with friends. Parks, playgrounds, woodlands somewhere we can switch off and enjoy.**
9. **Give me a voice. If you are planning something that impacts young people and children like me then ask our opinion.**

Thanks Jo 💖

A big thanks to these people...

We extend our gratitude to all those who played a role in creating this report. In particular, we would like to express my thanks to:

The Budding Artists & Writers

The children and young people of Gwent who attended the sessions and expressed their thoughts; thank you for gracing us with your beautiful artwork and invaluable contributions. Your creativity and dedication inspire us all!

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Thank you for inviting us to attend your setting and for granting us the opportunity to run these sessions.

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The Families of Gwent

For sharing your experiences of preparing for some key life milestones, whilst navigating the pandemic.

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Editorial Team

Neesha Varsani, Joanne Foley, Eryl Powell, Scott Wilson-Evans, Michael Allum & Beveleigh Evans.

Scarlet Design International

For bringing this report to life; you've seamlessly blended together the imaginative expressions of children and young people with a touch of professional magic.

Contributors

Florence Beach, Susan Carmichael, Kathryn Cross, Xela Dafauce Bouzo, Sarah Davies, Sarah Evans, Abbey Forshaw, Sian Harris, Rhiannon Hobbs, Natasha Jones, Richard Lewis, David Llewellyn, Anna Morgan, Joan Ogonovsky, Anna Pennington, Cherie Price, Niamh Falconer, Rebecca Stanton, Laura Rich, Rebecca Smith and Rosalin Williams.

Further reading


To inform the report and the data we have utilised a number of sources which you will find below. These have been broken down by the data source and the specific set of data used:

1. <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue>
 - a. Population projections for children and young people (0-18 years old) for the year 2023.
 - b. Percentage of pregnant women that **self-reported smoking**, at their initial assessment (2022).
 - c. The number of **singleton live births** with low birth weight (2022).
 - d. The percentage of women that **reported breastfeeding** at 10 days old and 6 months old (2022).
 - e. The number of children and young people attending Local Authority **school counselling services** (not CAMHS - 2021-22).
 - f. The number of children who have been **seriously injured or killed on the roads**; this refers to casualties from personal injury accidents on public roads reported to Gwent Police (2022).
 - g. The number of **Looked After Children** aged 0-16 (2022).
 - h. The percentage of children receiving care and support with **domestic abuse as a factor**; Collected from individual Local authority records, it measures the parental factors that contribute to that child receiving care and support.
 - i. The percentage of young people (16-24) **not in education, training or employment (NEET)** across Southeast Wales (2022-23).
2. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/>
 - a. **Life expectancy at birth** for 2018-20; this is defined as how long, on average, a new born can expect to live, if current death rates do not change.
 - b. The number of **infant deaths and the mortality rate for babies** that are born in 2021 and died before their first birthday, broken down by the five local

authorities, Gwent and Wales totals. The mortality rate is not available for Blaenau Gwent and Monmouthshire due to the number of infant deaths being less than 3 (the data included is for Wales - specific data was unavailable for ABUHB or each Local Authority).

3. https://publichealthwales.shinyapps.io/PHOF_Dashboard_Eng/
 - a. the gap in life expectancy, across Gwent, for males and females living in the most and least deprived areas.
 - b. Number of conceptions among teenage girls under 18 years divided by the female population aged 15-17 multiplied by 1,000 giving a rate per 1,000 women.
4. **COVER report Feb 95 [WP] (nhs.wales)**; data for the percentage of children who have received 2 doses of the Measles, Mumps and Rubella (MMR) vaccination by aged 5 (2022/23).
5. phw.nhs.wales/services-and-teams/child-measurement-programme/cmp-2021-2022/child-measurement-programme-annual-report-2021-2022/ the percentage of children aged 5 living with obesity (2021-22) - this means that they are above the 95th centile, which was calculated using BMI.
6. **National Data - School Health Research Network (shrn.org.uk)**; a self-reporting survey capturing high school pupils (aged 11-16) views and behaviours on six key topics. Data presented from 2021.
 - a. Who walk or cycle to school.
 - b. Have ever tried vaping.
 - c. Smoke at least one a week.
 - d. Have ever tried cannabis.
 - e. Classified as a problematic user of social media.
 - f. Who have been bullied in the past couple of months.
 - g. Who have experienced cyberbullying whilst online in the past couple of months.





If you need information
from this report in a different format please
email Scott.Wilson-Evans@wales.nhs.uk

This report is available online at: abuhb.nhs.wales

Further information on key data used is available at:
abuhb.nhs.wales/health-advice/gwent-joint-strategic-assessment/

We welcome feedback about our annual report.
If you have any comments please email
Scott.Wilson-Evans@wales.nhs.uk

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