

CHILDREN’S RIGHTS IMPACT ASSESSMENT (CRIA) – ALERT LEVEL 4 RESTRICTIONS ON GATHERINGS

SUPPORT BUBBLES FOR HOUSEHOLDS WITH CHILDREN UNDER ONE

This CRIA considers the impact on children’s rights of an easing of level 4 restrictions related to gatherings, to allow support bubbles for households with children under one.

This CRIA should be read in conjunction with the impact assessment on the COVID-19 alert levels and restrictions and their effects on children’s rights, “Alert levels and restrictions in Wales: children’s rights”, which was first published by the Welsh Government on 21 December 2020 and updated on 19 February 2021.¹

Context

In Wales, we remain at Alert level 4. As outlined in the *Coronavirus Control Plan: Alert Levels in Wales*, updated on 19 February, the variants and mutations of concern mean that we cannot move directly and fully into alert level 3 in one step. We will need to get there in gradual steps, assessing the impact as we go along.

The priority is returning children, young people and students to face to face learning, but small and cautious easements to support wellbeing may also be made.

Support bubbles

When alert level 4 was implemented, the ability to form extended households was suspended, except for single parents or single adult households who are still able to form support bubbles with another household.

However, even for those who are not part of a support bubble, the Coronavirus rules allow people to access support from their families (or close friends), if they need it and there is no reasonable alternative.

For parents with newborn babies and young children, the rules allow for informal childcare arrangements with friends or family to continue. The rules also allow meetings with friends or family if extra support and help are needed, but only if there are no other reasonable methods by which the support and help can be provided.

The easing to allow support bubbles for households with a child or children under one will mean:

- A household with a child or children under one will be able to form a support bubble with another household. This will be the case while Wales is at alert level 4, including if there were a re-entry into alert level 4 from a lower alert level in future
- Within this support bubble, mixing (without social distancing, both indoors and outdoors) will be permitted

¹ <https://gov.wales/alert-levels-and-restrictions-wales-childrens-rights-html>

- A household which forms a support bubble for this purpose (having a child under one) cannot also form an additional support bubble for another purpose (e.g. a support bubble to support a single person or single parent household); this is to reduce the risk of transmission between multiple households.

Before forming a support bubble, households should always consider the potential risk of transmission within the bubble, especially the risk to any person who is particularly vulnerable to illness.

This easement, permitting a support bubble for households with children under one, is based on the needs identified and analysis of benefits and risks, in Wales.

Case to allow households with children under one to form a support bubble

The key question is whether there are additional benefits for parents and carers of children under one, which would be derived from being part of a support bubble but not from the current provision allowing access to help and support.

The current provision does not provide continuous and secure access to a trusted family member or close friend. A support bubble could support both the parent and the child.

For parents, currently a parent can only access help and support under the “reasonable excuse” to mix, when there is no reasonable alternative to provide the help and support the parent or carer needs. This puts some onus on the individual to realise they need help and support and reach out for it. So a parent, for example, who may not realise that their mental health is suffering, may not reach out for help and support; whereas if they were in a support bubble, the close family member or friend they have bubbled with might proactively be able to intervene or help at an early stage.

The continuous access to support through a support bubble could therefore help parents of children under one in the following ways:

- Support with the transition to being a parent
- Perinatal mental health needs – supporting the new parents’ mental and emotional wellbeing, and potentially helping to spot if the parent’s mental health is at a point where additional professional help is required
- Reducing feelings of isolation

For young children, particularly babies, there are a number of potential impacts if the way in which they are parented is affected. These include the following:

- **Social learning theory:** if the parents are struggling with their reaction to the pandemic, another individual outside of the family such as a grandparent could provide a different response, of benefit to the child – the child looks to immediate caregivers to make sense and for reassurance in frightening situations.²

² Betancourt & Khan, 2008

- **Attachment:** research suggests the most important period in developing secure attachment are the antenatal period and first 18 months of life. If parents are struggling with e.g. poverty or mental health in this period, there could be an impact on their parenting, and development of secure attachment, with a potential impact on the child’s mental health, social and emotional skills and early language development.³ New parents are currently unable to access the usual sources of support, such as baby and toddler groups to gain peer support, and this may have an impact on their ability to bond well with their child. A bubble with another supportive adult may help with this.
- **Language development:** the experiences children have at home play a critical role in early language and learning. Research highlights three aspects of parenting which have a central role in children’s early language and learning: (1) children’s participation in routine learning activities (e.g. shared book reading, storytelling); (2) the quality of caregiver-child interactions (e.g. parents’ cognitive stimulation and sensitivity/responsiveness); and (3) the provision of age-appropriate learning materials (e.g. books and toys).⁴ This type of activity would not necessarily be allowed currently under the provisions for access to help and support, but could be carried out by a supportive adult in a support bubble.
- **Baby’s brain development:** neuroscience has shown that the circuits or ‘wiring’ of the brain is strongly affected by the kind of care and stimulation a baby receives, and the quality of attachment with caregivers.⁵ An additional caregiver within a support bubble would potentially contribute to this brain stimulation, and may be crucial if the parent is struggling with poor mental health or pressing issues such as poverty.
- The **model of human ecology** (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) suggests that a child’s development is determined by his or her interaction within the ‘nested’ environments of the individual, family, school, community and culture. Each one of these environments contains protective and risk factors which can either improve a child’s life outcomes or place them at risk of adversity. It assumes that the relationship between the child and parent cannot be fully understood without understanding how the conditions surrounding the family affect that interaction (Asmussen & Weizel, 2010; Osher et al 2020). Whether parents can “perform effectively in their child rearing roles within the family depends on role demands, stresses and supports emanating from other settings” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, page 7). The literature on children affected by natural disasters and war stress the importance of viewing children’s resilience within this ecological developmental perspective (Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Masten & Osofsky, 2010; Masten & Narayan, 2012). This emphasises the importance of the wider environment; a support bubble with a close family member or friend would add some element of community to the child’s experience.

³ Allen 2011; Moullin et al 2014

⁴ Tamis-LeMonda, & Rodriguez, 2009

⁵ Centre on the Developing Child, Harvard University

Impacts on children's rights

All children are potentially vulnerable as a result of the restrictions imposed by the pandemic. The overarching children's rights impact assessment for the alert levels and restrictions in Wales has been published,⁶ and sets out overarching principles to help inform the decisions on how we operate throughout the pandemic, covering all alert levels. The general principles include that support for parents should be available through a range of mechanisms, including for new mothers / parents.

Currently, while we are still at alert level 4, the priority is the return of children and young people to face to face teaching, but small cautious easements can be considered alongside that priority, where there is a clear need and the balance of risks is acceptable.

The decision to ease the restrictions slightly to allow support bubbles for households with children under one was based on careful consideration of the evidence about the potential impacts of alert level 4 restrictions on this group of parents and children, as set out above.

The impacts on children's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) were considered as follows:

Article 6 UNCRC: All children have the right to life, Governments should ensure that children survive and develop healthily; and

Article 24 UNCRC: Every child has the right to the best possible health.

The right to life is more than being safe from the virus. It is about developing socially, emotionally, physically, mentally and spiritually.

Younger children, should be able to socialise – this is important for babies and toddlers as well as for children of primary school age.

At level 4, children's ability to socialise with others is constrained not only through the lack of an extended household, but also because all meetings with other households (except now meeting for exercise outdoors is permitted for up to four adults from no more than two households, together with any children under the age of eleven from either household and any carer of a person in the group⁷) and all supervised activities for children are not permitted.

Without an extended household or support bubble, a young child's ability to form a relationship with extended family or close friends could be affected. It also impacts on how a child understands the world and social and cultural norms.

As outlined above, the benefits of a support bubble could reduce the risk to a child's social, mental, physical and emotional development by supporting the

⁶ <https://gov.wales/alert-levels-and-restrictions-wales-childrens-rights-html#section-58633>

⁷ The Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (No. 5) (Wales) Regulations 2020, paragraphs 1(4)(f) and 2(4)(i) of Schedule 4, as temporarily modified by paragraph 2 of Schedule 5 (from 20 February 2021 to 12 March 2021).

mother/parent's mental health and their ability to bond and form a secure attachment with their baby; providing an additional source of reassurance in the stressful situation created by the pandemic; and support early language and brain development.

Article 18 UNCRC: Governments must support parents by creating support services for children and giving parents the help they need to raise their children.

Early help, through Families First, are seeing waiting lists develop as more families contact them for help and support. Online support is available, including through Parenting. Give it Time⁸, but not all parents have access to digital platforms, and there may also be local support mechanisms in place. However, while face to face service provision is limited at alert level 4, a support bubble could provide the human contact a new parent needs to help with the transition to parenthood in circumstances which restrict parents' access to peer support groups.

Article 19 UNCRC: Governments must do all they can to ensure that children are protected from all forms of violence, abuse, neglect and bad treatment by their parents or anyone else who looks after them.

An extended household or support bubble, while not support provided directly by government, would enable a family to access support from their closest family or friends. It could help parents' mental and emotional well-being, and help them to deal with challenges such as sleep deprivation, especially if there are older children in the household too. A supportive adult in their support bubble could help to de-escalate tensions and help the parent to respond in positive ways, rather than feeling at the end of their tether and potentially reacting in a way they would not normally do.

Summary

We know that extended households are permitted at all other alert levels, alongside organised activities for children which would include peer support for parents, and developmental opportunities for children, through baby and toddler groups.

The length of time we spend in alert level 4 is therefore a key consideration. In terms of children's rights, and the impact of the current restrictions on their social, emotional, mental and physical development, the potential adverse impact is likely to be greater the longer the restrictions remain.

For new parents or carers of babies, there are clearly articulated reasons for promoting additional support through a support bubble, particularly because of the developmental needs of the baby, the need to form a relationship with wider family, and to form strong attachment with their parent/carer.

⁸ <https://gov.wales/parenting-give-it-time>

The Welsh Government's priority is to return children and young people to face to face learning, alongside small steps towards alert level 3, with a focus on wellbeing.

Allowing a support bubble for parents of new babies has the potential to provide significant benefits to households with children under one, supporting the wellbeing of the parent, and wellbeing and development of the baby. The provision supports the child's rights under articles 6, 18, 19 and 24 in particular.

On balance, the transmission risks are outweighed by the potential benefits. This is a small and cautious step to support our youngest children and their families, alongside the current focus on opening up education to our children and young people.

[End]