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Save the Children – Written Evidence to the Children and Young Peoples Committee on the Welsh Assembly Government's Budget for 2011-12

Introduction

Save the Children recognises that the Welsh Assembly Government has taken steps to protect children from low income households from spending cuts and to maintain strategic priorities and policies aimed at tackling child poverty.

We note and welcome the fact that the WAG has adhered to an inclusive Policy Making process in setting the budget. In this regard, age has been taken into account, but the budget makes no specific mention of children in relation to equality. Save the Children believes that poverty is a significant rights violation. We would welcome much greater detail on specific areas of spend and on how the budget will translate into service delivery at local level. We have been calling for a children's budgeting approach to government spending decisions.

The Welsh Assembly Government and all other public bodies in Wales have responsibility and obligations to respect the rights of children and young people living in Wales as enshrined in the UNCR. All public bodies are duty bearers in this regard and accountable to the children and young people of Wales.

Further to this we would like to see detailed analysis of the budget so that its full impact on all children can be properly understood. Transparent data on expenditure on children needs to be collected and published. This should be linked to the child poverty strategy and delivery plan for Wales, needs and then evaluated/analysed against it to show: Where the money is needed, where it actually goes, and what this means for children living in poverty. This approach will encourage development of indicators to monitor if spending is reaching and benefitting the poorest children and families. The information should be used to inform the next round of budget allocation.

Save the Children believes no child should endure poverty and no child's life chances should be shaped by the accident of birth. Resources should be focused on:

Protecting families in poverty from the impact of the economic downturn by removing barriers to employment and making work pay and supporting the finances of families living in poverty

Ending the educational attainment gap

Supporting universal benefits

We know from our work across the UK that family finances are under immense pressure. This is likely to get worse next year when we start to see the impact of welfare cuts start to bite, along with the planned VAT increase and expected high levels of food inflation.

Therefore we welcome the continuation of measures by WAG which relieve pressure on the finances of families in poverty (and which notably aren't available in all parts of the UK). These include:

Free school breakfasts for primary school children

Free school milk for primary school children

Free swimming for under 16s

Free NHS prescriptions

The Budget reports that 66% of schools in Wales are offering free breakfasts to primary school children. We would like to see the WAG exploring options for increasing take-up further.

Removing barriers to employment

Childcare can play an important role in child development and in supporting parents into employment. Lack of adequate and affordable childcare is one of the biggest barriers to work faced by parents living in poverty. Changes to the amount of support provided to meet childcare costs by the Westminster government (cutting the maximum amount of support available through the childcare element of Working Tax Credit from 80% to 70%) will make it even harder for low income Welsh parents to move into work or to increase the number of hours they work. Childcare policy in Wales is child focussed and the role of the sector in helping children achieve their development potential underpins the Child rights approach taken by the WAG. As well as increasing the accessibility and affordability of childcare to parents attempting to get into work, the quality of childcare will be enhanced by accelerating the up- skilling of the early years workforce.

Children's Bonds

We recognise that WAG has provided additional top up payments for Welsh children receiving the UK wide Child Trust Fund. Child Trust Funds were set up to help tackle asset based poverty. Given the decision by the Westminster government to scrap Child Trust Funds we seek assurances that the £2.5m spend by WAG will continue to be targeted at children either through a continued WAG lead Children's Bond or through equivalent spending which impacts on child poverty.

Financial Inclusion

We welcome continued spend on measures to tackle financial inclusion. We would like to see further detail as to how this money will be targeted. It is vital that steps are taken to promote income maximisation through efforts to increase benefit take-up amongst families with children. At a time when income from benefits streams into Wales have potential to fall, it is key to ensure that those who are entitled to benefits do access them. This, in itself, will have positive implications for the amount of money circulating in the Welsh economy. Tackling benefits take up will leverage additional money for the Welsh economy.

WAG has been a strong supporter of the Credit Union sector. Supporting the sector to link up with secondary schools has helped to widen access to the financial support and affordable credit. It is crucial that WAG continues to focus on widening the availability of affordable credit and financial advice.

Whilst welcoming the strategic focus of the budget on supporting financial inclusion we would like to see much greater detail on the targeted outcomes of efforts to increase financial inclusion amongst families with children.

Save the Children also believes that more can be done by government and industry to reduce the poverty premium faced by low income families. This is the extra amount families in poverty are charged for everyday goods and services (such insurance, affordable credit and utility bills) simply because they have a low income. Financial advice and support has an important part to play in supporting people to minimise expenditure and ensure they get the best deal from service providers.

Educational attainment

We welcome the protection of schools, early years and skills funding. The budget shows increased spend on Support for learners. We would welcome further details on how this budget will be allocated; specifically with reference to WAG's goal of closing the educational achievement gap.

The budget does not make it clear how the WAG will use the protected 1% allocation above the DEL to tackle the inequality of outcomes between the poorest children in Wales and their better off peers. We have been pleased to see political commitment to this in the past, but would like reassurance that this continues to be the case.

"Education is the route out of poverty. My government would look to increase education spending by at least 1% above the block grant we receive from the UK Government to ensure the best outcomes for Welsh children, with a sharp focus on inequalities in education."
Carwyn Jones 02/11/09

We would like to see targeted spend on tackling this attainment gap. A whole-school approach to achieving this, via the School Effectiveness Framework, is a good foundation but we are concerned that this may not deliver the speed of change needed to benefit the poorest children of Wales. We would like to see the budget used to support the poorest children realise their potential. We believe this can be achieved through the inclusion of resource supported targets in local child poverty strategies to improve the educational opportunities and learning experiences of the poorest children. Schools would need to be held accountable for how they have used additional funding to close the attainment gap.

Improving the early home learning environment

Further, we believe that schools alone cannot close the attainment gap. School readiness and parental support in their child's education are known to have a significant impact on children's attainment. The Flying Start programme shows positive signs of supporting children's readiness for school. Moreover continued investment in the Foundation Stage is also to be welcomed. We would like to see even greater focus on these crucial early years including investment in the home learning environment. We believe that investment in evidence based programmes that help parents engage with and support their child's education can play a significant role in this regard and would encourage resource allocation to support such programmes.

We were pleased to see a continued financial commitment to the continuing professional development of teachers and would encourage that it is used to enhance the understanding of the profession of children's rights and the impact of poverty on the children they teach.

Communities First and employment policy

Continued support for the Communities First programme is to be commended. However, we would like to know how the budget will be used to tackle child poverty for the 60% of children in Wales that live outside these areas.

We remain concerned about the impact of spending cuts on levels of employment. Wales has a large percentage of people employed in the public sector or in private sector jobs which rely on public sector investment. Cuts to the environment and transport could result in higher levels of unemployment in Wales.

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