

1. Introduction

NSPCC Cymru/Wales welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the Children and Young People Committee as they scrutinise the Welsh Assembly Government's Draft Budget 2011-2012.

The NSPCC aims to end cruelty to children in the UK over future generations. In pursuit of our vision, we will:

Create and deliver services for children which are innovative, distinctive and demonstrate how to enhance child protection most effectively.

Provide advice and support to ensure that every child is listened to and protected.

Provide advice and support for adults and professionals concerned about a child and if necessary take action to protect the child.

Work with organisations which work with children to ensure they effectively protect children and challenge those who do not.

Campaign for changes to legislation, policy and practice to ensure they best protect children.

Persuade everyone to take personal responsibility for preventing cruelty to children.

Inform and educate the public to change behaviours and attitudes to protect children.

2. Overview

Though it is regrettable that the worldwide economic downturn has resulted in the necessity to cut budgets, NSPCC Cymru/ Wales very much welcomes the approach taken by the Welsh Assembly Government to protect frontline services and the vulnerable; in particular to protect health, social services, education and housing services for vulnerable groups.

It is now important to ensure that the Assembly Government's policy intention to protect children's social services and education is implemented by local government, that any savings made or cuts in other areas do not negatively impact on vulnerable children and families and that child protection training and preventative services are not targeted for cuts.

3. Safeguarding Children

NSPCC Cymru/ Wales welcome the distinctive and progressive policy and legislative framework for children's services in Wales. We welcome the new Intensive Family Support Teams, the new framework for reviewing, learning and improving policy and practice in child protection that will move away from the over reliance on serious case reviews and that children's rights are the foundation for policy development.

However since the death of Peter Connolly in August 2007, child protection services have come under increased pressure and scrutiny. The numbers of referrals, numbers of children looked after and subject to a child protection plan are all increasing. In the year ending 31 March 2010, there had been 48,500 referrals, an increase of over 2,400 on the previous year, there were 2,730 children subject to a child protection plan, an increase of 220 on the previous year and there were 5,162 looked after children, a rise of 10% on the previous year¹. This increased demand is unlikely to diminish and the CSSIW 2009 inspection report² identified that safeguarding has become more complex.

3.1 Budget

NSPCC Cymru/ Wales welcome the approach that the Welsh Assembly Government has taken to the process of budget formulation, consulting and listening to stakeholders and then protecting frontline services and the vulnerable. We particularly welcome that funding for Children's Social Services has been protected from any cash reductions. However by freezing budgets, it still does mean that there will be a reduction of more than 6% after inflation over three years. Therefore children's social services departments face the challenge of having to find savings to meet inflationary rises and also to meet increased demands for their services.

It is now important to ensure that the Assembly Government's policy intention of protecting frontline children's social services and education is implemented by local government. We want to see no reduction in frontline children's social services and family support work and we hope that the Assembly Government can ensure that the funding reaches these frontline services.

3.2 Prevention

It is critical to protect preventative services for children and families; early intervention is cheaper, prevents problems escalating, often avoids the need for statutory intervention and offers the best opportunity to maximise children's potential. As Cymorth and Flying Start are key funding sources for early intervention services, we welcome that they have been protected in this Draft Budget. We are however aware that anxieties about the future of Cymorth are resulting in some Partnerships reducing or closing some projects and would urge the Government to provide clarity and comprehensive guidance to Partnerships to prevent this from happening.

3.3 Thresholds

Child protection thresholds are already high and so we would urge children's social services departments not to raise thresholds further to assist them in managing case loads. NSPCC Cymru/ Wales welcome the development of Intensive Family Support Teams and the

protection afforded to preventative programmes such as Cymorth and Flying Start. However we are concerned that children already miss out on support as they are beyond the help of or ineligible for preventative services but do not meet the threshold for child protection services. We would urge local government not to raise child protection thresholds further and to stop children from falling through the gaps between the preventative and child protection services.

3.4 Learning and Development

All frontline staff and volunteers working with children should receive the support and training they need to spot the signs of abuse and managers need the training to support them. Safeguarding is becoming more complex and new risks, such as trafficking and the use of the internet to groom and abuse children, are continually being identified. In Wales cases of neglect are increasing and professionals often struggle to recognise it and take effective action to deal with it. A rolling programme of local multi-agency child protection training is therefore essential and we would urge the Assembly Government to ensure that it is not sacrificed as part of the savings to balance the books

3.5 Impact of cuts in other areas

NSPCC Cymru/ Wales is also concerned that the UK government's cuts in welfare and reductions in other services will negatively impact on vulnerable families. Evidence has shown a correlation between child maltreatment and domestic violence, substance misuse, child poverty, disability, trafficking and asylum seeking status. The link between these issues is complex and research shows that factors causing stress are likely to increase parenting difficulties, thereby increasing the risk of child maltreatment.³ We are concerned that cuts in welfare payments, projected to be £18billion across the UK, job losses and potential cuts to other services such as substance misuse or domestic violence, will result in an increase in child maltreatment. We would ask that when services are identifying savings that they carefully think through the potential impact on the welfare of vulnerable children and families.