



# Children in Wales Plant yng Nghymru

## Equality of Opportunity Committee

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### Proposal for the creation of a National Assembly cross-cutting Committee to scrutinise WAG policies on Children and Young People""

## Children in Wales

Children in Wales is the national umbrella organisation in Wales, bringing organisations and individuals together to "speak with one voice" on behalf of children and young people. Its role is to make the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child a reality in Wales. Children in Wales also fights for sustainable quality services for all children and young people, and special attention for children in need, as well as ensuring children and young people have a voice on issues that affect them.

Children in Wales has over 220 members, including the major voluntary children's agencies, professional associations and local authorities, as well as many smaller community groups. It facilitates a variety of national and regional forums on topics such as disability, child poverty, children's rights, parenting, fatherhood, children looked after, advocacy etc.

Children in Wales works in partnership with the National Children's Bureau in England, Children in Scotland and Children in Northern Ireland and internationally is an active member of Eurochild and the International Forum for Child welfare.

The organisation has a large Policy Council which is democratically elected by its membership representing all the disciplines and sectors and it is at this Council that the key strategic issues for the children's sector are discussed and agreed.

### A cross cutting Scrutiny Committee for Children and Young People

In preparation for the new Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), the Policy Council considered its priorities and as a consequence, Children in Wales produced a key strategic document entitled 'a Wales Fit for Children and Young People'. The first and most important priority for the Policy Council was to have a cross cutting Assembly Committee that would scrutinise WAG activity regarding all aspects of policy as it affects children and young people and to hold WAG to account.

Reasons for establishing such a scrutiny structure included:

All WAG policies affecting children and young people are based on the principles contained in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). 'Rights to Action' (the WAG policy) covers all components of the UNCRC and as such areas of activity within all WAG Ministerial portfolios. The UNCRC also covers matters that are reserved. As a consequence, policy development in any of the WAG Ministerial portfolios can impact on the lives of children and young people.

It is essential that the impact of all WAG policies whether directly or indirectly impacting on children and young people is scrutinised if their lives are to be improved. This includes policies that might not normally be thought of as being directly relevant to children on topics such as transport, the environment, rural issues etc as well as those more directly linked such as social services, health and education.

Prior to the implementation of the Government of Wales Act 2004, the Children's Commissioner for Wales was accountable to the Assembly as a whole. It is now extremely important that there is a Committee with the specific responsibility for considering the progress made on the Annual Reports of the Children's Commissioner.

During the previous Assembly term, there was considerable interest in children and young people's issues in different Ministerial portfolios, however one of the difficult issues was the plethora of policies that were not necessarily co-ordinated and could occasionally contradict or undermine each other and make it very difficult for the service deliverers in the field to implement. A single Committee scrutinising all activity regarding Children and Young People would be extremely effective in highlighting this and avoiding duplication. It is particularly timely in the light of the Children Act 2006 that puts into statute the requirement for agencies to work together and to pool budgets. It is therefore essential that WAG policies reflect this and that there is sufficient scrutiny by the Assembly.

### Principles underpinning the cross cutting Scrutiny function

It is recognised that under the new arrangements there are not as many AM's to service all the Committees. However in due course there is likely to be a considerable benefit in a co-ordinated approach on children and young people.

There should be the same powers as in the existing Scrutiny Committees ""to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the

government and associated public bodies". The power to investigate and to call witnesses is clearly important. The Committee should be able to monitor all policy developments across WAG regarding Children and Young People and as such be comprised of members from each of the other Scrutiny Committees. The Committee should be a standing Committee and not just brought together for specific pieces of work.

## **Possible Options**

### **1. New self-standing Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee**

To approach the Business Committee to create a new cross cutting Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee with membership drawn from the Communities and Culture; Enterprise and Learning; and Health, Wellbeing and Local Government Scrutiny Committees and the ability to draw in members from other Committees if required. **2. A children and Young People's Sub Committee of the**

### **Equal Opportunities Committee with additional members from other Committees**

By its very nature the Equal Opportunities Committee cuts across all Ministerial portfolios and in the past has specifically considered issues such as those affecting disabled children. The Committee could possibly consider creating a sub Committee specifically for Children and Young People from its own members but also drawing in members from other Scrutiny Committees on a permanent basis to make it fully cross cutting.

## **Conclusion**

In order for the lives of children and young people, especially the most vulnerable in Wales, to be improved, WAG needs to have a coherent and integrated approach to policy development. A coherent Assembly Scrutiny mechanism is therefore essential to avoid a disjointed approach to calling WAG to account. It is hoped that AM's are willing to consider the options outlined above.

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