

Health and Social Services Committee

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Date: Wednesday 24 November 2004

Venue: Committee Rooms 3 & 4, National Assembly for Wales

Title: Childcare Working Group – Interim Report

Purpose

1. Members of the Health and Social Services Committee, along with members of the Economic Development and Transport, Education and Lifelong Learning, Social Justice and Regeneration, Equality of Opportunity and all Regional Committees have been invited to consider the Childcare Working Group's Interim Report. Comments will assist the development of the Group's final report due at the end of the year.

Summary

2. The Interim Report of the Childcare Working Group was the subject of a statement in plenary session on 7 July. This marked the start of a 12-week public consultation, which ran from 7 July until 30 September. Committee members are encouraged to consider the questions posed within the Interim Report and to provide feedback to assist the Group as it begins to develop its final report.

3. The Group was set up to provide advice to build on and drive forward the Childcare Action Plan, to promote the general provision of childcare for the benefit of children, parents and communities. Responding to its wide-ranging remit, the Group's Interim Report has identified some key issues that affect childcare in Wales.

4. Firstly, the Report stresses that the needs of children have to be set at the centre of the planning, development and delivery of childcare services. It also recognises that disabled children and their families are at risk of social exclusion, are often isolated and many need additional services to support them. The needs of children and families from ethnic minority backgrounds are also identified.

5. At the same time availability of childcare is important in enabling parents to find the right balance between work and home, and to enable parents who are not economically active to have access to work or training.

6. The Report also recognises that there are many communities in Wales in isolated areas where low incomes, lack of suitable accommodation for childcare and poor transport infrastructure pose particular difficulties. It also acknowledges that childcare has an important role to play in regenerating an area both socially and economically.

7. The Report notes that childcare is a crucial element to enable women to have choices to access work or training. It acknowledges that childcare provision is generally weaker in socially deprived areas and that a range of childcare needs to be available if the needs of children and parents or carers are to be fully met.

8. The Report considers the role of childcare social enterprises and asks how they could be supported to achieve their potential, including how to harness talent in communities. It also highlights the need for specific business and funding support for potential childcare providers, recognising the particular challenges they face.

9. The report also recognises the importance of schools, usually at the heart of communities, which can be key enablers to providing a range of community-based childcare for pre-school and school-aged children.

Background

10. Since the establishment of the Group in January 2004, 8 meetings have been held to date. The Group has received presentations on and has so far discussed the following issues:

- The Needs and Rights of the Child
- The Foundation Phase
- Regulation Policy and the operational role of the Care Standards Inspectorate for Wales
- Action to Build, Train and Develop the Workforce
- Training and Qualifications in Early Years and Childcare
- Business Support and Childcare Enterprises
- Using European Structural Funds to Increase Childcare Provision in Wales
- Views from Caerphilly Parent Focus Group.
- Tax credits/Sure Start consultation in England on extension to Home Childcarer Scheme/ implications for Wales.
- Childcare and the needs of children and families from ethnic minority backgrounds.
- Factors affecting the development of good quality, affordable and accessible childcare in rural areas.
- Community Focussed Schools

11. The Assembly Government has contracted with the Daycare Trust to provide support by drafting both the interim and final reports, including the review of the preliminary meetings and the collation of existing written sources on childcare and best practice. This will enable the reports to have an internal

consistency, and will provide re-assurance that the group's reporting deadlines may be met. The Daycare Trust is well known across the UK for its championing of childcare, though this is the first time that they have undertaken work in Wales.

12. The interim report is in the nature of a stock take of the issues covered by the Group's terms of reference. It invites comments on some of the key issues for childcare currently, in order to provide a basis for the Group to develop recommendations through the Autumn months. Importantly, the report provides an opportunity for all those involved in using, delivering or supporting childcare in Wales to give their views and contribute to the final report from the Group.

13. The Assembly Government hosted a childcare symposium on Thursday 23 September in Cardiff, for members of the Childcare Working Group and other stakeholders. The purpose of the event was to provide an information day for the Group to broaden their knowledge and illustrate examples of best practice. The programme for the event included speakers with strong UK-wide credibility, covering the following aspects:

- Aspirations for universal childcare
- Assessing the impact of childcare upon children's development
- International perspective of childcare development
- Integrating childcare with early years education, play and family support
- Group work around the question "Do we need bricks and mortar buildings to integrate services?"

14. The October meeting included an evidence-taking session to further inform the Group's knowledge of the relevant issues. Evidence was presented by the Welsh Language Board, Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin and the National Childminding Association. The Group will continue to consider evidence from stakeholder partners at the November meeting and will hold a further meeting in December. The information received in the form of consultation responses, comments from Assembly committees and evidence provided by partners will assist the development of the Group's final report, which will be the subject of a debate in Plenary in February 2005.

Financial Implications

15. There are no financial implications at this stage.

Cross Cutting Themes

16. The Interim Report discusses issues that have an impact on small businesses, local government, voluntary sector and private sector childcare providers. Issues including diversity and the Welsh language are also addressed. Membership of the Group is drawn from local government, other government departments, the NHS, business and the voluntary sector, with additional members being invited to join when appropriate to the Group's discussions.

17. There are unlikely to be Human Rights Impact or significant Sustainable Development considerations.

Action for Health and Social Services Committee

18. The Committee is invited to discuss the Childcare Working Group's Interim Report and to provide comments which will assist in the development of the Group's final report.

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